

# John Collins: Equipped to live

## Introduction

I was burning up leftover rubbish in my garden when I felt God say to me clearly: "I want you to be more like John Collins".

I had heard of his name as I was in the middle of researching the network of churches that came out of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) for my doctoral degree at Durham. As a curate, my training incumbent had often referred to the extraordinary moment in 1984/5? when John Collins had passed leadership of HTB on to Sandy Millar, and how Collins had been instrumental in David Watson's conversion and development as one of the foremost evangelists of the twentieth century. But I knew little else besides this, including whether this inspirational man was still alive.

Nevertheless, I was on sabbatical and it sounded an exciting prospect and a distraction from an ongoing dental problem. There was precious little I could find out in our local theological college library but providentially, whilst researching an HTB church plant on the following Sunday, I bumped into a university friend of his.

This led to a wonderful visit with John that helped inform my research and enabled me to see close up his interactions with lifelong friends and family and glimpse a little of his character and story. But it was only two years later, when, with the encouragement of Sandy Millar, I began to research John's life more deeply that I realised how entwined with the history of evangelical and charismatic renewal in the Anglican church John's story actually was. It has been my privilege to sit with him and his friends regularly, to read his old papers and notes and attempt to distil a small portion of his full life onto paper.

The full tale will take a much longer volume, but a brief telling will bring out some salient leadership points for anyone starting out in ministry who does not realise the heights previous generations have climbed, nor the price that they paid to get there.

The main reason that this story has not been fully told before is that John dislikes talking about his own ministry. He has two reasons: Firstly, "it exposes all involved and especially the clergy to the danger of triumphalism, pride and a temptation to polish the account". He is convinced that "When we get to heaven we will be surprised at who is considered important

in the Kingdom of God and not convinced the clergy will figure as a largely as we, or other kindly folk imagine". The second is more personal: Ministry is bound up with the minister's own inner life which he "deeply dislikes" talking about. John has always been drawn to Francis Bacon's idea that the Church of England needn't make 'windows into another man's soul'. When you are with him you quickly note that he is blessed with an inner security and deep humility and his wariness not to take credit for what only belongs to God.

**460 words**

### **Early days:**

Much of the inner security John derived was from his relationship with his father, who along with John Stott (Rector, All Souls Langham Place) and EM Nash (founder of the Iwerne 'Bash' Camps) and Henry Chadwick (historian and Iwerne camp officer) was one of four significant men in his early ministerial life. His father was a Cornish clergyman who had John when he was 50. He had a lot of time for him as a boy, spending hours each day educating him, before eventually sending him to Haileybury for secondary school. On his mother's side were connections to the Wynne family and a baronetcy. Her ancestry that can be traced back to an aristocrat lady related to Henry VIII, who fled to the continent at the time of 'Bloody' Mary. At Haileybury he was an all-rounder enjoying music, sport and classics. He went to Iwerne camps set up by EM Nash to train boys from the 'top 30 public schools' for ministry and received Christ just before embarking on National Service in the RAF. While in the forces a profound sense of the fear of God that overwhelmed him, and an experience of the Spirit which led to a period of 'walking on air' one of several key experiences of the Spirit that John would have. A very significant observation was made by his father, that despite all his upbringing he had 'never detected even an ounce of leadership' in the young John Collins, right up until the point of his conversion.

John went up to Clare College Cambridge in 1946 with an organ scholarship to read classics and eventually ended up at Ridley Hall theology college alongside Dick Lucas and Tim Dudley-Smith, conservatives in a predominantly liberal evangelical college.<sup>1</sup> The three of them drew up a document for a different form of theological training based in a Parish – 60 years ahead of its time! Another key factor was John's leadership of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, which thrived under him. He led future England star Cricketer David Shepherd to Christ in his rooms, following a mission week, and took him to Iwerne

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<sup>1</sup> John had what he calls a 'very wrong, very improper motive' for getting ordained, and thus struggled to explain his calling later on! Having heard a lot of speakers at the CICCUC he simply thought he could do better, and 'that was my call'!

camps for follow up. David later became a very high profile Bishop of Liverpool.<sup>2</sup> In the background for all this was Henry Chadwick, the great historian, musician and academic, who was John's dormitory officer at Iwerne. He was a wonderful mentor and very caring for John in his early days at Cambridge.

Iwerne also gave Collins other key contacts: He travelled to Northern Ireland with the administrator Philip Thomson where he was introduced to the unique and formative children's ministry of Hudson Pope. But most significantly of all he came on the radar of John Stott.

**460 words**

Study Questions:

Why were residential camps so important in the conversion and discipleship of so many young Christians?

What equivalent stepping stones are there for children and young people in your church?

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<sup>2</sup> Shepherd (1969) 48-50; Shepherd (2002) 214-217

### **All Souls Langham Place**

Of all the extraordinary array of talent in the Bash Camp alumni, including our current Archbishop, John Stott was undoubtedly the most significant for the development of Evangelical Anglicanism. His ministry saw All Souls Langham Place impact the national and global church through, his writings, student missions, the National Evangelical Anglican Congress, and latterly the Langham Partnership. Converted at a Bash camp in 1938 Stott returned to All Souls - the church he had grown up in - as a Curate in 1945 and became Rector five years later. He held that role for 25 years before handing over to colleagues, whilst remaining in situ as Rector Emeritus. In 2005 Time Magazine described him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Stott is a certain 'great' in the Evangelical World and the movement he fathered fundamentally changed the course of the Church of England for generations to come.

In 1951, when John Stott was a recently appointed Rector of All Souls Langham Place, all this was yet to come. But even in his curacy the Bishop of London had asked Stott to write his Lent book for him. So when he came to Iwerne to assess whether Collins would be a suitable curate it probably felt intimidating. Collins was the officer giving the evening talk in the library, and remembers being in shorts, so that the nervous twitches in his knees were visible to the entire room! He felt that he 'lost it' half way through - but Stott decided that he was his man!. The invitation for Collins was 'too surprising and delightful to turn down.' This led to a significant partnership in a curacy that lasted for 6 years in a time of explosive growth for All Souls, and modelled a discipline in training and ministry that would impact Collins and his own curates for a lifetime.

He arrived at All Souls in the summer of 1951 to form a strong relationship with his Rector, and was a significant figure in the early developments in the church. His musical abilities came in handy when Stott announced a guest service on Christmas Eve in 1952. The organist objected and refused to come, so Collins took the console and played for the service. There was a huge response to the appeal, with Stott asking each of the 40 or 50 who queued up to respond "Have you invited Christ into your life, or are you still unsure about it?" Half way through the queue an effusive lady "oh John, I just wanted to tell you that I knew Archdeacon X etc.." To which Stott again replied "Have you invited Christ..... " And she, oblivious, "did you ever meet a great friend of ours, Bishop Y ...." To which Stott continued "Have you invited Christ...etc" She went off in a huff – Stott could not to be diverted from the primary purpose! Among those who came forward, was a promising young secretary from the BBC called Frances Whitehead, who gave the rest of her life to serving John's ministry. In later years Collins battled with Diocesan authorities to train curates in the

church that they had come to faith in. When you have experienced Kingdom growth like this, he argued, it is hard to settle for anything less.

Current ministers in training might note that Collins took on the children's church at St Peter's, Vere Street during his curacy – a significant factor in All Souls' overall growth. A few years later when Collins' own curate David Watson announced that he wasn't called to lead family services, he ignored him. According to Watson's biographers this was 'just as well' as much of Watson's future ministry was built upon the strength he grew in talking to children and adults together.<sup>3</sup> Collins himself was greatly loved for his light and challenging children's talks and humour in the All Souls magazines.

While at All Souls Collins married the person with the biggest influence on him of all. He had first set eyes on Diana Kimpton at Iwerne. Andrew, her twin brother had brought her to be a "lady helper", kept well out of sight of the boys, in the kitchens. However, the helpers were brought up to the evening talks in the library where they filed into a dark back row after everyone else was seated. But, her glamorous looks and striking auburn hair must have been difficult to conceal! For Diana, trained as an actress at RADA, Nash's talk on "opening the door to Christ" was the turning point. Soon after she spent a year at the austere Ridgeland Bible College, which trained young women for Victorian era mission work! Collins only met up with her three times before proposing – not least because his Curate's stipend wouldn't stretch to a fourth date. Her response was at first "but I don't really know you". However, the sight of her running down the stairs of the college to greet him, auburn hair ablaze, excitement in her face, as he came to take her out, convinced him that she was really in love with him. The wedding was at All Souls in 1955, with Graham Scott Brown among the ushers. About 2 years later, Dominic was born. John had sold his Hillman Minx in order to buy Diana a top-quality ruby ring with small diamonds round the large gem. Diana was dismayed, but not deterred, to realise how little money he had.

While Collins was still at All Souls the evening congregation had grown to 2000 people. This bit of maths was evident from the fact that even the tiny section of balcony that was obscured by organ pipes, had been filled. Collins tells a delightful anecdote of Stott being late for vestry prayers one evening and then bursting in excitedly to say that the balcony was filled – to the relief of his senior curate who was trying to work out what he was going to preach himself to the gathered crowd with just ten minutes notice.

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<sup>3</sup> *Saunders, T and Sanson H, 47*

Collins would hold fort at All Souls with the other Curates while Stott went off on preaching tours and missions, but he also occasionally did student missions himself. One of the most memorable is re-told in David Watson's *You Are My God*, where he describes a winsome and tenacious Collins speaking at a nondescript Christian Union sponsored evangelistic tea-party. There was 'something unusually gracious and attractive about this clergyman' who spoke with 'simplicity and integrity' and 'seemed to speak from genuine personal experience'. He describes how Collins politely put him on the spot asking, 'Do you know Jesus personally?' and wasn't diverted by the pat answer: 'I have been baptised and confirmed'. This led to a follow up breakfast meeting where Collins shared the way of salvation, and left him to go away and pray a prayer on his own, but asking him to report back if he did so. When Watson duly did both of these Collins arranged for David Shepherd to follow up with Watson and there begun a three year discipleship journey and adventure.

Under the influence of EM Nash at Iwerne and Stott at All Souls, Collins had become a thoroughly disciplined evangelical exegete and minister. The habits he inculcated persist into his nineties, with ninety minutes of personal devotional Bible Study (preferably from a Greek New Testament) a norm. The key lesson of the curacy was in Collins' words to rest in Jesus in order to 'find the strength and determination *to discipline myself* for the on-going hard work and on-going hard reading necessary for any attempt to expound and to apply the Bible in a way that would feed the souls of the congregation.'

He elaborates that *three* processes, exemplified by John Stott, were essential:

(i) serious ongoing Bible study; (ii) application which would include patient collecting of illustrations; these first two being about equally difficult and equally time consuming. I quickly came to the conclusion that these two tasks *must* be carried out. (iii) to win the prayer battle. Only then could I climb the pulpit stairs with a proper confidence in God. Sunday by Sunday by Sunday.

However, there was a brave character at All Souls who spotted and vocalised a deficit in all the Clergy. George Ingram, had been influenced by Paget Wilkes, the founder of the Japan Evangelistic Band (1871-1934). He had followed Wilkes into his rooms one day demanding to know the secret of Wilkes' life as 'you have got something that I have not got'. Paget opened his Bible and explained the secret to be 'Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy'. "Now", he said, "you will never know peace or power until you accept that as God's standard for you. If you really mean business, get alone with God and pray for three things: first that God will give you a hunger for a greater blessing than you have ever had; secondly,

that he will show you your sinful nature as he sees it; and thirdly that he will give you a vision of the cross of Calvary and what it cost him to purchase a full salvation for you.”<sup>4</sup> This led Ingram into what he described as the ‘blessing of sanctification, which revolutionised my whole Christian life.’<sup>5</sup> It was this blessing, and what he called ‘dimensions of the fullness of the Holy Spirit’ that he thought was lacking still in Collins and his peers at All Souls, although it was George Ingram who would wait for the young Curate after his sermons, and ‘with a warm smile, say slowly and with great emphasis, “remember, John, you are chosen for this”’. It was often this old missionary’s encouragements that rescued Collins’ mind from the ‘pressure of preaching to the cultured congregation’ and directed him towards God.

**1650 words**

Study Questions:

What spiritual and study disciplines do you develop in young leaders in your church?

Who are the voices in the congregation who may know more of God than you do? Can you listen to them?

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<sup>4</sup> Govan Stewart (1957) 41

<sup>5</sup> Ingram, a former CMS missionary in India, led the Nights of Prayer for World-Wide Revival, and an Anglican Prayer for Revival.

### **St Mark's Gillingham – Early Days**

If you were a Diocesan bishop in the late 1950s looking to start a resource church - an example to many and a training place for some - you probably would not have thought of St Mark's Gillingham. The county of Kent is known as the Garden of England, and somewhat unkindly, Gillingham has been referred to as its compost heap. John Collins had a nagging desire to see whether the wonderful ministry at All Souls Langham Place was replicable in a very different part of the country, but when he went to interview with the Bishop of Rochester he had thought of 'ten perfectly good reasons why I had absolutely no intention of taking the job.' The formidable Churchillian Bishop Chavasse wisely berated him with a simultaneous growl and a glare that 'every young man these days feels that he is called to the South Coast', and sent him to visit the parish anyway.

Nevertheless, John and Diana arrived in 1957, despite also having been offered a post in Southport. Every one of Collins' ten reasons was turned around during his visit. In particular the earlier arrival of David and Jean Smith from Aberdeen was a very significant act of God, and conversions were already taking place. There was new life coming up from below and Collins was a 'sufficient strategist' to see that the young people could soon out vote the old people, so if God was doing new things in the parish it could not be held to ransom by an old guard. He maintains that the clearest guidance he ever had was his call to Gillingham; and he believed that the Lord was inviting him to show that what had happened in the rarefied location of All Souls in London could equally well occur in a tough inner-city church. It was a matter of following the same principles of prayer, preaching, teaching the good news, and discipling young Christians. Collins negotiated with the Bishop (for permission), CPAS (for funding) and Mr Nash (for influence) to quickly establish a clergy team ministry. David MacInnes arrived soon after as a curate, and within a year the Bishop gave permission for a second curate, such was the new life in the parish.

The parish was a world of little back to back terrace houses, thirty-five pubs and a pickle factory. Everything was dominated by Chatham Dockyard, which employed twelve thousand local inhabitants, and the Royal Engineers Garrison, which disgorged soldiers into the pubs. David MacInnes recalls: "The people were warm-hearted, with cockney humour, colourful language, and great openness. There was no room for unrelated piety. People's feelings were not concealed behind a sophisticated veneer. Here theology could be tested against the raw material of life, truth had to be expressed with vivid illustration, practical application and a simple vocabulary."



Numerous stories from this time deserve much longer retelling. There was a heady combination of sacrificial leadership, plucky evangelism, strategic planning, determined visiting and skilled gospel presentation. A few things stand out for leaders today:

Firstly, the growth was partly financed by Diana and John opening up their vicarage to church workers. Two or three church workers (including Curates) would stay in the vicarage, with their rooms sometimes doubling as church space – for meetings and even crèche. Team made a big difference: ‘We avoided the snare common to many Christians working in tough circumstances, namely loneliness, and we certainly had lots of fun together.’<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the training was rigorous. Diana had an actress’ perfect diction, and subjected all the clergy (including John) to such ‘fierce training’ that they each flinched at her withering comments. Both Diana and John were ‘superb tutors’ and ‘marvellous enablers’<sup>7</sup>, and John’s detailed feedback on sermons would balance extraordinary encouragement with an eventual ‘just one thing...’ or ‘three small comments’ that always helped preachers improve. He had an inspirational vision for what preaching could achieve and his curates aspired to it.

Thirdly, the evangelism was intentional. Preaching was for a verdict. In a memorable illustration (often repeated to ill effects) John swallowed a daffodil on Easter Day in front of 400 people. This was to make the point that while an individual witness may not be believed if hundreds see an event (like the resurrection) their testimony needs reckoning with. Door to door evangelism and pastoral visitation was normal, 70-80 children were taken on a week’s houseparty annually, and an open youth club for 140 ‘lively gangs of teddy boys’ were all part of the regular church outreach diet.

Fourthly, there was organisational savvy. A house was developed so that the church team could grow, and prospective ordinands were housed there. A treasurer was carefully outsmarted when he resisted the appointment of David Watson as curate. A crucifer was removed. A parish newsletter (in the style of the Daily Mirror) was begun. A curate was told to preach on the text ‘Wist ye not’ when John was busy replacing a culture of whist drives and jumble sales with direct and sacrificial giving. Two different types of prayer meetings were started for people at different stages of experience of renewal. Later at Gillingham John began to appoint ‘elders’, the beginnings of church leadership teams that served him so well at Canford and HTB.

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<sup>6</sup> Watson (1983) 42

<sup>7</sup> ibid 46

However, as at All Souls, there remained a hint that there was more John was missing out on. John and Pat Buckley, a young couple in the congregation, turned up at the Vicarage to tell the Vicar that they knew more about the Christian life than he did, and would probably leave the church. John graciously admitted that it was more than likely that they did, and would love to learn from them if they would stay. They did stay and Pat soon after had a profound experience of being filled with the Spirit and was physically healed. They became significant lay leaders, not least through opening up their miraculously provided home to foster children. This all coincided with significant soul searching in John and the rest of the staff team. Released by Diana, John would make a weekly escape from the Parish for quiet study days, pondering why he could not find more personal victory over sin.

A key moment came when Graham Scott Brown persuaded the Collins' to invite Corrie Ten Boom a 70-year-old Germanic women to come to the parish. Diana hosted yet another person in the vicarage! John writes of her:

“I remember opening the door to her. The moment she walked into the vicarage, I felt in the presence of a majestic person. But there was always laughter in her eyes and playing around her mouth. Also, there was dignity... She caused us to thirst after a sweeter and more gracious state than we knew. We felt that a beautiful life was crossing our path – a life of love and rest”

Twin brothers, John and David Hughes, were children of a naval officer near to Gillingham, and due to do a week of dance lessons. But they bunked of these lessons to attend Corrie's evening lectures. Anyone who has done the Alpha course will have heard her incredible story of forgiveness, and she spoke from her experiences in the holocaust of a love that faced the realities of evil, but had been tested in the fiery furnace of suffering. She used delightful visual aids and conveyed a sense of God's presence. In prayer before one of the meetings, she said quietly “There will be thirteen coming to the Lord tonight.” Twelve responded and she was concerned about the thirteenth, but sure enough the thirteenth rang up.

David MacInnes recalls: “the most valuable part of the week was the time we had, simply drawing on her wisdom. She spoke of being filled with the Spirit in a way which was beyond our experience, and described, too, how she had learned to discern the demonic in her pastoral work, and battle with the powers of darkness in the sinister world of the occult and spiritualism. At the same

time, together with all the stories that poured out, she confessed her ongoing difficulty with anger. Her companion on this tour irritated her beyond measure, and “every day I ask to be kept from losing my temper,” she said “and every night I have to ask forgiveness for doing so!” She was a delightfully human saint.”

Her parting words were inspired by her experience of surrendering to God which she in turn had learnt from Oswald Smith.<sup>8</sup> She left three clergymen blushing at the railway station as she shouted out from the train window: “Don’t wrestle, just nestle”, narrowly avoiding hitting her head on a sign! She had opened their eyes to a spiritual battle, and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

**1500 words**

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<sup>8</sup> Author of *The Endowment of Power*. See Boom (2002) 42

**St Mark's Gillingham – When the Spirit Fell**

Before David Watson left, he had been excited about Romans 6, and felt it had given him a spiritual breakthrough. John began preaching on the chapter, and came to a fresh understanding of being 'dead to sin' which he felt was the key prelude to the filling with the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

George Ingram had been promoting Nights of Prayer for World-Wide Revival. This led to two men from Rochester approaching John about using the Vicarage Hall for a night of prayer. John said he'd think about it, unsure he could manage the night after a very full day of work, and promptly forgot about the request. A few weeks later one returned asking if they could have the hall anyway even if the Clergy might be too tired to stay awake! They were themselves manual labourers working full-time, so John ended up feeling he ought to join them. So, on a night thick with snow, he put on the paraffin stoves in the little corrugated iron clad hall, quite convinced no-one would come.

40 people arrived by 10pm, including some who had walked 4 miles as the buses had stopped. The format was simple. Each hour a new leader took over. John Hughes (then 18) remembers someone confessed adultery before midnight which triggered heart-felt repentance around the room. After this there was then a focus on the cross and a half-hour pause for tea! At 2am John spoke on Luke 11 "how much more..." He used the illustration of visiting his young son Dominic in hospital with the promise of a teddy bear and getting the response of "Thank you, thank you, thank you, Daddy" even before the boy had received anything. 'A few mighty prayer warriors began to ask' John recalls, 'but I was struggling hard to keep awake.' Then around 2:40am an extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit followed, with some present literally dancing for joy. At 3am a group of men and women arrived into a room with an astonishing presence of God. One woman was set free from addictive feelings of jealousy. Others received a special call from God. Several ended up ordained. David and Jean Smith were particularly affected. People left reluctantly at 06:45am as they had to get to the dockyard. For about three weeks they felt like they were living out the early chapters of Acts.

This breakthrough wasn't allowed to be uncontested. A couple of days after the night of prayer, John went to speak at an ordinand's breakfast in Cambridge. He experienced an extraordinary presence of the Spirit as he walked to the train in London. Several characters begging on the street got up, quite unprovoked, and shook their fists at him. He stayed the

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<sup>9</sup> Collins (2013) 35-70

night at Tyndale House and at 12 midnight was woken and began to prophesy; the prophetic words flowed on until 3am and were a call to pray - (which made him wonder at the time whether he was being called to leave the parochial ministry and devote himself to prayer). At 3am came the words "Sleep on now and take your rest". At 6.30am his alarm went off and so, exhausted, he arrived for the breakfast. And after a brief description of the Gillingham parish, he told the story of the night of prayer, and expounded Romans 6 which had been such a significant prelude to the coming of the Spirit. A furore followed with several well-known evangelical peers dismayed by his contention that he knew what it was to be 'dead to sin'. Perhaps, MacInnes wonders, this happened so that the work of the Spirit in Gillingham might be more widely advertised? Gillingham rapidly became a hub for those involved in the renewal movement, at the same time that many key figures in John's life felt that he had 'lost the plot.'

No long after his previous Rector and key national evangelical leader John Stott preached an alternate reading of Romans 6 at the Keswick Convention. John comments: "I learnt all my theology from John Stott so it was very difficult for me." John had to contend with significant ostracizing from peers and patrons, which to some extent left him out on a limb. David MacInnes recalls that there were a number of key larger churches that John would have been eminently suited for that he was subsequently overlooked for. This was probably exacerbated by stories where renewal had caused churches to implode, such as nearby Christ Church Beckenham, where a move of God under George Forrester had ended up in a mess. John was determined not to let that happen in Gillingham and handled renewal carefully, having two separate prayer meetings for those at different stages of experience. He was greatly helped that God did a significant work in Diana and each of the former inhabitants of the vicarage – filling Graham Scott-Brown with the Spirit in Nepal (and giving him the gift of tongues) at almost exactly the same time as the Night of Prayer, Diana in London through the ministry of David du Plessis and Michael Harper (another of John Stott's curates), David Watson (through searching the Scriptures in Cambridge), and David MacInnes (also in London). The two David's and John took counsel from Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones who was a great help to them.<sup>10</sup>

There was increasing manifestation of gifts in the parish, and a number of rare characters came on the scene. Significant among them was Edgar Trout, a former Plymouth City Councillor and Methodist Lay preacher, who had felt called to mentor clergy who were

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<sup>10</sup> Watson (1983) 56-57

experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit. Mrs Owe, the Pentecostal, was another who came on the scene from the Gravesend Pentecostal church. John went to the Pentecostal church at Gravesend and asked for prayer for the gift of tongues. All the tough sailors and men gathered round him to lay hands on him with encouragement to "Say Halleluiah, brother", "Let go brother" and then "Hold on, brother" and then "unless you come out of the C of E, brother, you'll never receive" - none of which effected the gift of tongues at the time - but later it began!

Margaret Freeman, a Scottish lady, was thought to be the first person to speak in tongues. When John prayed for her a most glorious language came from her mouth and everyone leaped around for joy that she had received tongues, but she was actually speaking in fluent Gallic.

John never used the term Baptism of the Spirit - always 'Filled' - although it was used by many of those drawn into the Renewal. Then came the visit of Dennis Benett, the American Episcopalian, author of an influential book entitled "9 O'clock in the Morning". John invited a number of local clergy. Most left expressing thanks, but no more. One Anglo Catholic vicar insisted that he would not leave until he too had entered into the experience. He later phoned John to say, "I drove my van up the hill, turned off the M62 and when I stopped I began to speak in a strange language... Father Collins, do you think this was the real thing?"

There were experiences of deliverance, prophecy and healing in the Parish, including the very dramatic deliverance of young minister in training sent to the Parish for help. The man had turned so violent that he required 3 or 4 others to hold him down. This was out of their comfort zone and eventually, John phoned Edgar Trout who responded "send him down to me, and I will show that there is a God in Plymouth." He sat between 2 burly men all the way there, and when he met with God in Edgar he was freed and returned rejoicing.

For John ministry became more like a party – you don't know what will happen next. At times the miraculous touched the Collins' life. David MacInnes tells a remarkable story of Diana being rescued on a beach, by a man who simply disappeared when John and Diana turned to thank him. Another story is of a certain head on car collision that was averted (possibly to Diana's dismay as she was always ready to go to glory).

One of his later parishioners described John 'as, from where I stand, the best parish priest in the post-war era'. Given that that parishioner went on to be Archbishop of Canterbury that is a serious accolade. The reasons Justin Welby gave included John's effectiveness on a

range of fronts whilst keeping evangelism central to everything he did, the ability to let go of control to allow the Spirit to lead, and his shaping of a younger generation of leaders, including himself, by motivating, equipping and being a shining example alongside Diana.<sup>11</sup>

**1400 words**

Study Questions:

What were the roles of surrender and prayer in the renewal at Gillingham?

Why do you think opposition rose up to John's reading of Romans 6?

In what ways are you able to let go of control and allow the Spirit to lead in your ministry?

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<sup>11</sup> Welby (2013) letter in 'contribution to an anthology in John Collins' honour'.

## Canford

Whereas today the successes at Gillingham would have been lauded in a Church Commissioners report, in the late 1960s they still provoked fear among both conservative evangelicals and ecclesiastical authorities alike. Many doors were closed to them. The Collins's were also a very long way from their children's boarding schools, and after 14 years at Gillingham it was time to move on. Hugh Morgan Williams (father of Fiona Costa) had felt called to live in Canford Magna, but was becoming increasingly frustrated by the vicar who was a 'rank modernist' who he 'had been liberated from the Bible'. Thanks to Canford School being patrons, John was appointed despite opposition from some in ecclesiastical authority. This included an aggressive five-page letter denouncing John's theology of the Spirit to the church wardens one of whom, Ian Wallis, was Headmaster of Canford School.

It was a delightful village parish church, with a PCC of around 45 people – but with 25 attending the morning service and 6 coming in the evening!<sup>12</sup> It was not far from Post Green where Tom and Faith Lees has just begun hosted a significant renewal ministry associated with Jean Darnell.<sup>13</sup> Tom was to prove an important friend to John, particularly in establishing the Lantern Church. Change was already afoot, with housing developments planned at both ends of the parish, and John had secured the promise of a curate when the parish reached 8000 people.

There were many pressures, but the ministry began to develop both in the Parish and, significantly, in the school. John managed to arrange for school and parish services to be combined and brought in a series of stunning speakers from London and beyond, including Richard Wurmbrand and Jackie Pullinger. He interspersed pupils in one row and parishioners in the next so each could have a good effect on the other. He gently won trust with each head-teacher and parishioners telling the PCC, 'I will make changes, but make haste slowly'.

Over the following 13 years the parish grew to 750 people, which John's successor has attributed to a variety of factors ranging from God's sovereignty, very deliberate prayer, individuals drawn in, strong staff, groups ministry, outside links (such as Post Green), spiritual gifts, planting two new centres (Lantern and Bearwood), community links,

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<sup>12</sup> Gibbs (1984) 175

<sup>13</sup> see Lees (1978)



evangelism, leadership pattern and a churchmanship that is not extreme.<sup>14</sup> A half hour of prayer before each PCC meeting, individuals turning up at church asking how they could be saved and some excellent curates beginning with Brian Nicholson and John Mumford certainly helped.

Much more needs to be said on Canford as well, not least to relate John Mumford's detailed account of the exemplary training he and Ellie received from the Collins' and the subsequent impact that had on them in founding the UK Vineyard Churches. This was not just seen in their detailed sermon critiques, exemplary marriage and partnership in ministry, and steely ability to fight authorities on behalf of their curates, but also in their humour, graciousness, and 'humble and selfless determination to place themselves at God's disposal' without 'the least trace of bitterness or resentment' towards those who, out of reaction to trailblazing way in which they had followed the Spirit, had closed numerous doors to them. Both John and Ellie were deeply concerned that the church wasn't sufficiently conservative evangelical, and Ellie was she was terrified of Diana, and the emphasis on the Filling of the Holy Spirit! However both were liberated by a dramatic experience early on in their time there when Ellie was prayed for by John Collins en route to their honeymoon.

Paul Perkin was a schoolmaster at Canford School for six years, living almost next door to the vicarage. He describes them as 'in between older siblings and substitute parents... a transformative experience for me.' Observing their pressures, joys, frustrations, breakthroughs and disappointments, 'left me in no doubt that beneath the apparent serenity of their vicarage life was a spiritual passion, tested strongly as all Christian faith is tested, to win the hearts and minds of disciples and extend the Kingdom of God.'

It was also at this time that John and Diana began the ministry that would become the Stewards Trust. Concerned for families attending dead and isolated rural parishes, they began to gather whole families together in large country houses for bible-teaching, renewal and much fun. Their daughter Chick was sometimes drafted into catering for 140 people! This was the Iwerne model re-developed with a charismatic and family feel. Gordon Scott recalls Holiday Teaching Weeks for young adults in their 20s, with 111 coming in 1974, and this having to spread to 2 weeks by 1976 when they took over Clarendon School. He sees

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<sup>14</sup> Savile in Gibbs (1984) 176-85

this as the birthing of 'Focus'. At Canford John hosted gatherings for evangelists impacting the likes of Gavin Reid, Roger Simpson and Daniel Cozens to preach for a verdict. He regularly travelled to speak. Nicky Gumbel recalls cooking a lunch for his friends in his undergraduate rooms at Cambridge so they could meet this renowned evangelist. John also regularly embarked on ten-day parish missions elsewhere, including, most significantly the *Step Forward* mission held at Holy Trinity Brompton in 1978.<sup>15</sup>

900 words

Study Questions:

If God called you to start over again in ministry would you consider going somewhere as dead as Sir Hugh and the Collins' were called to?

What might 'making haste slowly' look like for a minister in a new job?

What extra-parish activities might it be profitable for you to take up?

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<sup>15</sup> Phil and Moyne Lawson Johnston joined John and Diana's teams from 1973 onwards.

**HTB**

It was with some considerable reluctance that John Collins took on the role as vicar at HTB in 1980. Canford was now going very well, and speaking at the high society gathering which was HTB, was something which intimidated him, as it had in his days at All Souls Langham Place. Nevertheless, God had begun a significant work HTB, accelerated by the arrival of the 'five Nicky's and Ken' in 1976 (many of whom had been converted in a David MacInnes led university mission), and Sandy Millar as curate soon after. It was Sandy Millar's contention that there were only three vicars in the whole country who could steward what God had begun there, and in a curious twist of roles he and Charlie Colchester, the churchwarden, headed to Canford to try and recruit John to be his boss.

It is quite possible that John was an accidental appointment to HTB by the Bishop of London. Gerald Elison had an old rowing buddy called Jack Collins who would have been a suitable choice for this society church. When the Bishop Elison came to take a wedding some time later, John introduced himself in the vestry and said, 'I'm Collins', to which the Bishop replied 'No, you're not!' before quickly regaining his cool and carrying on as before.

Nicky Gumbel was on the PCC which John quickly established to run the church. He recalls John not just as an amazing preacher, and wonderful story-teller, but also full of vision. He looked up at the balconies and said: 'Imagine – exercise faith – imagine one day there could be people in all those balconies'. It was through John he went to ordination training in 1983.

Again, the story deserves a fuller telling. One critical element was the Coleman family who in 1983 donated a good portion of Malshanger, their country residence to HTB. The Collins' were keen to get the young people of HTB out into the country for weekends away, allowing for both spiritual growth and matchmaking. This also contributed to the development of the Alpha course as a ten-week course with a weekend away based on John's own teaching on the Holy Spirit. In fact, Nicky Gumbel states that much of the Alpha material originally came from John, although he incorrectly credit's John with the 5 CSs in the guidance talk.<sup>16</sup> They date all the way back to Diana' college principal at Ridglands, and were ceased upon by John and Diana when they were trying to avoid the 'charismatic excesses' of those who seemed too unapologetic in claiming direct divine inspiration.

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<sup>16</sup> Commanding Scripture, Common Sense, Compelling Spirit, Counsel of the Saints, Circumstantial Signs.

John and Andy Irvine, with their three young children, had anticipated joining the Collins' in leafy Dorset for a curacy, and instead ended up in a small flat in Knightsbridge. John Irvine was tasked with the lengthening of Charles Marnham's four-week Alpha course to ten weeks, and joined a Curate team including Sandy Millar, Patrick Whitworth and, shortly afterwards, Paul Perkin. He recalls the value of team and how the wives were as included as they wanted to be, Diana's hospitable and kind mentoring, prayer, preaching critique, graciousness and vision for church planting as the highlights of the curacy. He learnt more about prayer 'in six months at HTB than in all my previous Christian life'. He remembers the way John 'used the Scriptures to entreat God with his combination of reverence and intimacy', seeing John at prayer through his study window, John and Diana's ongoing weekly prayers for his family, and how John always asked for time to think when he made a request, and then prayed and got back to him at an appointed time.

The work at HTB accelerated rapidly, not least through the strength of the team and the brave decision to invite John Wimber to speak. Patrick Whitworth recalls that through his encouragements: 'John Collins was able to lead a team who were devoted to the task and to each other, supportive, kindly, and stimulating.' Wimber was invited to speak after David Watson had recommended him to his old mentor and some of the staff had visited Anaheim Vineyard.

Sandy Millar recalls that Wimber showed us, 'what healing might really mean, what the prophetic might really mean... he did them like I imagined the early church might do them... he was disarming... he was what I had always hoped I would find in a church. At that time HTB did 1662 and matins, we changed to ASB matins that everybody hated – we tried putting slots of worship in services but it didn't work. Wimber provided a model to which we could move if we wanted to. This slightly overweight, laid back Californian made great concessions to us. He dialled everything down, spoke reasonably slowly, but he did ministry.' As well as easing up worship styles he helped distill the passion for church planting, which began with curates John Irvine and Paul Perkin pioneering substantial churches in London at St Barnabas Kensington and St Mark's Battersea Rise despite massive obstacles.

Sandy had been converted aged 28 and like Diana Collins had been prayed for by DuBlessit/Harper to be filled with the Spirit. He came as Raymond Turnin's curate in 1976.

Raymond told Sandy on his death bed: 'I invited you to join the staff as I could see what God was doing worldwide with things of the spirit but I didn't have the confidence to introduce it at the time.' Raymond had been the NEAC treasurer and under conservative evangelical scrutiny to ensure he was still 'sound'. From the outset Raymond had encouraged Sandy to start a small group with the five new converts with the intention of dragging the Anglican church into things of the Holy Spirit... 'He said to me "you get on and pray for everybody and I'll explain what you meant"'

In the mid-1980s John Collins found the Bishop of London attempting to wrench Sandy away from HTB to the east-end. Foreseeing that this would be a problem he once more argued with ecclesiastical authorities, eventually persuading the Bishop of Kensington to support him in a role reversal with his exceptionally talented curate. "Sandy could have been CEO of any FTSE-100 company" he later surmised, and so he secured the continuation of leadership of HTB for the next twenty years, before Sandy also passed on the baton in the same manner to Nicky Gumbel in 2005 for what may well be another twenty years as well. John remained as Curate from 1985-89. Curiously enough it was John Collins who had responsibility for Nicky Gumbel's preaching development when they were both curates, and Nicky recalls, that despite John's reputation for encouragement, he would get straight to the point with him. On one occasion he urged brevity – pointing out that Diana had closed her bible five times, thinking he had [should have] finished. On another he was told off for reading the punchline of a joke.

It is extraordinary that one man should have been so involved with the growth of All Souls Langham Place in the 1950s and HTB in the 1980s. All Souls is so obviously significant situated by the great temple of our age, the BBC studios. HTB is dwarfed and hidden by the Roman Catholic London Oratory next door. Thirty years later it is HTB that is being looked to by desperate dioceses as a model in church planting, leadership training and resourcing. John sometimes wonders if all God has done in and through HTB was supposed to have been planted on Stott's foundations at the great evangelical cathedral All Souls Langham Place? If Stott had more fully embraced the move of the Spirit, Collins, Harper, MacInnes and other had experienced perhaps the Alpha movement might have begun there?

**1300 words**

Study Questions

What prayer life underpins your church and ministry?

Who might God be calling you to push on in ministry beyond you?

What might happen if you let go of control of your ministry?

**I have run the race...**

Retirement took John and Diana to Milford on Sea, before a happy season in Oxford. There were numerous Stewards Trust houseparties to speak at, and they would visit with isolated Christian friends like the former MP of Abingdon Tom Benyon. Tom's wife Jane had come to faith on a houseparty John was speaking at. Tom went on to play a significant role on General Synod and John encouraged them to open up their own home for houseparties too. Jane recalls the lasting effect this had on all their four children.

Then there were Ordinands at Wycliffe Hall to influence. Jonathan Aitken recalls how Michael and Rosemary Green, then Rector of St Aldate's (and one-time runner up to David MacInnes to be John's curate at Gillingham), brought him to a prayer group at the Collins' flat. He described them as 'channels of God's grace to a bruised pilgrim.' John became a guide and mentor to him as he 'stumbled along the path of being a Christian speaker.' Not least, he came to Jonathan Aitken's flat and for four weeks gave him one-to-one tutorials on Stott's *The Cross of Christ* to help his new protégé keep a Good Friday engagement he had been asked to do in Salisbury.

Simon Ponsonby recalls John was always the greatest encouragement many ordinands as well as to him personally. "He would write beautiful letters to me after occasionally hearing me preach and he read and offered helpful advice for my book *God Inside Out*. But the most precious thing to me was that in early 2005 when Aldates were wondering about creating a post for me as a sort of resident theologian, John wrote a letter to Charlie Cleverly that I've seen, saying how important it was to have a charismatic teacher on the team and released to write & travel and that I was the man, and he would commit to paying monthly towards supporting me, from his pension, until the Lord took him. I was staggered when I read this letter - having such personal affirmation from such a man as John Collins." Later John even wrote to Justin Welby to commend Simon Ponsonby to him! The interest and support helped Simon develop to the renowned international speaker he is today, firstly he says as, "John Collins was a legend in the CofE/renewal movement, and also John was something of a Toff. Always struggling with my own sense of belonging and fit, to have a sense of inclusion and honour from one such as John was 'healing' for my soul."

In 2013 Tom Benyon and David MacInnes began to gather together a number of testimonies about John and Diana's life and ministry, many of which have underpinned this brief account. Two reflections still stand out:

The first is a letter from Michael and Judy Coleman, at Malshanger, describing the way they were led to offer their family home to HTB, and thanking John and Di for bringing their weekend gatherings there: Michael states the weekends:

“Made me aware of God's tangible presence entering many people's lives. We were, so to speak, sitting in the front row watching a stage where the players in succeeding waves were becoming aware of God's presence – his plan for their lives and the joy it brought them to know His way. I was privileged to be a witness to scenes of God's hands at work. Faith ceased to become a difficult path to transit. Instead it was impossible to avoid at such close quarters.”

The second comes from John Mumford, who points to John and Diana's 'enduring godliness and holiness.' This despite 'the prejudice and ostracism' they were shown after the 1963 move of God's Spirit in Gillingham, 'where all offers of ecclesiastical preferment for so gifted a couple ceased instantly, as suddenly as the turning off of a tap, and it is not difficult to begin to imagine the pain and sense of isolation they must have endured as a result.' Yet while all that 'they faithfully, obediently and bravely embraced was dismissed as "psychological or diabolical"... they blazed a trail for others to follow, humbly resolved to "carry on carrying on", humbly and selflessly determined to continue to place their lives at their Lord's disposal and thus qualify the highest accolade of all for which they have laboured all their lives: "*Well done thou good and faithful servants.*"

**750 words**

Study Questions:

Who can you imagine yourself cheering on in the Christian life when you come to your retirement?

What bitterness are you prepared to let go of to win the prize of God's approval?



**Epilogue:**

When I felt the Lord say to me, three years ago, that he wanted me to be more like John Collins, I had no idea at the time what an uphill journey and vision he was giving me. To visit with John, even at 92, now without his beloved (and often mentioned) Diana, is a humbling and motivating experience. He mentions scriptures he assumes I know, shows me his Greek commentary he is working through, and prays beautifully. With regards to this project he makes it clear he wants no ill to come to anyone, and cheerfully admits he only let Sandy talk him into embarking on this project under the threat that someone else would tell his story if he didn't let me have ago under his tutelage. From the beginning I have known I will have to wrestle back some editorial control to ensure he has proper recognition, but he is not looking for my praise, or for yours as the reader. He is sure that most accounts of church history he has personal knowledge of read little like the truth, and I think above all else would like to point you once more away from him to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In 2013 he wrote a brief account of the gospel can equip us to live in a book called *A Diagram of God's Love*. It includes a Chapter on how we can be 'buried with Christ' and 'die to sin'. This experience he had in 1963 was both a source of difficulty in his life, but also the foundation for all that extraordinary fruit that follows. He finishes that Chapter with these words and I think he would invite you to read the words below first, and then very slowly pray it with him line by line.

*Lord Jesus, in love and deepest gratitude I know offer myself to you. I offer you my eyes, my thinking, my lips, my tongue, my ears, my hands, my feet. Take me, all that I am, all that I hope to be, and use me in your glorious service. Amen<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Collins (2013) 68

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