**2. Through the Factory Door**

We flew out of New York on Icelandic Air, stopped over in Reykjavik, then on to Luxembourg where we met up with my cousin John. Together we toured through the Netherlands and Germany to Scandinavia. Completing our journey in Norway, Jackie and I took ship from Bergen across the North Sea to Newcastle-on-Tyne.

I was keen to spend a year in England working in a ministry team with an innovative and community-facing edge. Whilst still in the USA I had contacted the rector of Leamington Spa who thanked me for my letter but said he was looking for a more workaday curate. Another option was in Stockton-on-Tees, so disembarking in Newcastle we took a train south to be met by Bill Wright, senior chaplain of the Teesside Industrial Mission (TIM). Bill was an enthusiast, immediately urging us to spend our year there. He offered to explore options while we visited two other contacts we had.

A central London parish was looking for a curate. The accommodation was on the top floor of the vicarage in a small attic, accessible only through the vicarage living quarters, and with a kitchen sink that discharged its waste over roof tiles into the guttering. A better provision, perhaps, than a manger, yet it seemed unsuitable for the care of an infant.

Back in the North-East, the Bishop of Jarrow offered a sole charge locum in a parish by the Wearside docks in Sunderland, one of the places where my great-great-grandfather had been stationed as a Wesleyan minister in the 1850s. We would be the sole occupants of a huge three-storeyed vicarage in an abandoned part of the docks. The ground floor was padlocked off with windows boarded up on account of vandalism. The isolation again made it unsuitable for a baby, but more than that there would be no team from which I might learn.

So it was back to Teesside where Bill Wright had arranged a curacy and house in the parish of Egglescliffe. The rector, Leslie Nelson, was the most gracious of priests and happy for me to spend two days a week with TIM. The unfurnished house was on a nearby new housing estate and the call went out to local parishes for surplus bits of furniture. A community of young families made our year one of warm friendships and support when our first daughter, Rebecca, was born amidst the winter snows of 1971.

On Christmas Eve Leslie Nelson was unwell and unable to officiate at the midnight Christmas communion service. I was asked to stand in and felt part of a Christmas card scene as I walked in gently falling snow through the 11th century parish churchyard.

Industrial mission in England began in Sheffield where Ted Wickham (later Bishop of Middleton) had conducted major research on 19th century Sheffield.[[1]](#footnote-2) Wickham documented the minimal presence of the Church of England in the most heavily industrialised parts of the city and noted the estrangement of the working classes.[[2]](#footnote-3) In feudal times squire and peasant lived in close proximity and worshiped together in the village church. But large scale industrialisation and urbanisation had driven a geographical wedge between social classes so that, as Abraham said to the rich man: ‘between us and you a great gulf is fixed.’[[3]](#footnote-4)

Wickham illustrates this separation in his outline of the 19th century seating plan in the Sheffield parish church. The church accommodated 1500 people in ground floor and gallery seating. Pews with several seats in each were available for freehold purchase or annual rent, with 100 seats available free. Of the free seats ‘there were a few in the gallery behind pillars, and the rest were downstairs, behind the three-decker pulpit, and mostly behind pillars. In two of them the stoves were placed’.[[4]](#footnote-5) Of an adjacent church in Sheffield it was noted that the few free seats were thinly occupied.

The annual rent of a pew cost up to two weeks of a labourer’s wage, the amount varying according to the quality and location of the pew. The finest pews were owned freehold and were part of a person’s assets. Such pews were publicly advertised and sold at auction like a piece of real estate. The *Sheffield Telegraph* reported that ‘Pew No 69 was sold in 1817 for 105 pounds, and again in 1819 for 115 pounds…It was one of the finest placed in the church, seating six persons’.

In terms of attracting people to Sunday worship, clearly this great gulf was unlikely to be bridged. What would a cloth cap say to a top hat? And if the church saw its mission as one of advocacy for the poor, would the wealthy pew-owners who supported the church financially welcome a challenge from the pulpit about wages and conditions in their ‘dark satanic mills’?

A concept of mission focused solely on attracting people to church is quite inadequate. It is often only by venturing out that a bridge between life and faith can be built:

Often the missionary task is envisaged as the landing of a fish out of the sea on to the saving rock of the Church, as though the Church had escaped the pollutions and the colourations of the historical process; whereas the Church is also part of the world, called to be immersed in the deepest waters.

Too often the Gospel is preached wide outside the context of (human) life in this world, thrown from outside like a lifebuoy (or a brick) inscribed with a soteriological[[5]](#footnote-6) text that is meaningless to the secular mind and indifferent to the social context in which (people) are rooted.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Ted Wickham was writing about 19th century Sheffield, but another hundred years went by with little changed in terms of the Church’s link with the lives and conditions of workers. Concerned about the gap, the Bishop of Sheffield, Leslie Hunter, invited Wickham in 1944 to establish an outreach to factory-workers. This move was well received and led to the formation of the Sheffield Industrial Mission. Wickham made it clear that the mission not a ‘fishing expedition’ to recruit new members to fill the pews. It was rather an ’incarnational’ approach, seeking to get alongside the thousands of human beings who worked night and day under grinding conditions on often mindless and soul-less tasks.

Industrial mission is based on the belief that God is not restricted within church walls but is alive and active in all areas of life. The local congregation is largely focused on residential life with an emphasis on home and family, but residential life is only one part of a person’s total experience. From home people go out to work, education and leisure activities. Chaplaincies engage with these other sectors, but overwhelmingly the Church focuses its resources on the residential congregation, ignoring almost completely the powerful forces that shape people’s lives most of their waking hours.

Industrial mission sought to understand the daily human experience in the workplace, to know the poverty not only of body but also of mind and soul in lives dominated by activity often devoid of purpose and fulfillment. The mission explored leadership issues with managers and promoted consultation with unions to build cohesive relationships. Wickham writes:

Mr Graham Hutton, in his analysis of the post-war Anglo-American productivity reports *(We Too can Prosper,* 1953), makes the point that productivity and efficiency must be the basis of any modern viable society, but are not ends in themselves. They can be the basis of the bad society as well as the Good Society, and our task is to ensure they do assist in the achievement of ‘non-material ends, ethical, social and even spiritual ends.’ Christianity is precisely concerned with such ends, and with a critique of means, as the end illuminates them.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Around 1950 the Teesside Industrial Mission (TIM) was established with similar objectives. Bill Wright was senior chaplain, and the team of seven included Margaret Kane, a theologian. Both had worked on the Sheffield team prior to coming to Teesside, halfway between York and Newcastle, where the river Tees flows through Egglescliffe, Stockton and Middlesbrough into the North Sea.

Teesside was in a state of decline. On my second day I went with Bill to the Furness Shipyards at Haverton Hill to see the launching of one of the last large ships to be built on Teesside. The construction of smaller ships continued for a few years, but the days of major ship-building were coming to an end.

Later, I went down a coalmine in County Durham, the recent Pike River disaster in New Zealand graphically illustrating the risks of mining below ground. In the short days of winter miners would start and finish work in the dark, not experiencing natural daylight for days on end. In 1970 coalmines in County Durham were starting to close. Since much of the coal had been shipped out through Teesport, mine closures were another factor in rising unemployment.

The steel industry’s change to new technology was also causing redundancies on a massive scale. The decline in all these major industries led to unemployment rates of around 30 per cent on Teesside. Particularly affected were school-leavers, and older workers forced into early retirement around 55 years of age. TIM was not short of issues to address.

As an industrial chaplain I visited weekly ICI’s Butakon plant which manufactured synthetic rubber. The plant was scheduled to be closed down but, in an enlightened approach to factory closures, ICI had made an announcement two years in advance to allow its 150 staff time to make new arrangements. Staff were free to leave at any time they chose, and ICI undertook to find work for everyone who wanted it in other ICI plants on Teesside. Sudden changes in circumstances mean it is not always possible to plan closures far in advance, but the recent rash of closures in NZ, often with very short notice, raises questions as to how much thought businesses give to the wellbeing of their workers.

As chaplains became known and trusted in the workplace, TIM helped to develop strategies for other plant closures. And concerned about prospects for school-leavers, TIM set up regular meetings between employers, high school principals and vocational guidance staff to make better links between school and work. Education and training at school became more closely aligned with the skills needed in the workplace, so that young people had a better chance of finding a job.

TIM also initiated the five-day residential workshops in a hotel at Sandsend, a seaside village near Whitby. As described by Bruce Gilberd[[8]](#footnote-9), about 30 people from both unions and management attended each workshop, the cost met by their companies. TIM chaplains were part of a staff of six, the workshops aiming to increase understanding of how people work in groups, and how groups affect one another. Shared leadership, exercise of power, personal autonomy, authority and accountability were among issues discussed. Some sessions included group exercises focusing on skills in listening, sensitivity to other members of the group and consensus decision-making.

The Sandsend workshops helped build better relationships and negotiating skills between unions and management. They expressed the wisdom of the fridge sticker: ‘None of us is as smart as all of us’. The truth of that lies not only in the insights that come from consultation but, as a bonus, in the enhanced commitment to the success of a project by those who have had a hand in shaping it. The workshops were later taken over by the University of Durham’s extra-mural department.

For those who imagine theology is only to do with arcane discussions on topics such as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, a theological study group for managers and union members might seem off the radar. Yet TIM set up such a group led by John Cumpsty, a theologian from St John’s College, Durham. Theology has a concern for the common good, for human dignity and fulfillment in work, for a living wage and economic justice, for co-operative rather than adversarial teamwork, for sustainable production and good stewardship of resources, and delivering quality goods and services that meet human need. The agenda was set by those who attended and there was a lively interest.

Such questions and more gave group members the opportunity to reflect on workplace issues, and to consider wider objectives such as purpose, values and ethics, and the impact of their industry on its stakeholders. A narrow purpose of delivering a profit to shareholders is not ethical if it is achieved at the expense of other stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers and the environment. A company attending to the needs of all its stakeholders enhances both its reputation and its profitability.

Teesside was a place where smoke-stacks, concrete and steel were everywhere in evidence. Today, 40 years later, most of that has gone. In place of the old industries, new and smaller enterprises have sprung up. Unemployment is still a big issue, but the rate is lower than the 30 per cent of the 1970s. Parts of England’s North-East remain depressed but tourism has brought a growing number of visitors to the Yorkshire moors and dales, York Minster, the great cathedral at Durham , and down the Esk Valley to Whitby,[[9]](#footnote-10) a delightful fishing village whence Captain Cook, himself a Teessider, set sail on his voyages to the South Pacific. At Whitby the ruins remain of Hilda’s abbey, venue of the historic synod of Whitby in 664 where England opted for a Catholic approach to church life rather than the indigenous Celtic.

Our village church at Egglescliffe was in the diocese of Durham, and Jackie and I loved visiting Durham cathedral. On New Year’s Day 1971, with a visitor from New York, we joined the small congregation in the choir stalls at mid-week Evensong sung by the cathedral choir. We sat in the canons’ stalls in the back row but were soon approached by the verger who asked Jackie and our friend to move forward. The canons were all male, he explained, so only males could sit in those stalls. We all moved to a front row, but after the service approached a young cleric to register our concern about such a discriminatory practice. He was not at all sympathetic: ‘Next thing you’ll be wanting women priests,’ he said. Not surprisingly, this moved Jackie to write a letter of complaint to the bishop who replied with an assurance that the practice would cease.

In recent years industrial mission has declined in Britain. At its height in the 1970s, 300 or more chaplains, some part-time, were deployed from all denominations. Cuts in church funding has been one factor, the shift from large industrial complexes to smaller enterprises another. In Sheffield a bishop with a narrow church-focused view of mission closed the industrial mission, but it remains the case that the lives of whole populations are shaped by economic, commercial and employment realities. The Church does little to work alongside those who wrestle with the key ethical issues underlying such realities. The overwhelming emphasis is on programmes to equip church members for roles within the local church, not for the challenges they face at work and in the community.

Our year on Teesside was filled with new insights, warm friendships that have lasted over 40 years, and marked, of course, by the birth of Rebecca. Two of us left Auckland in 1968. We returned three years later as a threesome. Our lives had been changed for ever by our time in New York and North-East England. The vocational crisis of my curacy days in Papakura had slowly resolved in the face of my experiences of poverty and race, justice and peace, and the world of work. My understanding of the task of the Church had shifted beyond parochial boundaries to become world-focused.

To set off overseas for three years, with two of those years open-ended, seems foolhardy in retrospect, especially with a child in prospect. To then come home and expect to find a permanent ministry which dove-tailed with overseas insights was probably even more of a folly. But unbeknown to us, and reinforcing my belief in the reality of grace, plans had been under way to establish a base for industrial mission in Auckland.

Industrial chaplains were not unknown in New Zealand. In the 1960s the National Council of Churches appointed a Methodist minister, Owen Kitchingman, to be full-time chaplain on the Manapouri Power Project. Conditions for workers on the project were arduous through dark and damp winters, separated from families and friends in an isolated part of the country. Owen established himself well as a friend, pastor and sounding-board for people at all levels.

Some years earlier an Anglican priest, Ted Buckle[[10]](#footnote-11), had worked as chaplain on the Snowy Mountains Scheme in Australia. Now based in Auckland, Ted became one of the leaders in furthering industrial mission in New Zealand. Just five months before our return, a national conference had been held in Lower Hutt. Assisted by the Rev’d Lawrie Styles, director of the Inter-Church Trade and Industry Mission (ITIM) in Melbourne, and with much energy from the late Norris Collins, an Anglican and railway union leader, the large numbers present agreed to set up a national ITIM structure for New Zealand.

That same year church leaders agreed to establish ITIM in the Auckland region. The Rev’d Bruce Moore, its first chairman, gained support from the diocesan synod and a little later I was appointed as the first full-time director. On the ITIM Board were representatives from trade unions, management and various churches – a tripartite approach to address the complex issues in business and industry that impact on human life.

Three Presbyterian ministers were already acting as industrial chaplains as an outreach from their churches to local industry. In Parnell, Gordon Chambers visited each week Heards confectionery factory, a ministry continued by his successor, Bruce Paterson. Across the isthmus in Onehunga, Frank Winton made regular visits to the waterside workers at the Manukau Harbour docks.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Industrial mission in New Zealand developed in a very different manner from its British counterpart. In the United Kingdom national church funding meant full-time chaplains could be appointed to focus on the structural, relational and ethical issues of the workplace. But in New Zealand, apart from initial funding for myself as director, churches could not provide ongoing funding, and chaplaincy work was undertaken voluntarily by local parish clergy (and later by lay people). Companies paid a few hundred dollars annually to ITIM which, as the work expanded, enabled the funding of the organisation and my role as director. In return chaplains provided counselling and support services following the pattern in Australia. Parish clergy enjoyed this outreach into industry and were greatly stimulated by contact with people in the workplace.

In the 1970s many business leaders were ex-World War II men who had a high regard for the padres who had served with them. They welcomed the appointment of chaplains, as did union representatives who were always part of the appointment process. The independence of a chaplain, and of ITIM, was a cornerstone policy.

I was chaplain at Plastic Industries in Onehunga, and Consolidated Plastics and AHI Glass in Penrose. For a few hours weekly I would tour the various departments, meeting shop-floor and management workers. In offices, cafeterias or on the shop-floor I listened and discussed all sorts of personal or family concerns, as well as people’s feelings about their work. In some industries chaplains had to wear hard hats and earmuffs - not a good sign for someone supposed to be there to listen, as one wag commented. But in all kinds of informal settings I was granted trusted access to many of the personal and work-related issues that dominate people’s lives.

Until 1975 New Zealand had not only full employment but a marked shortage of labour. The Penrose plastics factory leafleted suburban letterboxes with a proposal that two housewives team up, work half-time each and joint babysit the other half, an invitation many took up. The 1970s were also a time when efficiency drives were beefed up as a sharp reduction in import tariffs drove local industries to lift their game. At the plastics factory in one department 20 per cent of the product was sub-standard and had to be ground up and re-worked, the cost of the waste being simply passed on to consumers.

The demand for workers had led to the Government turning a blind eye to Pacific Islanders illegally overstaying their immigration visas. Their presence in the workforce was essential to production in a time of labour shortage but, as unemployment grew from the mid-1970s, the Government hypocritically rounded them up in the infamous dawn raids and sent them home. I raised the issue with immigration officials but to no avail.

Changes were also afoot in work practices. As a student I had earned two pounds a day on a summer holiday job in the Tip Top ice-cream factory. At nights I would often find work as a ‘seagull’ – temporary worker – on the waterfront. The evening shift was from 6-9pm, but no work was ever done before 6.30pm. The permanent watersiders worked from 6.30–7.30pm and then went home. We seagulls worked the next hour to 8.30pm and I could usually catch the 8.40pm ferry to Devonport. The hour working had plenty of breaks as we waited in the ship’s bowels for another load of frozen carcasses. We were paid for three hours’ work at time and a half, plus meal money and a customary ‘efficiency’ bonus. That came to two pounds per shift, the same as I received for a whole day at Tip Top. Reform was in the wind but no change made in waterfront work practices until the 1980s.

Having trained in the British model of industrial mission I was clear that our work involved more than personal counselling. I was very much aware of the same industrial and ethical issues faced in the workplace by British chaplains. I wrestled with this dilemma. How could a focus on industrial issues be developed alongside a human support service for individuals? Part-time parish clergy did not have the time to develop the expertise of their British counterparts. I worried that industrial mission might be limited to personal and pastoral support, ignoring more deep-seated structural issues.

To ensure the big picture was not lost, I gathered the chaplains regularly to discuss workplace concerns such as cross-cultural issues in a multi-racial workforce, ethical questions, fears of job changes and restructuring, unfulfilling work (for both management and shop-floor), or frustration over work practices that were inefficient or failed to take notice of employee ideas and concerns.

Underlying many problems was a corporate failure to consult with those who were close to day-to-day operations, and whose experience could add much to the company’s output. Worse, the feeling of being ignored or undervalued led to a loss of morale and unwillingness to go the extra mile when a special effort was needed.

Teamwork between management and staff can bear much fruit if managers have the skills and make the time for it to happen. There are some excellent examples of companies and organisations where enlightened leadership draws on the experience of employees. The process leads to better outcomes and builds a sense of stake-holding and commitment on the part of staff. Sadly there are still too many organisations where leaders have the attitude that ‘I’m the boss and I tell people what to do’. The loss in terms of corporate output, job commitment and human fulfillment is incalculable.[[12]](#footnote-13)

ITIM took up a variety of issues. For example, many of the Pacific Island employees in Auckland’s industries knew little English, yet most safety and other notices were only in English. ITIM proposed multi-lingual notices which duly appeared and helped Pacific workers feel valued.

In November 1974, I organised a weekend for managers and unionists on the Te Tira Hou marae in Panmure. Over 100 people showed up with sleeping bags ready for two days and nights on the marae. The aim was to help industry leaders gain a better understanding of Maori cultures and backgrounds in the workforce. The Hon Matiu Rata, Minister of Maori Affairs, said in his keynote address:

Change is an unsettling process to many people. It brings people face to face with different attitudes, different ways of behaving and different reactions. It shatters a few stereotypes and a shattered stereotype is a difficult thing to replace because it involves a bit of hard thinking in an area of life where many New Zealanders have until recently not felt the need to do much thinking because they took their attitudes for granted.[[13]](#footnote-14)

It was a weekend of new insights, one of the Tuhoe hosts saying: ‘For the first time Pakeha has come to us.’

On another occasion Bruce Gilberd[[14]](#footnote-15) and I led a weekend training event for senior managers of Gough, Gough and Hamer on leadership, teamwork and conflict resolution. In Auckland I organised regular forums on issues in the workplace, and published a study on industrial relations, emphasising the value of negotiated outcomes rather than adversarial ones.

When I was chaplain at AHI Glass, a major change in glass manufacturing was envisaged using a well-established Swedish process. The factory employed around 700 staff, working with molten glass in an atmosphere of continuous noise and heat. The unions were well organised and known for taking a hard line on work issues. Any major change could be expected to trigger an extensive industrial dispute. AHI had an enlightened approach and sent a team of managers and union leaders on a fact-finding mission to Sweden. The group studied the process, met with local management and unions, and worked out how the process could be adapted for the Auckland situation. Many negotiating points still remained, but a major operational change was achieved without industrial confrontation.

The value of consultation was also evident in a major industrial dispute in December 1973. The hydrofoil *Manu Wai* had been recently purchased by Leo Dromgoole to run as a fast ferry between Auckland and Waiheke. Dromgoole was a well-known North Shore identity who, after the opening of the Auckland Harbour Bridge in 1959, purchased the few remaining harbour ferries and North Shore buses. It was a struggling business, and Leo could be found at times clipping tickets on the Devonport wharf.

After buying *Manu Wai*, he proposed to cut the size of the crew, believing the traditional number was too large for a comparatively small harbour ferry. This led to a dispute with the Seamen’s Union which soon developed into a strike. The strike was joined by the Drivers’ Union, led by Bill Andersen[[15]](#footnote-16), who refused to deliver fuel oil to Dromgoole’s ferries. This led in turn to a court injunction requiring the fuel ban to be lifted. Bill Andersen refused, was arrested and locked up in Mount Eden prison.

Once news of his imprisonment had spread, a national day of strike action was planned. In line with ITIM’s belief that disputes should be resolved by negotiation, I issued a media release saying that Bill should be released from jail and negotiations commence to resolve the planned strike. The Government asked the President of the Federation of Labour, Tom Skinner, to meet Bill overnight in prison. Next day a settlement was negotiated, Bill was released from jail and the strike averted.

I do not for a moment suggest a media release from ITIM was of any great significance in avoiding national strike action, but the move was noticed. To broaden my understanding of industrial matters, I attended each month the Auckland Trades Council meeting, chaired by Bill Andersen. Following the strike issue he would always welcome me as ‘our comrade who stood by us in our hour of need’.

By the time I left ITIM Auckland in 1978, about 60 industrial chaplains were visiting workplaces as far South as the Waikato and Bay of Plenty, and ITIM was working all over New Zealand. Changes since then have seen the emergence of Vitae and related organisations which offer programmes including on-site visitation, off-site counselling, trauma services, conflict resolution and work around issues of corporate ethics.

1. E R Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City,* Lutterworth, 1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. It should be noted, however, that the Methodists and other religious bodies successfully established new churches in working class areas, a move the Church of England also followed later. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Luke 16.26.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Op. cit.,* p.43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. ‘of salvation’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Ibid,* pp. 227/8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Ibid.* p.249. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Bruce, with his wife, Pat, and family came from Auckland to Teesside in 1971 after we left. On his return to New Zealand in 1973, he took over the leadership of industrial mission in Wellington, and was later Bishop of Auckland. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For rail enthusiasts, the Middlesbrough-Whitby train trundles gently down the valley. At Grosmont it connects with the North Yorkshire Moors Railway, one of the largest preservation railways in the UK, which offers regular rail service between Whitby and Pickering across the Yorkshire Moors, using classical steam and diesel engines. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ted was a pioneer in many forms of new ministries, and was later Assistant Bishop of Auckland. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. One Saturday Frank was sick and rang to ask me to take his Sunday service. It was a communion service and, not having conducted a Presbyterian service before, I was somewhat nervous at the prospect. Upon my arrival the church elders thrust a big black book in my hand, opened the vestry door and pointed me up steep stairs to a large central pulpit. Standing ‘ten feet above contradiction’, faced with a large packed church, and having little clue as to how things should proceed, it was one of the most unnerving liturgical experiences of my life. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. One of my favourite book titles is David P Campbell’s *If I’m in charge here, why is everybody laughing?*  1980. The general theme is that work can be an enjoyable and productive activity with the right leadership. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Auckland Star,* 16 November 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Bruce had returned from Teesside in 1973 and was now Director of ITIM in Wellington. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Bill Andersen was a leading trade unionist, and also leader of the communist Socialist Union Party (SUP). He would routinely stand as a candidate for Parliament in the blue-ribbon seat of Tamaki, gaining a handful of votes against the landslide wins of the National Party MP, and later Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)