



Angels and Others

True stories of hospitality from a pastor's house

By John Benton

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‘Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.’ Hebrews 13.2

This booklet and many others, hopefully helpful to pastors, are free to view or download from the website PASTAPASTOR.org.uk

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Introduction

This little booklet was mostly put together during the time of the Covid lockdown.

It was written mainly for our grandchildren to read and to reflect on in those difficult months. By then I had retired from the pastorate I exercised for most of my working life in Guildford. Ann, my wife, and I had moved there in 1980 and remained there in our own very small house, just 5 minutes' walk from the church building. The house became very dear to us as a couple and as a family.

Hospitality

We tried to keep an open door and offer hospitality whenever we could, 1 Peter 4.9. A lot of this was very mundane – Sunday lunches for church members and home groups etc. But there were certain visits and certain situations which stood out as unusual. They compose the majority of what is recalled here. Some of these visits were quite strange and I would not want anyone to base their understanding of theology on them. Nevertheless, the unusual ones convey the message of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that 'That there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'¹ And that's not such a bad lesson for Christians and pastors, surrounded and bombarded by aggressive secularism, to bear in mind in these days.

I am sure many other pastors have had experiences similar to those written about here. And all such experiences remind us all, both of God's providence and of the reality of the unseen spiritual world. These things tend to lead us to prayer – which is always a good direction in which to be led, especially as pastors who care for God's people and pursue God's gracious purposes.

This booklet then, is somewhat different from others in this series, more experiential and less didactic, but hopefully will be helpful to both pastors and indeed their wives and families too.

¹ *Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5*, by William Shakespeare

Chapter 1: AN ANGEL?

It was a bright, sunny morning in Spring at our little terraced house in central Guildford. It was also quite breezy weather.

The family – at that time the two young boys, Matthew, Tom and baby Jessica – had sat down at the breakfast table. There were all kinds of cereals – Shreddies, Weetabix, Cornflakes to choose from. We had just said grace when the front doorbell rang.

Either Ann or I must have gone to the door. I can't remember who. Probably me. There on the step stood a young woman beautifully dressed in an Edwardian costume. She looked very pretty and rather like Mary Poppins. She asked if she could come in. I said 'Yes,' she would be welcome.

She came into the dining room. We offered her breakfast. She didn't want to eat anything. She sat on a chair in the corner by the French windows, a little bit away from the table and seemed to just smile and say very nice things to us. We had no idea who she was. We just tried to be kind and strangely it didn't feel awkward in any way. The children were all rather fascinated. She looked practically perfect, and we all felt very happy for her to be there with us.

Just as we came to finish our breakfast, she announced that she had to go. One of us – I can't remember who – went to the front door with her and let her out. 'Goodbye' she said with a smile and left. The door had only been shut a few seconds, when we thought 'did that really happen?' I raced quickly out of the front of the house to see if I might see in which direction she went.

I dashed out on to the pavement. I looked up and down the road...but she was nowhere to be seen! I scratched my head. She seemed to have disappeared.

'Was that an angel?' we thought. We never knew for sure. 'Who else could it have been?' said someone.

And there were other strange visitors to our old house, as you will see if you read on.

The town has changed very much now, but when we first moved to Guildford there was an old junk shop in Woodbridge Road just along from our turning. Not long after we moved there, Ann had bought an old, framed photo she found there of an Edwardian woman and a little girl – just because she liked it. They looked like a girl

and her governess. It still hangs upstairs on our landing. It occurred to me much later that our visitor was dressed a little like the woman in our picture – only she looked younger... but that kind of connection would be too weird, surely?

Chapter 2: THE CHINESE DIPLOMAT

This was a wet winter's Sunday afternoon, and the sky was grey and dark. We had enjoyed a good roast dinner which Ann had cooked. The children had eaten their Sunday sweets and were happily playing. I was feeling quite tired after preaching for the morning service at church and was thinking about a rest when the telephone rang. In those days, it was an old-fashioned landline. It was a man with a foreign accent asking if he could come to the house. I said, 'Of course,' knowing it would probably be at the cost of an afternoon nap.

Not long afterwards the front doorbell sang out 'ding dong!'. (Although this happened a long time ago, we always kept the same front doorbell). I went and opened the door. There stood a little Chinese man. Who he was I didn't know – I had not a clue.

He had a hat on and was wearing a mac against the rain. He looked very wet. He asked, 'Can I come in? I've been given your address.' 'Yes, please do' was the reply. The Chinese man stepped back and quickly looked up and down the street. Then he entered. I took him into the dining room at the back of the house so as not to disturb the rest of the family and switched on the light. He spoke reasonable English which I could more or less understand, and this was his story....

He was indeed from China and China is, of course, a Communist country. He had come to England and worked as an official at the Chinese embassy in London. He said that his daughter had come over to be with the family and was a student at a university in this country. I'm not sure which one – maybe in London.

Through the witness of Christians who she had met at the university, she had herself become a Christian. Her life had changed a great deal and she had started attending church. This had been noticed by the staff at the embassy. The man thought that their secret service agents had been alerted. The Chinese Communist Party is militantly atheist and very much opposed to Christianity. In those days the church in China was under severe persecution (as it still is) and mostly had to keep their meetings hidden. The embassy would not want any of their people or their families to become Christians.

The Chinese man, steeped in Communist ideology, wanted to try to understand what had happened to his daughter. So, he had left London earlier giving the impression he was just going out sightseeing for the day but had taken a train to Guildford. He had been to a service at another church in Guildford in the morning which he found

very noisy and chaotic. This made him even more worried for his daughter. He had talked with some people at that church. They had given him our telephone number and address and told him, for some reason, to come and talk to us.

I did my best to tell him sensibly about the good news of Jesus and to reassure him about his daughter. Among other things, Christ would make her a better human being. Then it was time for him to go. He asked me to go upstairs and look out of the front window to see if there were any men hanging around in the street. He was worried he was being followed. I didn't see anyone.

I think he left by the back gate into the alley anyway. Maybe he climbed over the low wall behind the house, which is fairly easy, in order to cover his tracks and get away without being seen. We prayed for him, but we never saw him again. Maybe in God's providence we were a link in a chain somehow for him and his family?

Chapter 3: THE ANXIOUS FATHER

I was much younger when I started as the pastor of Chertsey Street Baptist Church (now Grace Church) in Guildford. I liked my little office at the back of the old chapel. I kept most of my theological books there and went off to study there most mornings of the week until lunchtime when I would come home to have a bite to eat with Ann. In the afternoons I often went on visits to various people in the congregation.

Everything was quiet at the chapel in the mornings. I would be there on my own with no-one to disturb me and it was just right for thinking, praying and working on the sermons for Sunday.

I had been the pastor for perhaps just over a year, when on this particular morning while I was quietly working in my office, I heard a gentle knock on the backdoor of the chapel. There was no knocker – it was a knock made with the knuckles of the back of the hand on the wood. My ears pricked up. ‘What was that?’ I thought. The knock came softly again. ‘Rat-a-tat-tat’. I got up, walked across the back hall and opened the old door.

There stood an older man, slight of build and wearing a brown raincoat. He had a neat moustache, which contained flecks of grey and wore an old trilby hat. ‘Are you the pastor here?’ said the man. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘Would you like to come in?’ There was something unusual about this visitor that is difficult to describe. It was almost as if he had stepped out of the not-so-distant past into the present. But he seemed friendly. I went and made cups of tea for myself and the visitor and we sat together in my office and talked.

The man said that he wasn’t from Guildford but had come to the town because he was looking for his daughter with whom he had lost contact. His anxiety showed. He was worried about her. But though he said this I don’t remember him telling me her name or what she looked like or asking any questions about whether I had heard of her. That seemed rather strange.

In fact, it was so strange that somehow it occurred to me afterwards that maybe the lost daughter was not a daughter at all, but was our church which needed, in some way, to be found again by God and revitalized. This was very humbling.

We talked for a little while and at the end of our conversation the man took a little booklet out of his pocket. It was titled *Prayer* and it was by the famous evangelist

Billy Graham. He gave it to me saying something like, 'This is the answer.' And I knew that I must pray for the church much more and with renewed determination.

Then the man finished his tea and asked for his coat and hat. He said thank you and was gone – never to be seen again....

Chapter 4: PAULINE

I was at home in the middle of the afternoon. Ann was out, collecting the children from school. It was fairly sunny and I was in the front room fiddling around with some papers and trying to do some administration about I don't know what. Suddenly, the telephone rang.

It was the old telephone I've mentioned before. So, it was a real ring: 'bring-bring...bring-bring...bring-bring...'

I picked up the phone. 'Guildford 34124 – hello' I said. It was a middle-aged woman named Pauline. 'I must come and see you,' she said. She was very insistent and seemed very excited. 'Can I come now?' 'Yes,' I said. And she put the phone down.

Pauline, a short, smiley, cuddly woman, was married to Tony and they were the parents of a teenaged boy named Trevor who had started coming along to the young people's meetings at the church and also on Sundays. After a little while Tony and Pauline had begun attending the evening services at Chertsey Street. They had been coming along for a few months and had listened politely to the preaching and heard the good news of God's love, of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in the Lord Jesus. They were friendly and kind, but I did not know what they thought of what they had heard. But now, out of the blue, there was this telephone call. What could it be about?

Ann had, by now come home with the children, Matthew, Tom and little Jessica, and had given them their after-school drink and biscuits and they had settled down to play in various ways.

The doorbell rang. There was Pauline looking both excited and as if something had happened. She came into the front room and immediately, before she had even sat down, her story came tumbling out. 'I've got to be baptized'; she said, 'I have been thinking about what you have been saying on Sundays from the Bible. I was thinking about Jesus this afternoon as I was baking a cake. And I was just about to put the cake into the oven, and he came to me! I don't know how. I didn't see anything, but I knew that Jesus was right there in the kitchen with me. I have become a Christian and I want to be baptized. Please will you baptize me?'

It is worth recalling that Jesus said, 'The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you know not where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit,' John 3.8.

What a joy! Not many weeks later we did baptize her. And later her husband Tony became a Christian too. And they threw themselves into the work of the church doing whatever they could to help. When the Lord opened the door for us to revitalize the church at Guildford Park across the railway line in Guildford, they began attending services there to help. They were humble workers with us until eventually some years later when they got much older, they moved away to be nearer their family.

Chapter 5: THE WOMAN WHO SLEPT IN THE LOFT

It was a cold dark night. The children had gone to bed happily after a day at their different schools. They were tucked up and asleep. This was in the early 1990s. Matthew was sleeping in the cellar, Tom in the middle bedroom (which later became Ann's office). Jessica and little Owen (our youngest son had been born by now) were snuggled in the back bedroom.

It must have been between 10 and 11 o'clock. We had gone to bed too. We were sitting in bed reading our books as we always do before sleeping. Our road was quiet. Ann was turning her pages much faster than me because she is a fast reader.

Then there came a faint knock on the front door. 'Whoever can that be at this time?' 'If it was someone from the church they would have phoned surely?' The faint knock came again. 'I had better get up and see.' So, I got out of bed and put on my slippers and dressing gown – I think I must have been grumbling a little bit. Downstairs I went and turned on the light in the hallway.

On the doorstep was a woman with dark hair, aged about 30, in a long nightdress. She smelled of alcohol and was a little drunk. She looked very unhappy and agitated. 'Please can I sleep here?' she pleaded. 'What?' I thought. 'I'm feeling so anxious. I live around the corner. But I don't like it there. Something is wrong.' Her words didn't make a lot of sense. 'Please, just let me sleep here?'

It was a cold night to be out in a nightdress, so I asked her to come in and sat her down in the front room. Then I went upstairs to talk to Ann. 'Why can't she sleep at home? Why does she have to sleep here?' asked my wife very sensibly. 'And where would we put her? We haven't got a bed?' (It was true, the beds were full of children). Then I had an idea. 'There is the futon in the loft.' The loft ladder was just outside our bedroom. If the woman got up in the night (would she try to rob us?) we would know about it. It seemed a fairly safe option.

Ann came downstairs to talk to her. 'Alright,' we said in the end, 'but you will have to sleep in the loft.' 'That's fine,' said the woman. 'Your house is so peaceful I feel better already. I just want to sleep here.' We found a duvet or a blanket or something. Up the loft ladder she went. Ann went up and settled her down under the rafters and turned out the light – though we left the landing light on.

We got into bed but had great trouble going off to sleep. But the woman didn't. In the morning she got up smiling. She did not want to stay for breakfast. She said that she had not slept so well for a very long time. Then she went.

We didn't think to ask for her address. We don't remember seeing her again – though I did hear of an alcoholic woman who lived, in the road behind ours, who sometimes went to St. Saviour's (An Anglican church in Guildford). Maybe it was her? Jesus said: 'I was a stranger and you took me in,' Matthew 25.35. I don't think we were much help to her. But at least she had a good night's rest.

Chapter 6: THE OLD TRAMP?

The seating at the church in Chertsey Street used to be the other way round from what it is now. You entered from the main road into a narrow porch with doors at either end. There were two aisles from these doors which ran down the length of the chapel to the big old pulpit at the far end, with pews on either side and in the middle.

We sat in pews in those days, not chairs. Later, sadly, the pews had to go because they were fixed and made that part of the building only useful on Sundays and we needed to be able to make better use of the space – especially for children’s work in the week. The pews were nice, but not very practical.

One Sunday when a much younger me entered the pulpit to begin the morning service at Chertsey Street, in the far back right-hand corner of the chapel, there sat a man none of us had never seen before. He was dressed like a tramp – someone who generally walked the roads and lived and slept outside. He was quite old, with whitish whiskers and had the battered hat of a tramp, and a thick woollen jacket, and I think, as I recall, corduroy trousers and large boots. He also wore a white neckerchief with small black spots.

I got on with the service. We worshipped God, sang our hymns, read the Bible, offered our prayers and had our sermon. But all the time my eyes kept coming back to the tramp at the back of the church. We often had visitors. But something made this visitor different. What was it? Eventually it dawned on me. Usually tramps are quite sad, but this man looked happy. Usually tramps look quite dirty, but this man, was quite clean – especially his lovely neckerchief. Usually tramps sat in the service but didn’t pay attention, but this man seemed engaged and to enjoy the service. ‘Who is he?’ I thought.

The service eventually finished, and the man stayed for a cup of tea. (I think by that time we had just started having hot beverages and biscuits after the service). We got talking to him. Then we asked if he would like to come home for Sunday lunch. He said, ‘Yes.’ He walked back with us with his stick and took his hat off when he came into the house. He had white wavy hair. He was very polite and happy and the children liked him. He enjoyed his roast dinner and talking about God and the Bible. But then he said it was time for him to leave.

We wished him well and sent him off. ‘Isn’t that strange?’ said Ann when he had gone. ‘What?’ I answered. ‘Well,’ said Ann, ‘we’ve had a number of tramps come to the church and they always ask for something – for money usually. But not only was

our visitor today very cheery – he never once asked for anything.' 'Yes, you are right,' I said, 'I wonder who he was?'

Chapter 7: JOSIAH

There he was sitting in our house, and he had come all the way from Kenya, a country in East Africa over 4000 miles away. He was a short cuddly black man of the Luo tribe whose people are mostly located around Lake Victoria in Western Kenya. He didn't like our food very much. It was a bit different from what he was used to. I think he would have had great difficulty with Branston Pickle for example. But he was glad to be with us and smiled and laughed a lot.

However, the story of how he came to visit us starts long before we even moved to Guildford.

In those previous days we lived in Liverpool and Matthew and Tom were very little boys. On Sunday mornings we would all go to Belvidere Road church in the Toxteth area of the city, but on Sunday evenings one of us as parents would go to church and the other would stay home to put the boys to bed and keep them safe.

It was my turn to stay at home. The boys were sleeping nicely. This was before I was a pastor and I would often use this time to catch up on reading some theological books and pray a little bit. This particular Sunday evening something unusual happened. I don't know why but I felt that with all the troubles in the world, especially between people of different races, it wasn't right that all my friends were white people. God's love is for all nations, Luke 24.47. I found myself saying sorry to the Lord for my failings and praying that somehow, he would send me a black friend. What a strange thing to pray? But maybe not.

Nothing happened immediately. But a few months later I was away for a couple of days, staying in Wales, listening to some lectures on theology and church history. And one evening there was this black little man from Kenya. He was a Christian pastor, slightly older than me, and visiting this country to study theology for a year. He smiled a lovely smile and I smiled back. Soon we got talking. Soon we became good friends and we stayed in touch by letter even when Josiah Ogalo Agengo (that was his name) went back to Kenya. He turned out to be God's answer to my prayer.

And the Lord had a plan in all this. When we moved to Guildford the church began to support Josiah's work among the little Luo churches near the town of Kisumu in Western Kenya. Then I travelled to Kenya and got to know Josiah even better. This led to us going out to that country every 3 or 4 years over a long period of time. We spoke (being translated into the Luo language) at conferences for Christians. When he was a little boy our son Owen came with us once and at the end of that visit we

went and stayed overnight in a Game Reserve and saw lions, zebras, crocodiles, hippopotami and a leopard named 'half-tail.' Over the years the Guildford church was very generous and we raised enough money to build a little school in Kenya, the Rae School, in the village of Kajulu, where Josiah lived with his wife Salome.

And a couple of times Josiah came to visit us to tell people here about the needs of the poorer people in his country and to learn some more theology. But it all began from that prayer one Sunday night in Liverpool.

Chapter 8: THE OPEN DOOR

This is a sad story. There was a man who never ever came into our house, but finally we had to go into his. He was older than us, lived right next door and his name was David. At first, he lived there with his mother, but she died and then he lived there alone.

They were generally grumpy people. The people who owned our house previously to us had put up the high fence along the garden because they had so much trouble from them. Early on after we moved into our house young Matthew did something which upset the man next door and from then on he was not at all kind to us. If our boys were playing football or cricket in our garden and the ball went over the fence, David would not give it back, even if we knocked on the door and asked him politely. Once we even tried buying him some chocolates and saying 'sorry', but it made no difference. He was determined to be unfriendly and probably Ann and I being Christians didn't help. When Ann saw David in the street, she would always try to smile at him but he either ignored her or scowled back.

He worked for the Council painting the yellow lines, which mean 'no parking', on the roads. His house seemed dark and if you glanced into the front window you could see through the gloom, piles of papers on a table.

When he got much older David became sick and could not look after the house. His garden became totally overgrown with weeds – so many they began to take root in neighbouring gardens too. Eventually it was so bad that I went and asked him if he would like us to clear up his garden. By now he was frail and weak (and still rather grumpy) but realizing how bad it was he agreed. I got some kind men from our church to help and one Saturday morning we worked hard and got rid of the weeds and tidied up for him. Later David grudgingly said to me, 'Hmm, that church of yours is quite useful.'

Then it happened. One day, people in the street realized that no-one had seen David for days and his front door was open. Had David died? 'You go in,' they said to Ann and I. Perhaps they were understandably scared. So, taking courage, we knocked and called and then went in. There were piles of things everywhere – old newspapers, old letters, old photos, old junk mail, even old crisp packets. In the sitting room was an armchair and a TV but otherwise it was full of stacked up stuff. David had hoarded everything. We called out, 'Hello!' – but no answer. We even went upstairs. It was dark, dusty and creepy. We looked everywhere but there was no-one there. The house was empty. Where had he gone?

Eventually we found that David had gone to see the doctor thinking he would only be out of the house for a while, leaving the door open. But when the doctor examined him, David was so sick he was taken directly to the hospital. I did go and visit him in the hospital and he seemed quite pleased to see me. But that was the last time we ever saw him for he soon died. And the house was left with all the piles of papers and things he had kept. There was so much stuff it took two big lorries from the Council to remove it all to the dump. Jesus said that it is no good storing up things on earth but not being rich towards God.

Chapter 9: JESSIE

It took a long time to get to know our neighbours. Some we never got to know. They seemed to move into the road and move on before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'

But some people had lived in the road a long time. One older woman who was there before we came was Jessie. She lived a few doors up the road from us and sadly she was blind. Just around the time our youngest boy Owen was born, Ann heard that she had become very sad and very lonely.

Not being able to see is enormously difficult and a terrible trial at the best of times. Just imagine waking up every morning not being able to see anything. She had been blind since she was a little girl when she caught a disease. And back when Jessie was a girl, doctors didn't know so much as they do now, and people didn't understand that even a girl who is blind wants to learn things and be able to do things for herself. Her family thought they were being kind by doing everything for her and not allowing her to do anything. But actually, it was very frustrating for Jessie.

So, when her mother went out to the shops, and she was on her own Jessie tried to do things. She learned, by memory and from feeling her way, to understand the whole lay out of the house and where everything was kept. She even learned to make a cup of tea for herself. (Could you do that with your eyes closed?)

But now she was very sad – more sad than she had ever been. The reason was that a few months earlier her husband had died. She had got to know Bob at a club for blind people because he was blind too. They wanted to get married soon after they met, but Jessie's mother wouldn't allow it. They had to wait until after her mother had died, so they got married quite late in life. They enjoyed about ten happy years together living in our street. But now Bob was gone, and Jessie was on her own and very sad.

But Ann had a brainwave when little Owen was born. What do blind people enjoy? Well, they can't see anything, so they often like to touch things and feel things instead. Very bravely, because she didn't really know her, Ann took baby Owen and knocked on Jessie's door. 'Hello,' said Ann, when the door opened, 'my name is Ann. I live at number 16. I've just had a baby and I wondered if you would like to hold him?' Jessie's face lit up. 'Yes please!' she said and asked Ann to come in. Jessie rocked the baby while Ann made tea and chatted. This became a regular event. When baby Owen got bigger he crawled on the floor while Ann and Jessie talked.

And so, the years went by and Jessie started coming to our home and to church. It became a habit for Ann to listen to Jessie's troubles and read the Bible to her and pray.

God's word tells us not to be proud but to 'be willing to associate with people of low position,' and when we do that, we often find a blessing ourselves.

Chapter 10: TUDOR

The story I am about to tell you took place before all the other stories in this booklet. It happened quite soon after Ann and I got married, before we had any children, when I was still doing research at Sussex University and we lived in a ground floor flat in Brighton on the South Coast of England.

We had bought an old car. It was in a bad way. But we could afford it. It wouldn't be allowed on the roads these days. It was royal blue and thankfully the brakes worked but not much else did. If you shut the doors firmly the winding windows fell down into the doors and it was a fiddle to get them back up. If you went up a very steep hill, the driver's seat came away from the floor and fell back so your feet went up in the air. And the engine always had troubles, usually overheating.

Ann was a teacher then and it was the Christmas holidays 1971. We had driven the old car up to see my parents in West London to take Christmas presents. Then we were to drive right across England, past Bristol, to Newport in South Wales, where Ann's parents lived. We were going to spend Christmas with them and the family.

So, on Christmas Eve afternoon we set off. A new motorway – the M4 – had just been opened a few days earlier. It went from London to Cardiff, so that was the road we took. All was going well until we got to around Swindon. Then guess what happened? The car's engine started making strange noises. Steam began to puff from under the bonnet. Soon we shuddered to a standstill on the hard shoulder of the motorway. Ann and I got out, looked at each other and said, 'What are we going to do?'

Now you must remember this was before mobile phones had been invented. And in those days, motorways were supposed to have emergency phones every mile – but we couldn't see one and anyway the M4 was so new I think those phones were yet to be installed. What were we going to do?

We did the only thing we could do – we prayed. And it seemed like a dream. Within moments of us praying a large van stopped in front of us. A smiley Welsh man got out and opened the back of his van where there were lots of tools for cars. 'Hello,' he said, 'what do you need?' We explained. 'Oh dear,' he said, 'I don't think I can get your car going, but I can tow it to safety off the motorway.'

Not only did he tow the old blue car to a layby on a nearby road, he then got us to load all our things into his van and he drove us all the way to Ann's parents' house in

Newport. He was very friendly and on the way he told us that his name was 'Tudor' – which is an old Welsh name, and is also, if you remember your history, the name of one of the royal families of English monarchs.

When we arrived in Newport, we said a big 'thank you' and asked him if he wanted to come in for a cup of tea. But he said he wouldn't, he had to get going. Off he went. We never saw him, nor our old car again – which the local council took to be broken up. Who was Tudor? We didn't know. But we did learn that it's good to pray. The Bible says that God knows what we need even before we ask him.

Chapter 11: MARRIAGES

Most of the visits to our home recalled here came quite out of the blue. But, of course, some occasions of hospitality were scheduled. Among the scheduled ones which Ann and I enjoyed the most were Bible studies with young people about to get married.

Guildford is a university town and, in those days, also had a College of Law, and so it was often a place where bright young men and women met each other, formed that special bond of love and decided to marry. Over the years, although we were not in any way the main 'student church' in the town, a steady flow of couples attended our congregation and asked to get married at Chertsey Street or for me to take or preach at their weddings. We always said, 'Yes', on condition that they first worked through a couple of Bible studies on marriage together and then came and talked through their answers with us over a meal Ann had cooked. (On these occasions we had given the children their food earlier – so as to be able to give full attention to the pre-marriage partners). We always set clear limits on time. Usually, it was 7pm until 9pm.

We believed this ministry was very important, partly because when Ann and I married we were given no Christian input on the subject of marriage, made many mistakes and had to grapple with things from first principles from the Bible. We felt a kind of responsibility to do our best to steer others in the right direction. Together we put together two short studies. The first made it clear that marriage was God's idea, Genesis 2.18 and not simply the human convention it is often made out to be. Marriage is for the service of God and that will lead to our happiness. This put touchy topics such as headship and submission into the right context. And we covered much more. The second study was more about the couple themselves in the light of Scripture and getting them to talk about the 'baggage' (the hurts, horrors and happy times of previous experiences) which they would be bringing to the partnership, Malachi 2.14. The main matter was first to get the couple to talk these things through on their own, together before they talked with us. Transparency and trust are so important in a marriage.

Our experience is that once a marriage goes wrong, it is very hard to mend it. Often things have been said or done which are both immensely damaging and, without a miracle from God, beyond retrieval. So, our strategy was prevention rather than cure. The hospitality of pre-marriage Bible studies was about setting firm foundations in the convivial atmosphere of a friendly feast.

The understanding was that (within reason) whatever was said in those studies was confidential and would be kept so. And hence I will not be sharing any of the particular stories of the different couples to whom we gave pre-marriage counselling over the years. But the studies overall did seem to be effective. Although covering the whole period of ministry in Guildford we must have entertained and shared our thoughts with getting on for a hundred couples, as far as we know the marriages all lasted apart from three or four.

And we ourselves benefited. I think it is true to say that every time Ann and I did these studies with young couples we found something that challenged us afresh about our own marriage. That led us to fresh repentance towards God and care for one another. After all if you are going to try to counsel others about marriage you had better have a good marriage yourself – or else you are flirting with hypocrisy.

As we know, marriage and good family life are so important, not only for the couple themselves but also for society in general. Sadly, though it grieves me to say it, we are witnessing the breakdown of society in the Western world. Our politics, our law and order, our children's futures seem to be disintegrating before our eyes. And much of the impetus for this disaster has come from the rejection of Christian values and in particular Christian marriage.

I hope, pastor, that Bible teaching about marriage, in warm and welcoming surroundings will be very much part of your ministry of hospitality.

