

Mark Berry – special missionary to 'godless' Telford Guardian Weekend – Saturday April 22, 2006

Mark Berry has a tricky mission. The son of a vicar, he has been charged with taking the word of God into the area the Church of England judges the most secular on the map. That place is Telford, in Shropshire, whose inhabitants know the town's spired shopping centre as "Telford Cathedral".



On the day Mark moved his wife, crucifix, child and cat into a small terraced house in the town (bought by the Church Mission Society and the local diocese), he was visited by a neighbour, who said, "Your tree is casting a shadow on my house and it's bad for the feng shui." "That's the sort of spiritual dabbling that's going on here," says Mark, 36. "When they talk about spirituality, things like Christianity, the church and institutional religion don't seem to enter the picture at all." More than 99% of Telfordians are "unchurched" and Mark's seven-year assignment, in which he answers to the Bishop of Shrewsbury, is to do something about it.

In a ceremony in one of the town's parks, Mark was appointed a licensed lay minister and anointed with oil beside a sign announcing "Telford: the final frontier". Five days later, not least because of the bishop's expectation that "I should get my butt into gear, rather than sitting around watching Sky Sports", he decided to "put a little colour on the canvas". He took his Vespa into town and left leaflets in libraries, inviting Telfordians to a local pub if they wished to "breathe, think, drink, wait, feel, touch, love, shout, scream, cry, laugh... reach for God".

At the library Mark had found out about a local "mind, body, spirit fayre", so he booked a stall among the exponents of tarot, psychic art, reiki, paganism and hypnosis. "I didn't storm in and say, 'Right, you're a bunch of heathen sinners'," he recalls. "I just listened and gave a lot of confirmation. I pushed my leaflets to the back and laid out lots of floor cushions. A crystal healer told me, 'We've been waiting for the church to get involved for years. But of course you know that the Son of God was an invention of Constantine?' I spoke to a Wiccan girl who believes everything has a spirit and I asked, 'When a rock breaks down into sand, does one spirit become millions?' That was pretty cool."

Hearing that he'd been discussed in the fan forum of Telford Football Club, Mark began posting in it himself, quoting from the Eurythmics song Missionary Man; then he recreated his pub meeting idea as the Chill Space at Joshua's Bar in the stadium. "You don't really find opportunities to talk about Jesus at a match," he admits, "but Jesus tells the parable about the kingdom of God being like a bit of yeast hidden in flour, and I feel like a little bit of yeast in the stand."

He makes a point of attending every home game – but not church every Sunday. "I've got to be very careful what I say here, because other Christians are my brothers and sisters. I didn't go last Sunday to our local, but I think maybe the Sunday before. It's a wonderful little church, full of wonderfully spirited, kind, elderly people who, bless them, would not know how to connect with some of the people I'm trying to connect with. The church warden asked me, 'As you're the local missionary, will we be seeing some young people coming?' and I said, 'The short answer is no. At least, it's not my objective.' "

He goes on: "If Jesus spent his time with people who the religious authorities kicked out as unclean, maybe there's a challenge there. I once joined a scooter club, full of rightwing skinheads with a lot of beliefs entirely abhorrent to me. One guy, who named me 'Vic', is well over six and a half foot tall, and dresses completely in black

combats and braces. He's a frightening guy who, if I met him in the street, I'd run a mile from. But I can honestly say I feel love for them.

"If I want somebody in Telford to be blessed, it's not me," he says. "It's somebody else in Telford, please. Please use me to bless them. Sorry, that sounds very pious. But bollocks, God cares more about what you do for other people."