

## Remembering Margaret 02.10.21



It is a privilege to be asked to give this tribute to Margaret on behalf of The Church at Carrs Lane. In preparation for it - and in order to be able to speak for as many of us as possible - I contacted a lot of people who knew Margaret, whether for many decades or just a year or two, and, in doing so, I've become enveloped in what feels like a warm patchwork quilt of memories which, I hope, will bring comfort to Bob and everyone who loved her. It's a pleasure to share this feeling with you!

Margaret became a member at Carrs Lane in January 1957 which, before her death in May this year, made her the longest living member of this church. Looking back on those sixty-four years, hers is an astonishing record of service, not that she would have acknowledged it as such.

It began with the social service activities of the Seventy Club which, as for so many of us, was Margaret's introduction to Carrs Lane. She became a regular in the decorating working party and at Lickey Grange Blind School where her thoughtful, caring nature was soon evident to everyone. Later, she and Bob organised and accompanied the Old People's annual summer outing events and, for even more years, the Christmas morning breakfast which became a Carrs Lane institution. As well as helping with preparations, Margaret's gift was the way she related to the visitors, chatting and, above all, listening to them...and they loved her.

In 1967, Carrs Lane Counselling Centre opened in the old church building, with Margaret one of the founder counsellors. As well as committing to several hours of face-to-face counselling every week, she also volunteered as the receptionist. Those who arrived for counselling sat in reception and Margaret would put them at ease with her calm voice and welcoming smile. She eventually became secretary to the board of directors.

She recalled, when contributing to the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary of the counselling centre, that her first counselling session had been with a lady who later disclosed that she was a clairvoyant. She wondered whether the client mightn't have had a better knowledge of the future than she did!

Many of our collective memories about Margaret revolve around The Carrs Lane Players. We would all acknowledge that Bob was always one of the first to remember his lines in rehearsals and Margaret, of course, played a key part in this, testing him at home and

exercising the patience that is required of a Carrs Lane Player's partner. Liz Cummings recalls how, when Margaret came to the plays she often recognised when Bob was reinventing the words on stage and chuckled at the missing pages of script and how the cast got themselves out of trouble. Bob also often took parts of his costume home for Margaret to adjust, and she had a good eye for bits of clothing that added to his character in the play.

Jane Winder particularly appreciated Margaret as an accurate and honest critic of Players' productions and particularly of the acting! There was never a thoughtless "it was splendid", but instead really constructive criticism which Jane personally found very helpful. She adds 'I don't recall Margaret ever being cajoled into taking a part, but without her Players would not have been the same'. In fact, Bob remembers Margaret occasionally acting in the pre-Players' concert party, which was more fun for us than it was for those in the audience!

All the Players remember Margaret and Bob's hosting of Players' parties, not just post production, but many of the famous New Year's Eve dos. We were always impressed by how they worked together as a team, especially when Margaret was suffering with her leg and foot problems. She knew how much Bob enjoyed preparing his music questions and she was very 'on the ball' when it came to scoring highly in many of the quizzes. We remember her wry smile when Bob's charades went awry, leaving us all totally puzzled at what he was portraying! It was tremendous fun!

Margaret had an amazing memory which always proved invaluable during the many years she volunteered as the Church Archivist. She never forgot names and, when responding to enquiries about the former Carrs Lane Church Centre and the even earlier Carrs Lane Congregational Church, Margaret would often know the answer and, if she didn't, she would know where to find it. But her sharp memory really came into its own when playing cards. She taught several of us to play the card game Bezique and for almost 30 years there were regular 'Bezique drives' which were taken very seriously by all the players. Margaret never missed a trick, and, if you partnered her, you were very glad of her concentration, skill and determination!

Margaret served on the Eldership for many years and from January 1983 until December 1990 was also Church Secretary. I know from personal experience what that role entails in terms of commitment, obligation and responsibility. Her eight years in office were turbulent at times but her quiet efficiency was much appreciated and effective. Following that period, Margaret served until 2019 in a variety of capacities: twenty years on the committees dealing with the premises both as minuting secretary, and in the case of the church centre management committee, several in the chair; she was membership secretary from 2001 – 2011; the church's link with One World Week and the World Development Movement for eight and nine years respectively; church archivist for 15 years and a pastoral visitor from 2007. It's an astonishing record!

Margaret was also a Trustee of Carrs Lane for fourteen years and Secretary to the Trustees for a time. As Chair, Simon Rowntree's abiding memory is of what he called Margaret's wisdom. He always felt that, when asked, she would offer balanced, sane and sensible comments that were always wise and helpful.

Christine Rowntree recalls their friendship with Margaret from those years too: she says, 'I really first got to know Margaret Cross properly when I was asked to become Deputy Church Secretary in the 1980s. She needed somebody who could deputise for her, particularly on Sunday mornings when she and Bob were away. Margaret was a delight to work with. She was always calm in a crisis - and there were a few of those - and she gave sound and wise advice. As a result, we became firm friends with Margaret.'

Margaret was always very supportive of those who were less fortunate than her. She was a great supporter of Amnesty International and for many years wrote greetings card for the Christmas Write for Rights campaign. Many years ago, she offered to make the cards to send. I was extremely grateful to her. Her mobility had become restricted, but she still wanted to contribute and felt this was an appropriate way. She made them carefully to meet the stringent weight restrictions of the Post Office: 10g for the cheapest price! Even though her health was failing by last Christmas she still wrote cards for the campaign. She was also a very loyal supporter of the Food Bank, regularly giving me donations of money to be passed on and continued to support it after we were all locked down.'

Margaret volunteered on the Traidcraft stall for many years and when Joan Davies took over the coordination of the shop, as it became, she found Margaret to be a very committed volunteer and a keen supporter of Fair Trade. All of her family received Traidcraft gifts for birthdays and Christmas! It was only when her health started to deteriorate that she needed to give up her regular day on duty although, of course, she continued to shop with us. Joan remembers her with much gratitude and affection.

Former ministers responded to my invitation to give their tributes to Margaret. Neil Riches says 'I remember very clearly the first time that I met Margaret. It was on the occasion that I 'preached with a view' and it was Margaret's first Sunday back in church after a bout of shingles; I remember it because of her warmth, her genuine interest, her immediate engagement. My partner Mark would echo my words here: he always felt that she was genuinely interested in him and in what he was doing. Whatever the circumstances, she was consistently supportive, never passing any kind of judgment.'

One thing which resonates very clearly with me is the fact that 'problems' were never simply problems; there was always a way around them - always a way forward for Margaret. In that sense, she was always positive. When I first arrived in Birmingham, the Church Centre Management Committee was still in existence, with Margaret playing a central role. Agendas could be complicated, to put it mildly, but there was never anything of the 'defeatist' in Margaret.'

Neil goes on: 'I know that she said to me that some people would consider her to be 'old-fashioned', because she didn't really work for money after her marriage to Bob, but her life was full in every sense of the word. Her quiet, efficient involvement in virtually every aspect of the life of the church over many, many years made a huge difference - and her commitment to the work of the Counselling Centre was visionary, even as her involvement with the Players bears testimony to her sense of fun and her conviviality. She was a generous friend and a lovely person.'

From Bungie: 'Margaret was the first of a number of Church Secretaries who had to cope with me over the years and I am certain that her stability and guidance were reasons I was able to complete my first ministry post successfully with you in Birmingham.'

And Anne Mackenzie, wife of the late Murdoch Mackenzie: 'When we arrived at Carrs Lane in 1988 Margaret was Church Secretary and she shared with Murdoch, in confidence, a list of all the members' names and situations, which was so helpful for him. On the evening of our removal to Anderton Park Road from Runcorn, Margaret and Bob hosted a party for the elders to welcome us! Margaret also twice played host to our dog, Gipsy, to enable us to visit the Chelsea Flower Show, and on the other occasion, Crufts! All these memories reflect Margaret's delightful, thoughtful, caring and helpful character.'

And from Peter Peirce: 'Margaret was a lovely friend - warm, cheerful, with a delightful smile and chuckle, which I can still hear! It was always a great pleasure to spend an evening with Margaret and Bob, excellent food and a glass of wine, and fascinating discussions - she was a wonderful hostess. Despite her lack of mobility, she was very ready to offer help when we were short staffed, and spent many hours on Reception - a joyful, 'smiley' introduction to Carrs Lane for any visitors.

Margaret and Bob loved their cricket and were long time members of Warwickshire Cricket Club. On one occasion, I remember Warwickshire were playing my county, Essex, at Edgbaston, just a short walk, through Cannon Hill Park, from our back garden. The Bears had set a highly unlikely target for Essex on the final day - I think it was 350 +, and since she couldn't use it, she lent me her ticket. Sufficient to say that Essex won, and Margaret ruefully suggested I couldn't ever borrow her ticket again (although I think her wrath waned!).'

Former members of staff also remember Margaret's regular weekday support. Margaret Rowland, former Church Centre Manager says: 'I'm sure I speak for all the staff when I say Margaret was a very welcome volunteer. She helped us in the office and would turn her hand to any task, whatever needed to be done, however unpleasant the job might be. We had great respect for her hard work and dedication to Carrs Lane; she was an active church member, counsellor, elder and church secretary as well as a good cook, working regularly in the café every Monday. She was direct and honest; you knew where you were with her, but she always had time for the staff. We also appreciated her taking minutes at various meetings, even though it was then a team effort to read her handwriting when it came to typing up the notes! If Tom were here, he would want to say thank you for the beautiful home-grown strawberries too. We loved Margaret – God bless her – and I hope there's a good cricket team in heaven!

And from Christine Mann: 'I was sad to hear that Margaret had died. I have very fond memories of her and Bob. She was a committed, responsible presence at Carrs Lane in a variety of roles, with a friendly and helpful persona, and she was always very supportive of me personally.'

Margaret was Andrew Veitch's line manager during his seven years in the centre manager role at the church. He says she was always very supportive but would also give him valuable advice when she felt he needed a bit of steering! She never failed to be caring of the staff

and very helpful to anyone who came to the office hatch for help or information; she volunteered in the church office for many, many years!

Margaret was particularly thoughtful in welcoming visitors and first attenders. Caroline Homan remembers her smiling and warm welcome when she arrived at Carrs Lane relatively recently. 'It was so friendly and safe,' she says, 'that she was one of the people who made me feel that I wanted to be part of the church. Then, when I became involved in the Counselling Centre, whenever it was mentioned in a meeting, she would make sure that she came to speak with me. She did this because of her faithfulness not only to counselling but to the mental health and well-being of all the people of Birmingham. She spoke of those needs with an interest and a modesty which helped me to listen carefully and to be grateful for her wisdom. She will have touched the lives of so many who cannot be present at the thanksgiving service or who might never even have known her name but who are grateful for her compassion and common sense.'

In whatever role, Margaret always engaged with people and went out of her way to make them welcome. Many of us have enjoyed Bob and Margaret's hospitality over the decades but, for two young overseas students, Tara and (then later) Chong, they became like surrogate parents. It was more than 40 years ago but the friendships have endured through regular contact from Hong Kong and Australia respectively.

Many of us have been blessed to count Margaret as a dear friend. She took a genuine interest in all church folk and their families, watching our youngsters grow up and always asking after those who had moved away. Our son, Simon, recalls how kind and supportive Margaret was when, as a newly elected and very young Elder, she broke the ice for him with humour at those first, daunting Elders' meetings!

In Pat Davies's early days in Selly Oak, she was truly grateful for Margaret and Bob's kindness in offering lifts to church for her and her new baby, John; she realised only later what a selfless gesture it was for a couple unable to have children themselves. How we all shared their joy when first Andrew and then Catherine joined the Carrs Lane family!

Former Carrs Laner, Eleanor Reeves, sent a lovely, long tribute. She remembers Margaret as a wonderful supportive friend to her when her three boys were very little. (So do I...with three children under two, I was so grateful to have friends like Margaret who would simply pick up a carrycot or scoop up a toddler for me). Eleanor says 'We were often invited to lunch at the house in Rubery, which gave me a change of scenery and a helping hand. Margaret was so kind and thoughtful – and very patient! Whenever we met, we talked about everything, from family, politics, world affairs, religion and sport. Margaret was keen to have a good discussion, but was always respectful of the views of others, unless of course it was to do with Welsh Rugby or Cricket!

As the years have gone on, we kept in touch by phone and I stayed with Margaret and Bob sometimes when I came to see the latest Players production. It was always a good chance for us to catch up on family news. Every Christmas I looked forward to Margaret's handwritten letters when she sent several pages of news. She described them increasingly as her annual 'challenge' to me (her expression for me deciphering her deteriorating spidery writing!)

Margaret was always genuinely interested in people's lives and whenever we talked, she wanted news of what I was doing with my life and how the boys were getting on. She would always ask after Harry too – a loyalty without judgement, which was so typical of her, and which I greatly appreciated. It has been a huge privilege to have been able to count Margaret as a special friend over all these years and I am grateful to have shared part of my life with her – as a trusted friend, mentor and supporter. It is a great sadness that she is no longer here.'

So, it is as a friend that we will all remember Margaret most affectionately. Alan and Sylvia Emson wrote: 'Margaret put her heart into everything she did and was a great inspiration to many people. She was a good friend. We will never forget her infectious support of Welsh rugby and it was great to see what this meant to her. Rest easy Margaret, we will miss you.'

And Alistair Dow, who recalls Margaret 'signing him in' as a new church member when she was church secretary, also has fond memories of being introduced by Bob and Margaret to CBSO concerts at the Town Hall and encouraging him to become a regular concert goer and a patron. It was the memory of Margaret's regularly going to visit her father in Wales near his life's end that helped Alistair when he was making similar journeys up to Edinburgh to see his mother. He adds, 'It was always a pleasure to see Margaret because she had a happy face and kind words.'

Perhaps the most recent memory is from Diana Cullum-Hall who remembers Margaret's indefatigable courage when she was going into hospital. She chatted away in the car as if it was just an ordinary outing. She was such a bubbly person and chatting came so easily.

But of all the reminiscences about someone so loved, so supportive, so 'just always there', from those who called her friend, none speak so poignantly of that relationship with Margaret as this. Maureen Brown who, of all of us at Carrs Lane, knew Margaret for the longest, shares one lasting memory in her tribute in Journey, the church magazine. It goes back to 1997 and the time of her husband Ron's last few days. With deep thanks, she recalls how Margaret moved into their house to help care and provide meals for her and their three boys, who had returned home to be close at hand at the end, enabling them all to be with Ron for those final precious days. What a friend to have...

I am grateful for all of these reflections so my thanks to everyone who has shared their memories. The thread which holds them all together is an echo of the ways in which, throughout her life, Margaret gave of herself to others.

She was always positive, cheerful and enthusiastic, whatever the circumstances; she was a 'glass half full' kind of person...and if that glass was a gin and tonic, so much the better!

She is sorely missed by us all, but we are here to honour her, to celebrate and give thanks for a life well lived and we rejoice that she spent so much of it here with us.

Bless you, Margaret.

Julie Grove  
02.10.21