

JACQUI JONES, Precentor 2003 - 2018 in conversation with Eric Ritchie

The Precentor, Jacqui Jones, left her post in June to become Priest in charge of Danbury and Little Baddow in Essex. For fifteen years she has been a prominent member of The Minster community, much loved for her warmth, humanity and kindness. She is particularly known, though, because of her role as Precentor, singing responses with the choir week in and week out. In talking to Jacqui I was intrigued to learn how she became a precentor, what training and background was needed and why, after so many years here, Jacqui has decided to move on.

Jacqui was born in Brentwood, Essex the second of two sisters. Her father was a salesman and her mother was a teacher. The family did not attend church. She attended Brentwood County High School for girls and excelled at sports. She played tennis and badminton, was captain of tennis and played cricket for Essex. Academically, she loved poetry, drama, visual arts, English literature and history. Curiously, unlike her elder sister, she did not learn to play a musical instrument, sing or take part in any musical activity.

When she was sixteen years of age, her mother suggested she be confirmed and so she began to attend St. Mary's Church in Great Warley. She was immediately attracted to the Art Nouveau church, its charismatic rector and the church community. It was a transforming experience.

At eighteen Jacqui left school to attend Bretton Hall Teacher Training College in Yorkshire to study for BEd Hons in Drama and Art with RE as a secondary subject. She was very homesick leaving her family and found Yorkshire completely alien; she was barely able to understand the local dialect. She also began to realise that she was much more interested in theology than drama and art and began to explore taking a university course in theology. As the College was affiliated to Leeds University, she went there to discuss a possible change of direction with the head of Theology, David Jenkins, later to become Bishop of Durham. The interview was challenging but it only confirmed her in her desire to study theology. Jacqui left Bretton Hall College after two terms in order to study theology but not at Leeds, deciding Kings College was a more attractive option.

In order to enter Kings, Jacqui had to learn Greek and spent the time from Easter to October teaching herself. She also had to persuade Essex County Council to give her a grant for a further three years. Succeeding in both endeavours, she went up to Kings to gain the degree of Bachelor of Divinity and Associate of Kings College. She also gained a blue in pistol shooting.

After graduation, Jacqui went back to live at home whilst deciding on her future course. Her interest in theology continued but she had no clear idea of where that might lead her. She also became involved in hospital broadcasting and then in Essex radio when local broadcasting took off.

At this point her father died suddenly, resulting in her mother suffering a breakdown. She spent

the next few years living at home to support her mother and working as a doctors' receptionist and briefly as a benefits clerk. Eventually her mother recovered her equilibrium and her sister married and came to live near-by. She was then free to think more seriously about her future direction.

The Diocese of Chelmsford sent her to a selection conference to explore training for ordination. She was selected for training and still with misgivings as to whether she was suitable and whether she wished to pursue ordination, went to Wescott House, Cambridge for a two year course in theology. Instead of the usual parish placement, Jacqui managed a placement with a hospital chaplain in Leeds. She was intensely involved with the staff and the families in the hospitals and was very drawn to the role of hospital chaplain as a future career.

After Wescott, she became a deaconess in the C of E, not a full priest, as that was denied to women. But she was still able to carry out many of the duties of a priest. In 1987 she was ordained deacon. Her first post was as assistant curate at Epsom where Nigel Coates was senior curate. In 1991, she left Epsom to become The Chaplain of Chelmsford Cathedral and industrial Chaplain of Chelmsford. In 1994 the C of E allowed ordination of women and Jacqui, along with sixty other women, was ordained in one of the mass ceremonies as a priest.

In 1997, she became parish priest at Bridgemary near Gosport, where she stayed for some six years, working in a run-down town suffering economic hardship.

Then out of the blue, came a call from Bishop Cassidy asking if she would be interested in discussing taking up the role of Precentor at Southwell. The post had been advertised a year previously and had not been filled. The Bishop and Provost, David Leaning, were seeking a priest with experience of Cathedral ministry and Jacqui had spent six years at Chelmsford. She took the plunge, was offered and accepted the post. What a challenge for Jacqui, she was thrown into singing with a professional choir without any background in music. She did have a good ear however, and got by with help from Paul Hale and the Choir, lay clerks, assistant directors of music, organ scholars and occasionally professional singers. Someone who can learn Greek unaided is not easily defeated. She has now sung with distinction for fifteen years and is now able to sing with confidence the Exaltet at Easter.

Reflecting on her time here she is particularly proud of introducing drama and poetry to The Minster and to have instigated the Lunchtime Concert series. She has loved being here and could easily have carried on into retirement. So why change? The answer may be that life had become too cosy and lacking challenge. She is too young to drift into retirement. A move back to parish work will, she hopes, give her new stimulus. Although we shall greatly miss her here in Southwell, we all wish her fulfilment and happiness in her future ventures.

This article is reproduced from The Steward, issue No 10 – July 2018