

Gareth Wardell – the ninth interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Gareth was introduced by my eighth interviewee, [Liz Carrington](#) who talked about her experiences as an international physiotherapist, particularly in rural India. She said: “I’ve chosen my friend, Gareth Wardell. It was his invitation to India on holiday that was the start of amazing things for me. He is now a vicar in Greater London and is pretty much the most inspirational person I know.”

I met up with Gareth at the vicarage. We sat in his study surrounded by books, paperwork and clocks and he told me about his life. He started by describing himself as ‘just an ordinary common or garden vicar working in the Church of England.’ But as he talked about his experiences of working overseas and the path that led him to ordination, it became clear that he has had an extraordinary life. Not many ‘common or garden vicars’ have lived in Kabul under the Taliban regime.

What are you doing at the moment, Gareth?

I’ve been the vicar of this parish for about four and a half years and have been ordained for twelve years. I carry out Sunday services, midweek services, baptisms, weddings and lots of funerals. I’m also involved with a number of local schools and do assemblies. Once or twice a week I go to a local children’s hospice where I’m chaplain and I always take Libby my Labrador, with me. People aren’t necessarily interested in seeing a vicar but they’re always interested in seeing a Labrador. It doesn’t take a huge amount of my time but it’s an important aspect of local involvement.

What led you to become ordained?

I was raised in the 1960s when it was not uncommon for children to go to church and Sunday school. I remember having a simple childlike faith but not necessarily feeling that it made a personal difference to my own life. And then when I was twelve I was involved in a serious car crash. I was waiting for a bus when a drunken driver veered across the road and ploughed into the bus shelter. The person on one side of me was disabled for life and the person on the other side was killed. Both my legs were broken and I ended up in hospital. That gave me time to reflect on faith, life and death in a way that would normally be unusual for a twelve-year old. Six months later I went to an evangelical meeting and people were invited to come forward and dedicate their lives to God. I remember thinking, “Yes, this matters to me and I want to make this commitment.” The person who was speaking said, “This shouldn’t be just a phase or a fad—a commitment to God is something that should be life changing.” As I went forward I thought, “What I’m doing now will impact on the rest of my life.” And indeed it has—in ways both good and troubling.

When you said that you made a commitment what did that mean to you?

I knew that my understanding of the Christian faith was limited and childlike in many respects but I found a way of love profoundly attractive and wanted to replicate it in my own life. As a Christian one does not have to be ultra-ascetic but I do think it’s about learning to live simply and to place value on relationships, key values and ethical principles rather than material things. As a child I could not articulate that but I did feel very drawn to it even though that now feels quite countercultural.

So what happened next?

I got involved in the local church youth group and then went off to university to study politics. I wasn't altogether sure what to do after that—I considered ordination but was told that it's good to get some experience of life first. So after I graduated in 1981 I decided to take a year out. It was shortly after Mother Theresa had won the Nobel Peace Prize and rather naively I thought that it would be interesting to go and work with her and her organisation. I discovered that there's a male order called the Missionary Brothers of Charity that works with her Sisters, and that you can go and be a volunteer. So I went off to join them. It seems very naïve now but I just booked a one-way ticket to Calcutta. I was 21 and arrived at the airport with a few travellers' cheques and an address. When I got to the Brothers' house it turned out that they hadn't received my letter but they were incredibly welcoming and I ended up staying with them for about a year. I didn't stay in Calcutta all that time as they thought it would be interesting for me to see some other places. So for a number of months I worked with their mobile leprosy clinic in the state of Bihar in Northern India. I had no medical skills or anything really, but they were very gracious.

I'd obviously read about leprosy in the Bible but although it has been almost eradicated in most of the world it does still exist in some parts. I remember seeing people whose noses had disappeared and whose hands were reduced to stumps. They often had terrible sores because Hansen's Disease (*its proper name*) kills the nerve endings. People have no sense of pain and cause themselves terrible injuries by doing things like picking up boiling pots. I also heard stories about people having the stump ends of their feet chewed at night by rats, but not waking up because they couldn't feel it. I worked in the pharmacy part of the clinic and would count out the tablets and give them out in little screws of paper. One of the biggest challenges was getting people to take the full course of treatment. Their symptoms would partially improve and so they would stop taking the medicine. From talking to the Brothers I began to understand some of the challenges faced by people in that part of the world. They would have to walk for two or three days to get to the clinic, and then another two or three days back to their village. It was difficult for them to take that time away from tending their land.



There was one incident that I particularly remember. We were on our way to set up the clinic for the day when a child ran out from the side of the road. There was nothing the driver could do and we hit it with our jeep. My first thought was 'OK, we're in a jeep ambulance that's marked with a red cross, so we'll stop and take the child to hospital.' But I was staggered when the Brothers started locking the doors and the jeep sped off. I remonstrated with the driver and said that we should stop. But the Brothers said, "If we do that, there'll be a mob reaction—the villagers will force us out of the jeep and they might set light to it in revenge. Instead we must go straight to the next village, turn ourselves into the police and explain what has happened." So that's what we did—it was about five miles away. We hid the jeep round the back and a policeman stood guard over it while we went into the police station and there was lots of explanation in Hindi. I asked, "What happens now?" and they

said, “The villagers will come to the police station.” Sure enough a bit later on, various family members arrived with the child, having flagged down the next vehicle that came along. There was lots of shouting and then a process of negotiation. The child had some injuries but they weren’t life threatening so it was agreed that we would take the family and the child to the local hospital and would pay for any treatment that was needed. It made me reflect on the fact that as a twenty-one year old white person, I was saying, “We need to do the right thing.” But as a foreigner I knew nothing about how these things work.

What did you do at the end of that year in India?

I did some trekking in Nepal and then came back to the UK. I worked in London for a while in an administrative role at The Arts Council of Great Britain, in the HR department, where, among other roles, I served as editor of their in-house magazine. But by then, my exposure to Asia and the developing world was such that I wanted in that clichéd phrase, ‘to make a difference.’

I also wanted to understand more about ‘good development’ because you can both help and hinder. I didn’t have a science O-Level to my name so there was no way I was going to be a medic but I knew that health service management is important and managed to get a place on the NHS National Management Training Scheme. I spent two years in Yorkshire, learning about health services management and then applied to work with a Christian development organisation in Nepal. They’ve been working in that region since 1852 so had lots of cultural understanding and experience. I went out as an HR manager and eventually became the HR director. At that time they were one of the largest employers in the country, second only to the Government, and employed many thousands of Nepali staff and over 400 expats.

Our remit was to deliver projects that would assist in the development of Nepal and its people. They spanned four main areas—health, education, engineering and industrial development, and rural development. The idea was to set them up and then train Nepali people to run them. The agreements forbade any overt proselytising but we aimed to work “in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.”

So, for example in the hospitals and community health clinics which the mission helped to run, we sought to challenge traditional approaches and superstition but without undermining the local culture. For most people confronted with a problem such as epilepsy, their first recourse would be to a local jhankri or traditional healer. There were many thousands of these in the rural areas and far fewer Western-trained doctors. These traditional healers would use all sorts of practices that we might regard as somewhat suspect. But they are people of high status in their community and you would not want to alienate them. So rather than working against the local healers, the mission's Mental Health Programme tried to work with them and to help them not to feel threatened by Western medicine. One of the things that worked well was running workshops where we trained them to identify some of the most common mental health problems.

We also worked on some big engineering projects such as hydropower schemes. Bringing electrical power to the villages had all kinds of knock on benefits—people no longer had to cut down trees to burn and so this helped to stop the deforestation which leads to landslides and flooding.

Can I ask about your time in Afghanistan?

I was asked to go there as HR Director to the International Assistance Mission which employed about 500 Afghan staff and about 100 expats. It was during a particularly unstable period in the early 1990s. Soviet troops had invaded in 1979 but left by 1989 and that led to the fall of the Russian-backed government. The West had worked assiduously to put the Pakistan-based mujahideen into power but within about six months, that government collapsed and broke up into a collection of

different groups. After several years of internecine warfare, the Taliban came to power. Kabul, where I lived, faced extraordinary destruction. On a bad day there might be two thousand shells and rockets landing in the city, and on a good day there might be only three or four hundred. There was continual upheaval and you had to be ready to move with just one or two suitcases. I moved house eleven times in eighteen months. A couple of my friends were held with knives to their throats in the counteroffensive and a house where I lived was looted at gunpoint.

It was a fascinating time—very ‘on edge.’ During the day we went out to make sure our projects were functioning but there were times when at night it was safest to be underground. There was one ten-week period when I slept in a basement with eight people from my mission. That was such a bonding experience that even now I’m still in touch with most of them. We sign off our emails as ‘Your BB’— Basement Buddy. They were extraordinary times and I’m grateful to have seen what was possible, even under fire. We were not there to be heroic, we were there with a purpose and our development projects were able to continue even though that sometimes had to be in a reduced form. At one stage during the Taliban era, we were running pretty much the only mother and child health clinic in the whole of Kabul. That was pretty important.

What was the impact of the Taliban regime on women and children?

It was a country that had experienced quite considerable development in the past – when I give talks, I often ask, “Who got the vote first? Was it Afghan women or Swiss women?” People are usually surprised to hear that it was Afghan women in 1964. (Swiss women only got the vote in 1970!). In the period prior to and then during the Soviet occupation, women held a huge number of significant jobs in areas like medicine, teaching and the Civil Service. But of course all of that went awry under the Taliban and it was a terrible shock for women to find their lives so limited. Many were already suffering mental health issues as a result of seeing people killed and they faced further trauma by being constrained to their homes.

Interestingly though, there is evidence to suggest that in some respects, things got slightly better for women at that time. This seems counterintuitive but it was because the majority of qualified teachers had been women. As they were no longer allowed to work, it meant that boys tended to be educated in huge groups—perhaps a hundred in one class with just one male teacher giving a pretty appalling kind of rote learning education. On the other hand, women who were qualified teachers



Suhaila Seddiqi Photo: USAID

were keen to see education continue and so all across Kabul there was an extraordinary network of secret home schools for girls. Burka-clad women scurried from one alley to another without the Taliban realising what was going on. There would be up to about fifteen girls in a class with one or two teachers and so some girls got a better education than the boys. And even in spite of the restrictions there were times when the Taliban had to accept that women had skills that they needed. So for example, the 400-bed military hospital in Kabul was run by an excellent trauma surgeon called Suhaila Seddiqi who held the rank of General in the Afghan Army. The Taliban tried to stop her working and then realised that they couldn’t run the hospital without her so she carried on. She was always known as ‘General Suhaila’ and when the Taliban fell she became Minister of Health.

What happened when you left Kabul?

I was there for about three years and then came back to the UK. I did a masters degree in post-war recovery studies and was planning to do a PhD. Instead, I found myself exploring ordination again, and ended up going off to Cambridge to study theology.

You said earlier that the commitment you made was ‘full of blessings but also troubles.’ What did you mean?

I guess I said that because I’m gay. When I was much younger I had a conservative view of that particular issue and the Christian approach to it. It led me to believe that the only option for a person in my situation was lifelong celibacy. And so I have lived an entirely celibate life but that view is not one I actually believe in any more—it’s not one I would ever teach. Although it’s quite a strong word to use, I think it’s abusive of people and their personal integrity. I would never endorse a life style that’s promiscuous but I’m entirely comfortable with same sex marriage, based on faithful, stable, monogamous relationships, and same-sex parenting. I’ve observed that at close quarters with a number of friends in same-sex relationships, including those who have adopted children and have seen them doing an amazing job.

My hesitancy in my own life is because I still function in what can feel like quite a conservative environment within the Church. I probably work for the only employer in the UK that is entitled to sack me for that issue, which is bizarre when you think even the armed services, which one might think of as traditionally homophobic, are now equal opportunity employers, but not the Church of England! I think if I had been born thirty years later, I might have made different choices. Faith would have been important to me, but I don’t think I would have ruled out the possibility of a relationship and I would love to have been a parent. My life story has been as it is and it's important to live life without regrets, but that’s what was behind my ambivalence.

What are you most pleased to have done?



It’s been fascinating to have experienced such diversity across continents and cultures, and I’ve made friends all over the world. But there are times when I see friends post pictures on Facebook of themselves with their first grandchild or with their husband or wife, and it makes me feel slightly wistful about what might have been... There’s a temptation sometimes to wonder what I’ve achieved but I hope that I’ve modelled something of the love of God in the variety of contexts in which I’ve lived. I’ve wanted to be there for people at times of extraordinary difficulty as well as at times of great joy and thanksgiving. That’s what I set out to do right from the beginning.