

An Obituary for Joan Watts (Chelsea Group, London West Area)  
Died 16<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

Joan Watts was born on Christmas Day 1919. Sixty years later at the end of 1979, she retired very much against her will, as Director of Welcare in the Diocese of London, the social work agency of the diocese. She was a dynamic person full of energy and vitality and having to retire at the statutory age was a great blow to her. I had known of Joan all my ordained ministry, since 1966 and had met her and worked with her since 1970. Welcare at that time had at least one Anglican social worker in every deanery of the diocese and most deaneries including our deanery had a mother and baby home for young women living rough on the streets of London while expecting a child. Joan and her team were a real force for good in the world of social work and highly respected as caring professionals in their field. I was involved at the time of her retirement with plans to sell the Christchurch Burial Ground in Victoria Street, in order to set up two major parish charities which would secure the financial future of St Peter's. This meant that I needed help in the short term with parish administration and subsequently a secretary to the new charities. I asked Joan if she would come to work for me and so began Joan's work at St Peter's. In the event, the sale of the burial ground was not achieved and the site remains a parish asset. It is currently rented by Westminster City Council on a short lease and there is a file in the archives for future incumbents.

Instead, Joan became my Secretary and took on the administration of the St Peter's Eaton Square Charity set up in 1977 to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of the church in 1827. She incorporated into that responsibility the administration of the church car parking and was soon very efficiently making an annual profit of £100,000 p.a. for the support of the parish. She stayed with me until my retirement 26 years later and stayed on for another two years after to make the handover until she retired at the age of 87.

She was a perfect Secretary. Although she could "talk the hind legs off a donkey", nevertheless, when it came to confidential material she had a mouth like a padlock, and secondly, if I

dictated a letter which she thought needed toning down, it would be done discretely so that I was aware that it had been improved and grateful she had done so. Shades of "Tea with Mussolini"! Also, when in about 2000, she came to me to announce that our supplier had told her that the ribbon for her typewriter no longer existed – "There is not one single ribbon left in the universe" – I asked her whether she would like me to buy her a different brand of typewriter or a computer. She replied at once, "Let's move on. A computer." In the end after she had done the research, she chose a word processor to type the letters and print the bills for the car parking. She taught herself how to use it and it speeded up her work in the process.

Joan had an extraordinary life and career. In 1945, she went to Vienna to work with the refugees fleeing from the east following the end of the Second World War. There she made Viennese friends with whom she developed a deep rapport, so that those friendships lasted for the rest of her life. Just a week or so before she died, a grandson of one of her friends visited her while in London. She was not supposed to fraternise with the Austrians but she did so with good effect.

She then trained as a church social worker, later being a lay student at Queen's Theological College, Birmingham, studying alongside ordinands preparing for Ordination. A revolutionary idea at the time!

Her capacity for friendship led to her keeping in touch with many of the women and children she and her team of social workers in Welcare helped. She became a godparent to a number of the babies. Again, those friendships lasted for the rest of her life.

Joan was inspired by many people, including Josephine Butler who worked in Victorian England to repeal the legislation passed to blame the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases on to female prostitutes because the Victorians could not believe that "respectable" men who used prostitutes could themselves pass these diseases on to the women. The Josephine Butler Society works today for the abolition of the slavery of women in the sex trade throughout the world. Joan was a member of the society, which still meets regularly in the parish hall.

She was also a Guider in Marylebone in her spare time after work, bettering the lives of young girls in Marylebone over many years. She worshipped for much of that time at St Mary's Bryanston Square until forced out by a church plant, after which, she transferred to St John 's Wood Parish Church.

She was also a supporter of the Ordination of women from the time of its early beginnings, believing both in the justice of the cause and the need to recognise and discern the callings already experienced by women to the ordained priesthood.

In 2001, Her Majesty the Queen presented the Royal Maundy at Westminster Abbey and three people from St Peter's were nominated, including Joan Watts, to mark their exceptional contribution to the welfare of the people of Westminster. The other two were Margaret Denton and Brenda Bailey. A truly exceptional trio!

Her gift for friendship was rooted in love, her great capacity to love, her recognition that the law of Love, inaugurated by Our Lord is greater than any set of rules. Jesus was a Law breaker and it took him to the Cross. Joan took risks by befriending others and showing them Christian love.

All this was crystallised in her membership of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis, the Anglican community of Franciscan friars, with its focus on the example and teaching of St Francis of Assisi, namely, simplicity of life, poverty of spirit, renewal of the Church, thirst for the Kingdom of God, humility as the root of all progress towards love of God, love of neighbour, love of self. Joan became a novice guardian of the Third Order, responsible for teaching enquirers the basic tenets and practice of the Third Order and, more importantly, being an example to them of the Franciscan life, lived in society.

Here was the key to the meaning of her life, her quest for social justice in the world and in the Church, her great capacity for love and friendship, her wisdom and her inner strength. Joan was not perfect but she was and remains an inspiration to so many today, as the high attendance at her funeral bore witness.

We commend her to God our Father, that she may enjoy the vision of his glory and come to that radiant fulfilment to which he calls us all. May her faith be turned into sight, her hope into possession and her love perfected in his love in the joy of God her Creator and Redeemer. Amen.

Desmond Tillyer