

***Out of the
comfort zone.***

A Testimony of challenge.

Sharon Bethel

I first heard about the youth of our church going to Spring Harvest from my children; Josh and Martha. Unusually, there were some spaces left at the event in Minehead and Ray Ellis thought it would be a good experience for the older members of Kids Church to attend. I thought it seemed like a great idea for my two and agreed they could go.

After coming home from church Friday morning, out of curiosity I looked up Spring Harvest on the internet and from there was directed to the Butlins Website where the event was being held. It all looked very nice and unusually for me, quite wished I was going.

I say unusually because as a lot of people know, but maybe not all, I suffer with Agoraphobia so getting out and about can be a huge problem and a frightening experience sometimes. I hadn't actually been away from home for 8 years, and certainly not had a proper holiday since staying with my brother in Worthing when the children were very small.

It's not a problem I tell everyone about because I find it very embarrassing, and it's hard for people who have never suffered with it to know how it feels. It's easier for me to just make up excuses as to why I can't go somewhere or do something when they ask. Saves that embarrassment and making me get hot and bothered! Background information complete - Spring Harvest. As I sat at the computer I found myself talking to God about it. 'Well why am I looking at the Butlins' site and wishing I could go? I hate going away' No response.' Okay, if this is YOUR doing, making me want to go, find a way for me to be able to go, something that I cannot explain away as anything other than Your handiwork, some sort of sign'.

Umm! As soon as I did that I was back peddling. Never give God the 'go ahead', because He loves a challenge and that day was 'making Sharon face her fears day!'

At Choir Practise that night Martha came and spent time with the youth group whilst I and the singing group trilled our little hearts out in the sanctuary. Afterwards, we walked into the foyer and I walked into a nightmare

'Ray is wondering whether you can come to Spring Harvest with us, Sue can't get time off from work and neither can Rosie. We need another adult' was what greeted me. I thought I did well to keep the smile on my face whilst inside I was thinking 'Oh, yes! Very funny! You have such a sense of humour, thanks for that God'

I did the only thing I could do and told Ray I'd think about it and let him know the next day. Inside was already saying, 'absolutely not! This is not God's doing. This is not the sign that He wants me to go. Will I never learn!!'

The next day was also the Church sale and I got up there after an absolutely ghastly night. My head was splitting. I kept getting hot and cold and had agonised over whether or not to go to Spring Harvest. Let's list all the negatives shall we.

- 1 .Always vowed never to go to Butlins - terrible place.
2. Hate sharing rooms with anyone.
- 3 .It's over a hundred miles away from the sanctuary of home.
- 4 I'm not good looking after children....even my two complain....
5. Thousands of people in one place and I do not mix.
- 6 .No home comforts for 6 days.....yeah right!
7. Not God's will for me to go; the sign isn't clear enough, so didn't come from Him.
8. What if something goes wrong and I want to come home? I'm stuck there with no hope of getting back. Terrifying!

So there we go - 8 perfectly good reasons for me to tell Ray that I was sorry, but won't be going after all. I even explained it all to Joyce and Cath in the church kitchen that morning as we got the refreshments ready for the sale. They were very supportive and understanding. So there, I had my answer, everything against, nothing for!

Ray appeared in the hatchway not long after I'd definitely decided against going and asked had I thought about it. Oh yes, I said I had thought, and explained a little of my worries about going. He was very kind and told me a few more things about the trip. What a shame I was going to say 'no'.

'Well alright then I'll go'Ray was very pleased and as he walked away my mouth was still hanging open and I turn round to Joyce and Cath in complete and utter shock, then clapped my hand on my mouth and wailed, 'What have I done? I opened my mouth to say no and I've agreed to go. I never meant to say that!'

So there you go, never issue God with a challenge. He loves to rise to it and that was definitely a 'God moment' because I sure as heck didn't want to go! The strange thing was, I told one of my oldest and closest friends the story of what had happened and even as a non Christian she immediately said 'How can you possibly doubt that that's God's work. He definitely wants you to go'!

For the next few weeks I walked around like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. My head was full of 'what if's' and if anyone spoke to me about how exciting it all was I just dissolved into tears. I argued my case with God and anyone who would listen about why He would put me in such a difficult position but I also knew it was right for me to go. He's always right!

I spoke to Rosie about my fears after Church one Sunday, as she and Ray regularly go to Spring Harvest so knew how everything worked. I was comforted to know that I didn't need to attend every seminar going, if I didn't feel I could do it, I could stay in my chalet and watch it on the T.V. There were even Christian Counsellors that would come and visit and Pray with me. Umm! suddenly it did not seem quite so bad.

At the next Church sale, I took time out from kitchen duty and visited our wonderful Prayer team of Averil and Rita and explained what I had been and was, going through, only to fall completely apart once more. God must absolutely despair of me sometimes! The scene will be etched in my mind forever.

"How could He do this? He is taking me out of everything I find secure; my home; my friends; my Church; sending me hundreds of miles away to a strange place with a group of teenagers, to stay in a place I vowed never to go...Butlins!"

Of course as soon as I said it I knew what answer I was going to get and I was right. That's just what God will do, He removes your comfort zone and places you in situations where the only thing you can do is hang on to Him and hang on tight!

I have been a Christian a long time but I'd always felt I was one of those Christians who had never grown; who was still feeding on milk as a baby, instead of growing in Faith to be more like Him. So now I was being given the chance to grow. I felt more like throwing my toys out of the pram...

So the day came to leave. I won't deny how pitiful I felt. I walked around mentally touching everything in the house as though I would never come back.....I think I should have been an actress, I can be very dramatic!

The journey down to Minehead started and I felt very surreal I have to admit. I was travelling with Rosie with Josh, Martha and Sarah in the back. All very calm and quiet and it was a lovely experience. I'd quite forgotten the joy of travelling and how beautiful the West Country is. I'd been a child the last time I ventured in that direction.

It was a beautiful day when we arrived, pure blue sky and just a light breeze, and I have to admit I felt very relaxed as we headed for the beach to kill some time before we could check in to Butlins late afternoon. I was happy to see that said place was only a stone's throw from the beach. My very favourite place on earth!

A little apprehension set in as we entered Butlins later on and made our way to our chalet. Quite a long trek from the main entrance, but good exercise, I told myself....It was a nice place, three bedrooms and I had one to myself. Perfect! We carted all the luggage from the car on a nice trolley, bit like a supermarket one really, it didn't go where you wanted it to either!

I had a bit of a wobble when Rosie said 'Goodbye' for her return journey leaving myself, Ray and 9 youngsters to unpack and settle in....It took a lot for me not to run after her screaming 'Take me home'! However I was very adult and did the only thing I could, rushed back to the beach and had a cigarette! I was kind of hoping to give it up whilst I was down there but wasn't that asking just a bit too much?

We went and had a meal at the restaurant and the food was lovely, bit like a 'Carvery', where you could go up and have 2nd or 3rd helpings or just have two dinners on one tray as some did. (No names mentioned...!)

We had been given a welcome pack after registering at reception and I looked through it at the map of the site, it was vast but well marked so I didn't foresee any problems.

That evening was the first of the nightly Big Top celebrations which ran from 6.45pm to 9pm and we duly filed in - Ray and myself. The children went off to their separate groups held around the site. I was quite pleased with myself that I sat quite far back in one of the stands and not perched on a seat near the exit as I would normally do! The atmosphere was just alive with Praise and the Spirit of God and it just filled your entire being, I'm sure if I'd touched a light bulb it would have lit up!

During the evening we were told to fill in a questionnaire to see what kind of learning style suited you. There were various seminars each day and the morning ones were divided into different learning zones:-

Theorist:- A logical, systematic, structured and sequential approach. Learning through theory.

Reflector:- Thoughtful, reflective, observational and analytical. Learning by reflecting.

Activist:- Experimental, active, problem-solving, interactive and participative. Learning by doing.

Pragmatist:- Practical, experimental, efficient and direct. Learning through practise.

Well I'd already read about these zones and evaluated how I felt about them all, so after very careful consideration I decided to opt for the Theorist zone. I was very good at everything structured, systematic and learning through theory. Of course I knew myself well. I'm pretty sure I told Ray during the meeting that I'd already decided that.

Pity I hadn't told God. After filling in the questionnaire, my results bellowed 'Activist' at me. Are you mad? I'm no activist. I don't like putting myself out there for everyone to see, thanks very much. Much amusement, and was told 'Well maybe God thinks otherwise' by more than one person. Well of course I'm me, so I didn't listen. I'd decided Theorist, so Theorist it was.

The first full day dawned and was another lovely day, not quite so sunny but still quite warm. At breakfast I told Ray I would like to go to the Bible study in the Big Top for my first event and Bless him he said he would accompany me. One day I'll do things on my own Lord! That first morning was a bit of a shock to my system and as the Restaurant filled up I started to feel extremely edgy and had to leave for the safety of my Chalet. Not a good start. I forgo the early morning joint Big Start in the big top....but then for some odd reason after watching a bit of it on telly, trundled off to the Big Top and perched on a seat (By the exit!!) for the last 15 minutes. Afterwards I waited outside for my group to appear but since there were 6 entrance and exits, I had no idea which one they would emerge from. None of them it seemed, as I didn't spot them, so I made my way back to the chalet and... ended up back at the Big Top. I tried again and headed for my Chalet, and ended up near some strange bungalows, so again headed to the Big Top and started again. This time I ended up near the Skyline, the main complex of Butlins, completely lost and more than a bit panicked; people's faces seemed to merge into one! I spotted the peaks of the Big Top tent in the distance and headed

back there for the third time, nearly bumping into Jeff Lucas who was exiting. I just grinned, he grinned back but I so wanted to say 'Help I'm lost and hysterical!' Eventually I found the chalet and calmed down and had to admit what had happened. How embarrassing! In fact it happened again later that day so I said I would be tying string to the chalet door to guide me back each time!

The theme of the 2010 Spring Harvest was called 'Different Eyes' and was about seeing the World and everything in it through God's eyes; the ethics and morality of our planet and how strictly must we abide by the laws of man. Are they always right? Are they always fair? Are they black and white or are there grey areas? It's quite a hard concept to grasp but we had learning guides to help us through. If I'm brutally honest, I thought it looked pretty boring and just wanted to do the praise bit.....Oh how wrong I was!

The Bible Studies each morning were being given by a Salvationist called Danielle Strickland so I wasn't certain what to expect, but if anyone comes across her and has the chance to hear her, do so, because she is incredible. The first day we looked at the story of Abraham and his calling. I thought I knew all about Abraham but in fact I knew very little. I have copies of three of Danielle's talks if anyone would like to hear them. Definitely worth it! That first session made me think quite hard at how I'd happened to end up at Spring Harvest, as it was all about hearing God's voice and doing as He asks, but also I felt quite sad that He'd had such a battle getting me there in the first place!

After that first session Ray and I went for a cup of coffee in the Skyline pavilion which was the main section of Butlins. Inside there were stalls and stalls of Christian merchandise, charities, Puppets in Praise....whatever you needed was pretty much there and it was actually quite a nice area to be in. I felt quite safe there because I knew they were all Jesus fans and any one of them would take time out to talk to me or even Pray with me. There was a lovely airy refreshment area where we got a cup of coffee and sat down to drink it before going off to the next Seminar, the Theorist zone one. As we sat and chatted about the Bible study I noted that the small stage area beside us was being set up for the next group, which was a shame as I was quite comfy and relaxed sat there, so hoped it was our group. Ray went to another table to find out which zone we were in.....oh can't you hear God laughing already. Yes. It was the Activist zone and as they were about to start there wasn't really the time to move! Sometimes I wish He didn't have quite such a broad sense of humour! So there we stayed, and yes I did enjoy it. Another challenging, thought provoking session, even though I'd decided I would swap the next day and go to my Theorist sessions.

I never did get to those Theorist sessions! I gave in gracefully and accepted I was where God wanted me to be. Through the Activist zone I met Patrick Regan who works for XLP and helps excluded children in the inner cities, children who have been taken out from school and made to feel worthless, and gives them their lives back. The talent in these teenagers is astounding and that society had already consigned them to lives of gang warfare, drugs, prostitution is just unforgiveable. How many other teenagers have not been reached to be pulled up out of that kind of life? It's heart breaking. It made me want to do something to help them but what? The fact I am writing this testimony may be of help to someone, to spur someone on to do something too.

Afternoons were free to have a walk around or wander down to the beach. The children went off to swimming or the funfair or did any number of activities and generally had a lovely time. I was just content to sit by the sea and wonder that I was even there at all! Bit by bit God was changing my concept of life with Him but it can't be an overnight change. I have lived my life my way for such a long time, it will take more time for that change to happen. But He's patient.

Here's an example of what God can do. People who know me know how I hate being the centre of attention, like the example at one of our Church meetings when God quite clearly gave me something to say to everyone. I kept refusing and He kept asking until I told the person next to me and they announced I had something to say. All eyes turned and I went scarlet as I stood up. The first thing I said was 'God's given me something to say but don't look at me or I won't be able to say it' so all eyes turned back to the front. I mean for goodness sake, how big is this complex? I'm telling that story because it's relevant to the next part of my Testimony.

On the third day of the event, Patrick Regan was the speaker at the evening Big Top celebration and he spoke about being challenged to step out of our comfort zone. Now we'd already learned a song with those words in earlier that evening and I kept thinking 'There it is again, out of your comfort zone'. I was already well out of my comfort zone and thought that was all God wanted me to do, I'd listened to Him, obeyed Him and here I was. Yes, I should have known it wasn't enough! Near the end of his talk, Patrick felt led to ask for people who wanted to make that move out of their comfort zone to come forward for Prayer. Now please bear in mind there were up to 6000 people in that Big Top and I was tucked in behind quite a lot of people with a few empty seats in the rows below me. Before Patrick had even finished speaking, I was climbing down over the seats and found myself walking with others up to the front of the stage. It was the most bizarre thing I'd ever done, almost like a dream, but there I was and not only there but inching forward to get to the front! Even writing this I'm laughing and crying at the same time because I did the one thing I would never ever have dreamed of doing in Church, let alone in front of thousands of people! I wasn't sure what to expect when Patrick and the other leaders Prayed for us, I didn't get a 'Glory Fit' as Danielle calls it when you collapse in the Spirit, but I was shaking from head to foot and I could feel the Holy Spirit all around us; not just those at the front but right the way around the Big Top. The air was just fizzing and alive.

When I went back to where we were sat, I didn't bother getting back up to my seat, just sat where I could and the lady sat nearby suddenly turned and enveloped me in the biggest hug imaginable, whispering that whatever I needed, God was there and she would Pray for me and how brave I had been to go up to the stage. For the rest of the meeting I kept thinking what on earth just happened?!

A friend of mine had come down to join us at Spring Harvest for a couple of days and even he had wanted to go up for Prayer but hadn't been able to get out of his seat which I was so sorry about, but God blessed him just as much, I know it!

Another quite, special thing I have to share was that as Ray and I made our way to the Big Top for one of the evening celebrations, we came around a corner where our path joined onto a larger one and as I looked up towards the tent, I had a lovely view of all the other path's leading from various points of the Butlins site towards the Big Top. I couldn't help being struck by the columns of people all streaming towards that point of Worship, us included and I had to smile and say, 'Do you think Heaven will be a bit like this, all of us heading to one place to Worship God?' It gave me goose bumps!

A few final things I will add to this testimony of mine. I find it very difficult to lead the Christian life I know I should be leading. I get angry, I even swear, I get stressed and bitter. I have even denied God on occasions so I don't look and sound stupid and all the time feeling that I was just rubbish. I couldn't get it out of my head that I was just a piece of rubbish, I would never be a good Christian. I couldn't stick to what God teaches us to do. I was rubbish. On the final evening, before the meeting, I couldn't cope with that feeling anymore, I went to see a Christian Counsellor and blurted out exactly what I thought I was. I came away from that meeting almost walking on air. Guess what? God loves rubbish! We are human, we are imperfect, we get it wrong, we are selfish at times and we don't listen to Him all the time and we're rubbish. But so what? Does God stop loving us because of it? No, He loves us despite it, He will never stop loving us, even when we hurt Him, deny Him and go off on our own merry way then come back ashamed and sorry for ourselves.

He still loves us. The only person telling me I was rubbish was ME, not God. He sent His Son to die for us. If He thought we were rubbish, would He have done that?

Since coming back from Spring Harvest, I think it is safe to say that I have had one of the most stressful periods with problem after huge problem and I'm struggling. I admit it, but I'm still fighting. I haven't cracked under the pressure and I haven't forgotten that God is stood next to me, helping me to sort it out. It's hard and I've wept, but so has He. We're a team, and I am learning to believe that with all my heart. 'Never will I leave you, Never will I forsake you'.

A final footnote - During one of the Bible Studies, Danielle showed a clip from 'Evan Almighty', a film about a newly elected American Politician whom God asked to build an ark. The clip she showed was where basically he was denying God and refusing to acknowledge what God wanted him to do, so God appeared

in all sorts of places until eventually Evan gives in and does as he's told. Sounds familiar!

When I came home, I made a point of watching the film and it's extremely good and worth seeing if you haven't done so, but what really spoke to me was the ending, when God was talking to Evan about the Ark he had built. Evans policy had been about wanting to change the world and God said 'But you have! 'A.R.K'. it stands for' Act of Random Kindness'. And he's right, all it takes is one Act of Random Kindness to change the world - anyone's world. To you it may be something small and not worth mentioning, but to that one person, it could mean everything and changes their world.

Before I went away to Spring Harvest I told someone that if I have to go, I didn't want to come back the same person, otherwise what was the point. I'm not sure what I was expecting to happen as such a lot did, but could anyone see a change in me? Well as that same someone pointed out to me when I did get back, 'You have changed, your already planning next year's trip and you would never have done that before....!' God can and sometimes does change things in an instant, nothing is beyond Him, but having lived with my problems for so many years I don't know how to live a normal life and I have to learn that bit by bit. What an exciting prospect!

This is dedicated to all my friends at Tyndale, who were patient and understanding and who listened to me and comforted me when I felt so scared about moving out of my 'Comfort Zone', to the one who blessed me each and every morning of my stay at Spring Harvest with a text message telling me to enjoy my day, and to all those who prayed so hard for me. It was quite an experience, a bit of a roller-coaster ride but I wouldn't have missed it and can Testify that if God ever asks you to do something which is out of your 'comfort zone', don't be afraid, because He won't be expecting you to go it alone, He's beside you every step. If I can be so bold, anyone can!

Praise be to God!

Sharon Bethel. 20th May 2010.