

'Conviction diplomat' fired up by China post

YOU'VE heard of a conviction politician – now meet the 'conviction diplomat'.

That's what Roger Garside became during 25 years of diplomacy in Burma, Hong Kong, China and France.

As a Christian, his faith was challenged and deepened as he observed dictatorships and democracies, state socialism and free markets at close quarters.

When China was racked by religious persecution, he climbed a mountain to declaim the Bible to the wind blowing over the strife-torn land, as his small act of defiance against Chairman Mao. That's unusual for a diplomat.

Roger, 68, now worships at St Peter and St Paul's Church in Hambledon. In July, he completed a year on our diocesan course on Christian Spirituality.

As a boy, Roger's faith was nurtured by his mother. She prayed daily, worshipped regularly and loved others unconditionally. Roger worshipped with her in Meonstoke, and then in Hambledon, learning to love the Book of Common Prayer and King James Version of the Bible. He continued to worship at school at Eton, in Hong Kong, where he was an officer in the Brigade of Gurkhas, at Cambridge University as an undergraduate, and during a nomadic professional life.

"During my first posting in China in the 1960s, Mao was leading his Cultural Revolution," he said. "In pursuit of a crazy vision, he destroyed the old order, and plunged the country into anarchy. All human rights were trampled on. I learnt the need for the rule of law and democracy.

"Mao ordered the Red Guards to destroy all faiths. Christian

churches were closed, and my colleagues seemed indifferent to religion. So I prayed on my own and celebrated Holy Communion on my own, but I knew I was not alone. I was joining millions around the world who were doing the same.

"One Sunday morning, I climbed in the Western Hills outside Beijing and declaimed the epistle for that day, 1 Corinthians 13. Why? I wanted the wind to carry St Paul's words on love

scene with a display of poetry on the walls of Tiananmen Square.

"The poems were political dynamite," he said. "Huang denounced the tyranny of a fallen idol – Mao – and described a vision of the spirit of God liberating mankind, bringing light in place of darkness and love in place of hatred.

"These poems are as powerful as the most visionary passages in Isaiah. They convinced me that Communism had only suppressed

my faith

Roger Garside was an unusual diplomat - he shouted Bible verses at soldiers to show his disapproval of the Chinese government. But such experiences helped to shape his beliefs.

across that land where love was anathema and the Red Guards were persecuting all believers.

"Later, a little church in Beijing was allowed to re-open to serve the international community. The loyalty of our Chinese pastors and of other Christians whom I knew had suffered persecution for decades impressed me deeply. It encouraged me to think that Christianity is for all men and women, not just Westerners."

After his first stint in diplomacy, Roger spent three years working for the World Bank in the early 1970s. He wanted to help get countries out of poverty. But he felt it didn't really value his expertise, so returned to diplomacy, from 1975-87.

He was posted back to China, and Mao died a few months after his return. There was then a period of uncertainty which gave a little freedom. Roger remembers a poet, Huang Xiang, seizing the chance to speak out, bursting onto the

spiritual life of the Chinese people, not eliminated it. The poems are not written in Christian terms, but they strengthened my own belief in God.

"Thirty years later, there is more tolerance for religion in China, and what do we see? A great spontaneous growth of Christianity. There are more Christians in China now than before 1949, when missionaries could operate freely. This is a faith for all mankind."

In the 1990s, Roger worked for the London Stock Exchange, and then set up a consultancy to work with former Communist countries in their transition to a market economy. He was paid by the British government, World Bank and European Commission to help such countries build free capital markets.

"To be really successful, capital markets need not only freedom but good regulation," he said. "Our role was to help them devel-



Roger Garside: studied spirituality on diocesan course

op that. Good regulation of markets is one aspect of democracy.

"If you strike a balance between freedom and law in running markets, as in running societies as a whole, you work with the grain of the world as God has designed it. Then amazing energy and creativity are liberated, and true 'economic miracles' happen – the modern equivalent of the feeding of the 5,000. The more I experience, the more I am in awe of God's creation."

He discussed some of these themes in a small group of churchgoers and non-churchgoers that meets bi-monthly in Hambledon village. For two years, Roger co-lead the group with former vicar Richard Brand.

They discussed issues such as abortion, creation, the relationship between science and religion, adoption, and charitable giving, mostly in terms of ethics, but also their faith.

As a pensioner, free from the need to earn his living, Roger is keen to attend to the spiritual side of life. It was no surprise, then, when he applied to take part in the year-long diocesan course on Christian Spirituality, studying and experiencing different traditions from traditional monastic to contemporary spiritualities.

"This course has helped me in many ways," he said. "It has taught me to listen more carefully to the Holy Spirit. It has reinforced me in the discipline of daily prayer at set times, but has also encouraged me in continual prayer through the day.

"It has opened my eyes to 'God in the everyday', and made me realise that – like every Christian – I'm part of a great company of men and women who have responded to the Holy Spirit in every generation over the past 2,000 years. It is an excellent course."

Spirituality reunion on cards

THOSE who have been on the two year-long spirituality courses run by our diocese have been invited to get together to reflect on their experiences.

The event happens at John Pounds Church, High Street, Old Portsmouth, on December 9, and enables participants to look back at what they learnt and look forward to future training in spirituality. It happens from 10am-2pm, and includes a bring-and-share lunch.

Among future spirituality events are the chance to train as a prayer companion next January and February, a Week of Accompanied Prayer with the two city cathedrals in April, and taster spirituality courses in May ahead of the full, year-long Christianity Spirituality Foundation Course next September (interviews take place in June).

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