

God is the compass says globe-trotter

IN his kitchen, John Phillips has a map of the world that's covered in pins.

There are 75, to be precise, and each marks a different country he has been to on his extensive travels. Travel is a big part of John's life. And whether he goes to new places for work, or simply as a traveller exploring different terrain, each trip is an important step in his own journey of faith.

Geographically, John has travelled a long way from his childhood roots in rural Wiltshire where his father was an Anglican priest. But Christianity has always been his map and compass.

"I'm not saying that I am necessarily any happier or better for my faith," he said. "But it defines me – it's where I come from."

John, who now worships at St

my faith

His life, his work and his faith have all carried the themes of 'journey'. John Phillips' faith can be seen in his work for the Commonwealth, his voluntary endeavours and his recent book

Peter's Church, Soberton, talks fondly about the important part that parish life played in his happy childhood. School also reinforced his Christian beliefs and he did well academically, progressing to study history at Cambridge.

"Having travelled so widely in the world, I am all the more conscious of my roots. I was very privileged to grow up in a strong, loving Christian family," he said.

But life hasn't all been plain sailing. Straight after university, John took a job at an international PR agency. It was varied and exciting, yet he didn't find it fulfilling. He was also broken-hearted over the end of an important relationship. So he decided to take time off to travel and write, and bought a one-way ticket to Islamabad. It was the first of many big trips that have since taken him to remote and occasionally inhospitable parts of the world.

Time out also gave him a new perspective, and John returned to Brussels to work for the European Commission on external relations with the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union.



(above left) John sitting in a plane on top of thousands of food boxes as part of a humanitarian mission to Armenians after the conflict with Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabakh in 1994; (right): meeting the Queen at Commonwealth headquarters in 2007



Subsequently he held various influential public affairs roles in the European Union, working in Greece, Slovenia and Belgium. Back in London, he also worked for the Prince of Wales

pass through, in my beloved Anglican Church," he said.

"Instead, my experience is that God can use me in surprising and untraditional ways – as a 'named Christian' working out my calling in the various jobs, interests, friendships and projects I undertake."

John is now public affairs adviser to the Commonwealth Secretary-General. It's a high-profile role that brings him into contact with senior politicians, world leaders and heads of state.

While travelling in distant places, John has had

many encounters that have strengthened his faith, not least a memorable Christmas in Timbuktu, Mali. He arrived there exhausted after days of travelling but found a warm welcome at the local Christian 'church' – a small, bare room with a faithful few in the congregation. John's fellow worshippers were delighted to welcome him, and insisted that he preach. Fortunately, he speaks good French. They also asked him to sing.

"The only Christmas carol I know really well is *In the Bleak Midwinter*, so I sang it. However incongruous, it was an incredibly moving experience," he recalls.

"At times like this – in a country where Christians are persecuted – you have a heightened awareness of your own country, and how fortunate we are to have the freedom and opportunity to practise our faith."

Travel will no doubt continue to feature in John's life. There are still many places on the map without a pin; people and places yet to be discovered. So his journey continues.

"I take right and wrong turns," he concludes. "At times, I experience great shafts of light, then grey and indeterminate skies, or even complete fog. But my faith is the journey."

International Business Leaders Forum, and as speechwriter for Hilary Benn, then the UK Secretary of State for International Development.

John's Christian calling also led him to volunteer for humanitarian projects working for charities in places like Armenia and Tajikistan. At one point he explored the possibility of ordination.

"But with the great help and support of the clergy whom I met at the time, I concluded that this door was not the one for me to



Writing helps express faith

"PREACH the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words." This quote from St Francis of Assisi is one of John's favourites.

He has found writing to be a powerful way of expressing his faith and sharing it with others.

There was the time he wrote to *The Economist* after reading the obituary column in its millennium issue. "God is dead", it said. His impassioned response was subsequently published in full.

More recently, John embraced the opportunity to spread the word by compiling a book. *My God, My All* tells the story of the Franciscan friar Brother Bernard, who played an important part in John's own journey of faith.

"I first met Bernard in 1989 when I was 25 and he was my spiritual direc-

tor until he died in 2007," he said.

With a foreword by the Rt Rev Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, the book includes Bernard's writings on issues such as prayer, suffering, spirituality, and the life and teaching of St Francis. It ends with moving recollections from people whose lives were touched by him.

"I really hope that it can speak to all people on their journey through life," said John (pictured, left, with a copy). Working with another Anglican Franciscan and a Roman Catholic priest, he was responsible for producing the book, and selecting the beautiful illustrations. These include the cover artwork featuring the San Damiano cross – the icon that St Francis prayed before when, in 1205, he received his calling.

The book is published by the Society of St Francis, available on booksforsale@franciscans.org.uk or 01300 341345. Copies are also available from Portsmouth Cathedral bookshop.