

SHE has faced poverty and bereavement, given birth in the middle of a conflict, and been locked up in an African country – but her faith has rarely wavered.

Joan Livingstone, from Holy Cross Church, Binstead, has trusted God throughout her eventful life. Now she can look back and see how God has been faithful in so many ways. He's still helping her now as she offers pastoral support to friends on the Isle of Wight.

God gave her the courage to leap out of a plane and skydive earlier this year at the age of 91. He also helped her to be a Street Pastor, patrolling the streets of Ryde in her 80s.

"I remember when I was just three or four years old going with my grandmother to her staunch chapel," said Joan. "One of the Sankey hymns we sang was *Trust And Obey*, and that has stayed with me throughout my life."

She was brought up in a Christian household in Salford, near Manchester. Her father owned a sweet factory, but sugar rationing before the war helped to drive him out of business. In 1938, the family relocated to the Isle of Man, where Joan's grandparents lived, but her father struggled to find a permanent job.

He was the youngest staff sergeant in the British Army in the First World War. When he was called up to fight in the Second World War, Joan, her mother and her three siblings found themselves in a tiny cottage with no water, gas or electricity. They were isolated in huge snowdrifts during the winter of 1940.

Joan went to Sheffield to train to become a teacher, and joined the student Christian Union. She took her first job as a teacher in Liverpool, and found herself teaching girls aged 14 to 15 when she was only 20 herself.

"It was awful," she said. "The 1944 Education Act had just been implemented so they had to stay at school beyond the age of 14, and they blamed me. They wouldn't do as they were told, they would be violent and rude, and I would cry myself to sleep at night.

"But I remember the headmistress telling me to stand at the top of the stairs and say something nice to each girl. Eventually the ringleader hit me in the face. When I slapped her back, that was actually the start of a real friendship!

"She used to come and help me clean my house and told me stories about their background, about her friends becoming pregnant, or having to abandon their babies. It really opened my eyes."

Joan ended up organising



I've trusted God for all my 91 years

Joan Livingstone

holidays for these girls on the Isle of Man for three years running, giving them a break from their difficult domestic lives.

She married David, who she had originally met as a teenager at a chapel on the Isle of Man. They went on to have five children, but the birth of her second child Deborah was eventful.

David was a policeman, and in 1955 was assigned to help deal with the troubles in Cyprus, then under British administration. Joan

local hospital for her to give birth.

"There were flies all around the ward, and there were no drugs," she said. "I knew the doctor, and after I had given birth, he gave me a full-strength Capstan cigarette to ease the pain! I still didn't see my husband for another three days – he had been nearly killed in an ambush."

After a few more years, David was assigned to Middleton in Manchester, working on a deprived estate.

my faith

Joan Livingstone has led a full life, including bereavement, poverty and even imprisonment abroad. But the common thread has involved putting her faith into action by helping others

eventually travelled with her first daughter Ruth to join him, but they were often confined to their home as fighting raged between Turks and Greeks.

Joan became pregnant again, but when the time came to give birth, there was a riot on the streets. Joan hadn't seen David for two days, but her contractions were starting. A teenage police cadet had to drive her to a basic

"The locals hated the police so much that they used to defecate on the doorstep, and you'd have to step over it," she said. "I refused to send Ruth to the local school, because I didn't want her surrounded by this bullying and hatred."

They moved to a different house and Ruth went to a church school. Meanwhile, Joan's twin sisters Margaret and May were

working in Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe. They had to return in 1961 because of health concerns about May. She was diagnosed with a hole in the heart, and died shortly after Joan and her parents reached her in Guy's Hospital.

"God helped me in that the churchwarden who lived across the road was able to look after all four of my children while I went to London and while David was working shifts," said Joan.

"When we arrived, May looked up at me and mouthed 'Joan!', but she died shortly afterwards. My father went into the hospital waiting room and asked everyone to stand up and say the Lord's Prayer.

"Her death affected me a lot, and actually brought me closer to God. I had never been confirmed, but took lessons and was confirmed at Manchester Cathedral. That strengthened my faith, and I knew that May was being looked after."

The family moved to Bolton, where Joan got involved with children from the local children's home on the moors and started teaching at the local school.

In 1983, her daughter Deborah was working with Voluntary Service Overseas in Lesotho. Joan

went to visit her, taking a flight via Moscow and Mozambique. After spending Christmas Day in a children's ward in a Lesotho hospital, she flew home.

But in Mozambique, where a civil war was in progress, her plane was delayed and she was grabbed by armed soldiers. She and a fellow passenger Maria, a black South African escaping from apartheid, were locked in a room in the airport without their passports, food or water.

"The room was hot, stuffy and full of mosquitos," she said. "I took my shoe off and hammered on the door calling for water. After an hour, we were given a toilet bucket.

"I was determined to show we weren't intimidated, so we started singing. Two hours later, we were given a bucket of water, a fig and two cups."

She was eventually released, boarded her plane and realised she was covered in mosquito bites.

A few years later, while studying for a degree in Manchester, monks from Xavarian College took lectures in Christianity. She learnt about Thomas Aquinas and Julian of Norwich, and their teachings stayed with her.

Once her children had left home, she was at a low ebb. She had become headmistress of her school, but hadn't enjoyed the administration. She decided to move.

"I saw an advert in the paper for a flat to let in the Isle of Wight," she said. "I realised that God was calling me. My family didn't want me to come, but everything turned out right. I got a job, found a house and made hundreds of friends."

After retirement, she became the co-ordinator of the volunteers who helped visitors at the three island prisons.

She helped to build the visitors' centre at HMP Parkhurst and HMP Albany, including creating a crèche so that prisoners' children would have somewhere to play during visits. Her work led to an invitation to Buckingham Palace.

She became a Street Pastor in her 80s, patrolling the streets of Ryde, meeting those who were homeless, and helping late-night revellers to get home safely. She then became a Prayer Pastor, supporting the Street Pastors, as she couldn't manage the walking.

And at the age of 91, she decided to skydive from 8,000 feet, raising £2,500 for Age UK. She was strapped to an experienced skydiver, and described the first five seconds – before the parachute opened – as "terrifying".

"I'm still very busy," she said. "I live in a care home and have made lots of friends who need to talk. Every Tuesday, we play bridge with a woman with dementia. In a very tiny way, I hope I can still help others."