

# Navy pioneer faced challenges to faith

**Leroy Osbourne** was a teenager when he found faith. Now he works with teenagers so they can have similar experiences

He was the first black Chief Petty Officer in his branch of the Royal Navy – but it wasn't easy. Leroy Osbourne was thankful for his Christian faith which helped him cope with many difficult challenges.

The 67-year-old joined the Navy at 18 and served for 22 years on a number of warships, ranging from destroyers to frigates. His specialism was Electronic Warfare, Communications and Intelligence and he worked for a while at HMS Mercury near Clanfield.

He had become a Christian aged 16, so steered clear of some of the excesses his naval colleagues indulged in. But he had to rely on God to see him through some difficult times.

Leroy is now part of St Mary's Church, Portchester, where he is a volunteer for a number of roles and he is an integral part of the St Mary's youth programme. He is also very involved with the clergy team, and is now wondering if God is calling him to become a Reader.

"Because I found faith at 16, I'm really excited about working with young people of a similar age," he said. "I remember how it made me feel to be filled with the loving Holy Spirit and how that changed me. So, I just want the same for them."

He grew up in Wembley, in London, and his mother was a devoted worshipper at a Pentecostal church. Her faith grew out of her roots in Jamaica. Leroy was her first child and therefore expected to comply with churchgoing – and maybe even become a minister.

"I never actually liked church, to be honest," he said. "My dad was on the fence about faith, and I went there under duress. My mum used to take me to Sunday School each week, as well as church.

**'I found faith at 16, so I'm really excited about working with young people'**

"But then something miraculous happened. I used to see people joyfully praising God, full of the Holy Spirit, and I wondered why I didn't feel that. Someone prayed for me and a strong, warm feeling went through me. I realised what others felt, as I suddenly fell in love with Jesus and couldn't wait to go to church. It felt like a big adventure, and I wanted to discover as much about Jesus's life as possible."

He used to do a milk round with a milkman who had served in the Royal Navy, and he suggested that



Leroy should join up and 'see the world'. He went to Plymouth for his training, going from a fairly multi-cultural neighbourhood to a naval college where he was the only black person in 200 or so trainees.

"It didn't bother me too much," he said. "I knew I was going into a different culture, and that God was within me. There were various distractions, such as drinking too much and poor behaviour. It wasn't easy as I was only 18 and there weren't many Christians around me. But you could bond with the naval padre and every Sunday we used to muster outside for a service."

Among his deployments were trips to the United States, Africa,



**Left: Leroy Osbourne on a High Tide residential holiday; above: outside St Mary's Church, Portchester; above right: working with young people**

the Gulf, Mediterranean and other parts of Europe. His initial role was in Defensive Warfare, which involved monitoring communications and providing electronic support and intelligence data to various authorities.

Over the years he had to adapt to the latest technology. He was promoted to Chief Petty Officer (CPO), but didn't feel motivated to apply for a commissioned rank.

"I was already the first black CPO in my branch of the Royal Navy, which was some achievement in the 1970s," he said. "But there were never any black naval officers, so there was no one modelling that for me, no one who I could aspire to be like. There were times when the pace of change and the varying attitudes to life in the Royal Navy made me think about leaving, but the guidance I got from God was to continue."

"I do think Jesus had a hand in me staying there for 22 years. I don't think I would have been able to do it without a Christian faith."

Leroy had married his childhood sweetheart Sue shortly after joining the Navy and they had two children. However, his mother didn't approve of him marrying someone from a different culture and as such didn't attend the wedding.

After 29 years of marriage, Sue sadly died of leukaemia in 2014. The couple were going to a different church at the time, but loved visiting St Mary's, bringing their children to play in the grounds of Portchester Castle. So he chose the churchyard at St Mary's to be Sue's final resting place.

"I came and met Rev Ian and everyone here at St Mary's was so brilliant when Sue died," said Leroy. "Lots of people would blame God



for their spouse dying prematurely, but it brought me closer to God. Since Sue has died, I've felt even more filled with the Holy Spirit. I've done preaching here, and intercessions, worked with young people and been part of the vergers' group."

Leroy helps out youth and families minister Tanya Simpson at both of the church's youth groups, Connect – for eight to 13 year olds – and Momentum – for those aged 13 and above. He's also a regular at High Tide, the monthly youth services that bring together church youth groups from across this area.

"When you see young people receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, it reminds me of what I've been through and it's the best feeling," he said. "I want my relationship with young people to be like having a friend, not having a teacher. And I'm very happy to listen to different views from young people about what they believe or have read in the Bible."

"I am exploring being a Reader, as my children are grown up and I may have time to do this. But I just want to do what Jesus wants me to do. If that's working with children and young people, that's fine."