

An Interview with Miranda Grell

John Wilson talks with Miranda Grell about her faith and her work in the legal profession

JW: When and how did you become a Christian?

MG: I was born into Christianity. My parents were Catholic and I was baptised at four months old, but I was not confirmed. I attended a Catholic Junior school until about the age of eleven or twelve, and then a non-denominational school.

My Catholicism weakened slightly because we had some issues with the social teachings of the church, but I remained spiritual. I was confirmed here at St John's on May 24th, 2009. That's when I would say I became a Christian properly in my own right. So, I've always been a Christian, but in terms of being confirmed and absolutely knowing that I really want to be a Christian it was from 2009.

JW: What does it mean to you to be a Christian?

MG: To me it means multiple things. I think there are three main things. The first is that I believe in God, and I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and in God's love, God's justice and God's mercy. Secondly it is a moral code by which I live, that guides me through happy times, through sad times,



through times of confusion. And thirdly, it's something that gives me peace and joy and helps me to grow into love. It's something that fills me with spiritual health.

JW: Can you describe the best moment in your life since you became a Christian?

MG: In 2008, when Barack Obama ran for President of the United States, I worked on his campaign in London, then in Florida. What was so special to me about that time was the coming

together of so many people from lots of different backgrounds and countries, all working together to get this amazing man elected. He was a unifier in terms of black and white, different political persuasions, different classes, different backgrounds.

To me it was a time of showing that lots of people from many different walks of life could come together and be unified in something. I was there in America on election night. It was one of the most joyous times. A really happy world occasion.

JW: How do you deal with difficult times in your Christian life?

MG: I come here to St John's and I receive a lot of comfort and solace by praying, by listening to the teachings and talking to others. I also talk with my friends and family. I talk things out, I don't keep things in. I get a lot of comfort from being here in very difficult times.

JW: Have you ever questioned your faith?

MG: I know people won't believe me, but no. I think it's because I chose to be confirmed. I was thirty. I'd come to Reverend Drapers' confirmation classes and taken them very seriously. I read books by Archbishop Tutu and Gandhi and others and I'd talked about God and the Bible. I knew what I was getting into and I really believe.

I've had some quite traumatic experiences in the last ten years and my faith has only strengthened.

JW: What is your favourite book of the Bible?

MG: Job. I read it again last night in preparation. He was someone who was completely blessed with wealth, with health, with children, family, all the trappings of earthly life, and then he was tested by God taking absolutely everything away.

He was given illnesses and sores. His children all died. His wealth went. And he kept maintaining his faith. His friends said to him – you're a sinner, you must have done something wrong – but he hadn't. God had had a conversation with the Devil. The Devil had said let's see if this blameless and innocent man would still have the belief and faith in you if his earthly things are taken away.

Job maintained that faith, even when everything was going wrong and then got it back a thousand-fold. I think that's something to live by.

It also says that when bad things happen to you it's not necessarily that you've done something. There's a higher purpose. Just keep believing in God and you'll come through it.

JW: Aside from the Bible, what is your favourite book, or film, piece of music or work of art?

MG: I have two pieces of music. In terms of church music my favourite hymn is *Be Still*. It was sung at my confirmation and I feel a sense of peace every time I hear it. It is very special to me because of that time of my life.

In terms of non-Christian music, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*. I played the cello and I love orchestral music. I love that era of music, the romantic era. At the same time, you had the impressionist era in the art world with lots of colour. It was "bigger" than the classical era, which was quite symmetrical.

Dvorak was Czech and the symphony is about immigrants going to the New World and making new discoveries. Life isn't limited, it's limitless. That's what that piece of music means to me, and I love orchestral music as well.

JW: How do you like to relax?

MG: I am a real home body and love to laze around when I need to. I'm so busy when I'm on the go, I just like to sit quietly, reading. Also, I recently took up swimming again, at Leytonstone Leisure Centre. I find that afterwards I feel very relaxed and my breathing is better and it just sets me up for any physical, mental and professional challenges ahead.

JW: Describe one part of the human or natural world that inspires your faith in God?

MG: I have a friend, called Andrew. He lives in Leyton. Andrew says he is an atheist. But Andrew has thrown himself wholeheartedly into helping the local Christian Kitchen charity. He goes to the supermarkets and picks up food that they want to donate. He helps to distribute the food. He's involved in fundraising for the charity. And that has shown me that even if someone says they don't believe in God, they are people of God. This person is a man of God and watching this Christian behaviour says to me that whatever you may declare yourself to be, what you do matters. There are people who are living God's word through their actions and through their love of other people whatever title they choose to give themselves. That gives me faith in humanity. How ever people chose to label themselves, if they do good, to me, they are children of God and that inspires me.

JW: Tell us about your job.

MG: I work for two law centres, one in Hackney and one in Haringey. Law centres are charities that provide free and independent legal advice and representation for people from very poor and deprived backgrounds.

The kind of clients we work for are disabled people who need to claim disability benefits to allow them to live independently and with dignity. Refugees and asylum seekers whose

lives are at threat. We assist them with their immigration cases. People who have been sacked from work unfairly or discriminated against. Homeless people, or people at threat of becoming homeless.

I work for those charities in two capacities. I work as a Business Development manager, which means I try to fundraise to keep the charities running. I network with local councillors, telling them about the work and trying to gain their support.

In 2014, I was called to the Bar by the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple – my Inns of Court, and so in my second role, I represent clients at Social Security tribunals. I am hoping to serve in the higher courts if I can do my one year's 'pupillage' training.

It's a lot of variety. Helping on the one hand to fundraise to keep the operation of the centres going, and on the other hand practising law. It is very satisfying to have that variety in my work.

JW: What made you decide to go into law?

MG: About ten years ago, I was elected a local councillor in this borough and my election was challenged and went to court. I had no experience of law, no family members in law, nothing that would give me any knowledge of the law. When I watched the legal process in action and I

watched my barrister using ancient legal cases and turning them into erudite words, a 'light bulb' went on and I thought it was amazing. He was using technical and intellectual ideas and applying it to my situation and I thought I could do that.

It's a mix of the intellectual stimulation, the emotional satisfaction from helping people and it's a vocation. For me, my interest in law is not in making lots of money or commercial law. I very much want to do 'people-centred' law. For people who might lose their home, or may have been tortured or threatened in their own country and face the risk of deportation back there.

We're all an accident of birth. I'm blessed, I live here, I'm healthy, my life is not threatened, I have a wonderful family. My life could easily be very different, so I want to help others who might be less fortunate and to do that through law.

JW: How does your faith help you in your job?

MG: You have to have faith. If you didn't have faith working for a law centre, I don't think you could get through it.

For example, Haringey Law Centre lost all its funding last May. Everybody lost their jobs, but two or three members decided to stay on as volunteers because they believed so

deeply in wanting to help people. They did this from May to November without any money. I arrived in November to help fundraise and help the law centre stay open. We wondered how we could do this, but since November we have managed to raise money to pay for the Debt Worker, the Housing Solicitor, and only last week a City law firm has said they want to help us to pay for people to represent our disabled clients at the social security tribunal.

It's faith that is carrying us through because if we didn't have that faith we would have closed and given up. There was no money, but my colleagues stayed. I think that God is rewarding them. They were doing this for no reward, and now it's coming through. Faith is carrying us. We are only open three days a week, at the moment, but we will be back to full strength. We will be well resourced again, and we will be able to help more people. If we didn't have that faith the law centre wouldn't be open.

It's immensely important to have faith. The manager is doing a Doctorate in Theology. I think people in all law centres must have deep faith. Again, whether they label themselves Christian or not, they are children of God.

JW: What is your hope for St John's for the future?

MG: My hope for St John's is that it continues to be the welcoming, friendly, spiritually and emotionally comforting church that it is. It has given so much to so many people, including me. When I came to St John's, my first service, on the 21st of September 2008, I was a broken person, unemployed, very distressed. St John's gave me my life back. That's the only way to describe it. It was somewhere I felt safe and I hope that St John's can stay resourced and attract new people to the ministry and services.

I'm quite worried about the decline in the number of people attending church. However, I think because this church is so well established in the community and wants to be a community church, I think that will keep us going.

I hope we can increase the number of people who come in and that we welcome people from this faith, other denominations, no denominations and continue to be that hub of the community. That's what I love about St John's – its faith in action. It's not just people coming and praying and going away. It's a church that is at the centre of practical help in people's lives.