

# Commentary

SPECIAL EDITION 2017

The goal of Mike's work was a new reformation, and his significance is as a reformer, says Don Carson  
**Page 4**

Mark Thompson pays tribute to Mike's educational vision, while John Stevens is grateful for the way he brought Independent and Anglican students together  
**Pages 16 and 19**

**Oak Hill  
College**

In thanksgiving for  
the life and ministry of  
**MIKE OVEY**  
1958-2017

With tributes from  
colleagues, Oak Hill  
alumni and fellow  
church leaders



# Ask the Lord of the harvest



**The testimonies in these pages give us an opportunity to thank God for the life of his servant Mike Ovey, and to pray for the partnership of Oak Hill and the churches to proclaim the gospel in our time, says Dan Strange, Acting Principal of Oak Hill**

In the middle of his ministry, Jesus was besieged by large crowds who came to him for healing, teaching and leadership. Seeing the people, who were like sheep without a shepherd, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matthew 9:37-38).

In this special edition of *Commentary*, you will read tributes and testimonies to the life and ministry of Mike Ovey, and see how God in his gracious goodness touched and changed the lives of so many people through him. There is no doubt that in his own inimitable way, Mike was one of the faithful workers Jesus spoke about, who was sent to bring in the harvest in the field of the Lord. But now Mike has been called home. After many years of stirring people up to be the best gift they can be for Christ's church, he has suddenly and without warning been taken from the field.

This has been a hard and faith-stretching experience for everyone who has ever worked with Mike. But of course, it takes only a moment's thought to realise that the last thing

he would want anyone to do would be to stop praying for the Lord of the harvest to send fresh workers into the field. And in fact, this is exactly what God has been doing, and continues to do, through the ministry of Oak Hill.

God has been sending gospel ministers, youth leaders, church planters, women's workers, and cross-cultural missionaries, who come to the college community to learn how to become servants of the word of God and of the people of God. Now is the time for the church and the college to step up their partnership in order to flood our nation and beyond with men and women who will give their best years to proclaiming the gospel in our time.

This issue of *Commentary* gives us an opportunity to thank God for the life of his servant Mike Ovey, and to learn from his example how we can become better servants of the Lord Jesus ourselves. As Nick Tucker writes in his tribute (on page 13), 'If we wish to honour Mike, we must do so by borrowing a little of his courage, and by imitating him as he imitated Christ.'

Can I say a huge thank you to everyone who has contributed their appreciations of Mike at short notice in the pages which follow. The range of testimony is amazingly broad, which is not surprising, since Mike threw himself wholeheartedly into so many different areas of work.

Mark Thompson and David Peterson (on pages 16 and 25) talk about Mike's vision for theological education. Mark

says that Mike endured his own 'horrendous experience of theological education in the 1980s – which is vividly described by William Taylor (on page 28) – but that 'he dared to dream of something better. He thought through what it would be like for a theological education to nurture faith and prepare people for ministry.'

Ray Porter (on page 7) writes about Mike's enduring passion for the great commission of Jesus, and his commitment to see students trained to do cross-cultural ministry, both here in the UK and around the world. John Stevens (page 19) writes in appreciation for the way Mike helped create the conditions for Anglican and Independent students to study together, respecting each other's different politics and finding unity in the essentials.

Don Carson (on page 4) looks at Mike's life as a scholar, writer, churchman, theologian and educator, but the description of Mike he thinks most significant is as a reformer.

The personal testimonies to Mike's pastoral gifts, to his quirky eccentricities, and to his love and kindness, complete the picture. It's been said that 'his books were his students', in that he gave his time to people, rather than to writing a string of impressive books. And that is what we see here, in personal tributes paid by three former students who are now in ministry in Birmingham, Bedford and South London. As Efrem Buckle (page 23) says, 'He was just as keen to listen, to learn, and to trust, as any of his students; a truly rare and precious brother indeed.'

As we consider how God has blessed us in the life of Mike Ovey, can I ask you also to pray for Oak Hill as we look to the Lord of the harvest for the future direction of the college? We are aware more than ever that we need the grace of God to help us discern the leadership structure which will best serve the mission of Oak Hill, and enable the college to become the servant of the churches, and of the students they send us. Thank you for holding us in your prayers.

# Commentary

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# His goal was a new reformation



**Don Carson surveys Mike Ovey's public life, and pays tribute to his work as a scholar and writer, a churchman and theologian, a mentor and educator. But above all, his vision was for a new reformation, and the significance of his life is as a reformer**

Mike Ovey was many things. Laying aside his personal life, where he was above all and most importantly a husband and a father, I shall survey his public life.

Mike was a scholar and a writer. His two most important books, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, co-written with Steve Jeffery and Andrew Sach (2007), and *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (2016), are models of clarity and careful reasoning on theological issues that are simultaneously traditional, contemporary, and important. His grasp of the patristic sources in the latter volume is wholly admirable.

But Mike could and did write at popular levels. Moreover, especially in essays published in *Churchman* and *Themelios*, he wrote for theological students and pastors. Perhaps

the best piece he wrote for the *Themelios* column, which he filled three times a year, was, 'The Art of Imperious Ignorance' (2016).

Mike made himself something of an expert on several more topics on which he wrote little, but thought much, not least the doctrine of justification. Better yet, he was generous with his scholarship. I heard about the topic of his unpublished doctoral dissertation and wrote to him to ask if it was going to become available. He promptly sent me a digital copy, and a detailed note indicating where he had changed his mind on some relatively minor details.

Mike was a churchman, a preacher, a confessional evangelical. When his responsibilities did not take him away, he and his family could be found in their local church, Sunday by Sunday. And not just Sundays: Mike contributed to the pastoral leadership in his cheerful willingness to preach, to counsel, to pray, to plan, to teach and encourage.

The debates that sometimes engulf the denomination in which he was nurtured did not find Mike sidelined, too busy with his own patch to roll up his sleeves and try to exercise a godly influence in the corridors of power. Although the principal of a recognized Anglican training college, he was the friend, encourager, and counsellor of pastors and



*Left: Mike Ovey addresses GAFCON at its second international conference in Nairobi in 2013, where he spoke on the choice before global Anglicans of 'the grace of God or the world of the West'.*

**His goal was nothing less than a new reformation in the United Kingdom and beyond. He was quite explicit about this vision, and it shaped his priorities. He pressed on, fully aware that although reformation might come in his generation, it might not come until the next, or the one after that – or it might not come at all, and God might well deal with us in judgment.**

leaders of independent churches. Confessionally Reformed, he nevertheless moved comfortably within a broader evangelical constituency.

Mike was a teacher and a mentor. Here he excelled, not because he was always well ordered and structured (he often wasn't), but because he was contagious. He understood intuitively that it is more important for his students to become excited over the scriptures and theology than to get through the assigned passage or topic. Nowhere was his influence more marked than in his private mentoring, his personal availability, his willingness – more, his eagerness – to spend time with his students.

Some of this sprang from his natural gregariousness; some of it sprang from his understanding that much in the Christian life is caught better than it is taught. He could deliver a formal address to the crowds at GAFCON and leave them hungering for more, and he was no less at home bringing comfort to a grieving student recently bereaved.

Mike was, ironically, an excellent educator and an indifferent administrator. In the last years of his life, during which he served as Principal of Oak Hill, Mike continued to grow: the pastor-theologian became the theologian-teacher-mentor, who became the theologian-principal, the public educator. Some of those years were both tumultuous and painful – but the best leaders learn from tumult and pain.

In the best sense, Mike was authentic: there was no false note in his character. Certainly, nothing dulled his well-honed eccentricities and impish sense of humour. Administration was not his strong suit, and doubtless that played some part in the challenges that were eventually overcome. But by the time of his death, Mike, working with others, had put in place a team in which each member played to his or her strengths.

Oak Hill was hiring some excellent people. At a time when most of the university theology faculties are in decline, and when the independent theological colleges are facing challenges of various kinds, Oak Hill under Mike's leadership has become the institution that confessional Christian leaders view with greatest respect. If Oak Hill can continue

on the same trajectory, and increase its focus and skill in recruitment, its future as the leading theological college in England will be secure.

Yes, Mike was many things. But we miss the significance of his life if we overlook his vision: his goal was nothing less than a new reformation in the United Kingdom and beyond. He was quite explicit about this vision, and it shaped his priorities. Undaunted by cultural and ecclesiastical tides that threatened historic Christian life and thought, he pressed on, fully aware that although reformation might come in his generation, it might not come until the next, or the one after that – or it might not come at all, and God might well deal with us in judgment.

He understood that if reformation came, it would need robust theological thinking – courageous, principled, faithful to the evangel – and so he did not want to be an evan-jelly. He understood that there is value in diverse theological education delivery systems, but he clearly saw that there is always room at the top.

Doubtless God raises up a handful of people who are autodidacts, gifted preachers and teachers and reformers who read themselves into biblical and theological maturity, but they are not the norm. Such people hold high the English tradition of the gifted amateur (whose stance reminds one of the old Flanders and Swann song humorously excoriating foreigners who 'practise beforehand and ruin the fun'), but they are not the norm.

What is needed is a generation of pastor-theologian-evangelists, people with the minds and hearts and training of Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Cranmer, Knox, Owen, Whitefield, and Wesley. Mike was a reformer. May God enable us to honor his memory by strengthening and pursuing his vision.

*Don Carson is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and co-founder of The Gospel Coalition.*

# A passion for the great commission



**Training students for world mission at Oak Hill began as an innovative new course, but under Mike became the heart of his vision for the whole of theological education. He realised, says Ray Porter, that cross-cultural mission is key to fulfilling the great commission of Jesus**

It was David Peterson who realised that Oak Hill should be training people for world mission and not just parish ministry in the UK. But without Mike Ovey, would the course have survived? After the first few years, enrolment for the stream that is now called Theology for Crossing Cultures (TCC) never reached the number of students that had been anticipated. If there was ever a dream that it would make money for the college, it was never realised.

David Baldwin, who now leads TCC, recalls that on the day he began to teach at Oak Hill, 'Mike looked at me with that Ovey twinkle in his eye and said, with excessive gesticulation, "David, whatever else you do, we want you to exude the great commission!"'

For Mike, the fulfilment of the great commission of Jesus had become the *raison d'être* of the college. As I often joked

with him, although the numbers of world mission students might be small, the course had in fact taken over the college. When Mike presented his vision for the future of the college to the council and faculty in 2016, using a mindmap, at its centre was a quote from me to that effect.

In the difficulties that were encountered in the first year of his principalship, Mike recognised that the college had become proud of its academic ability. There was the danger of an intellectual arrogance that did not commend the gospel. Mike began to talk more and more of the fact that we are stewards of the message that has been entrusted to us. We are not owners of the building God is constructing, but 'brickies' working on the site.

He wanted all the students to recognise that wherever they might minister, they were going into a cross-cultural situation, where they would need the tools of understanding and relationship that were taught in the TCC course. Mike rejoiced when the bishops' inspectors insisted that all Anglican ordinands should study at least one TCC module. We went one better than that and designed a new compulsory module for all students about crossing cultures.

But Mike was never just concerned about tools. He was a man who was passionate about bringing the whole gospel to the whole world. His 2013 paper to GAFCON recounted

**Mike was passionate about bringing the whole gospel to the whole world. He was determined to preach the biblical gospel. He rejoiced in the growth of the world church. He often asked how we, as a college, could serve it better**

how in 1990 he had encountered an East African minister. He was horrified by the realisation of what he was saying was true: that the Western church had turned away from the gospel of grace it once preached in Africa and replaced it with a false gospel based on its own philosophies.

Mike was determined to preach the biblical gospel. He rejoiced in the growth of the world church. He often asked how we, as a college, could serve it better. He was keen to know about the ministries to which Old Oaks had gone overseas and to see their contributions.

Mike appeared to many as the conventional middle-class Englishman, but he was proud of his multi-cultural background. He identified himself as a Cornish Jew, despite the fact that his lines of descent would not have been accepted by the genealogical guardians of either group. I was surprised at his enthusiasm when I had the rare opportunity to introduce him to something he didn't already know: *The Heliand*, a Saxon retelling of the gospel story as an epic poem, portraying the Saviour in Saxon dress. Mike delighted at this 9th century contextualisation of the Christian message, and added readings from it to the entertainment at faculty socials. It didn't quite displace Wodehouse!

Personally, I appreciated all the times when Mike and I were able to sit down for an extended conversation. He liked to have information about the mission community. For me it was great to be able to get his counsel on issues being faced in world mission. His clear thinking and understanding of systematic and biblical theology were

invaluable, as I thought through the consequences of some of the pragmatic contextualisation that was being embraced by missionaries in different countries. I remember him giving me a detailed analysis of the baptismal formula used by some people involved in Muslim evangelism, and our conclusion that it was not historic Christian baptism. Too rarely does world mission have such input.

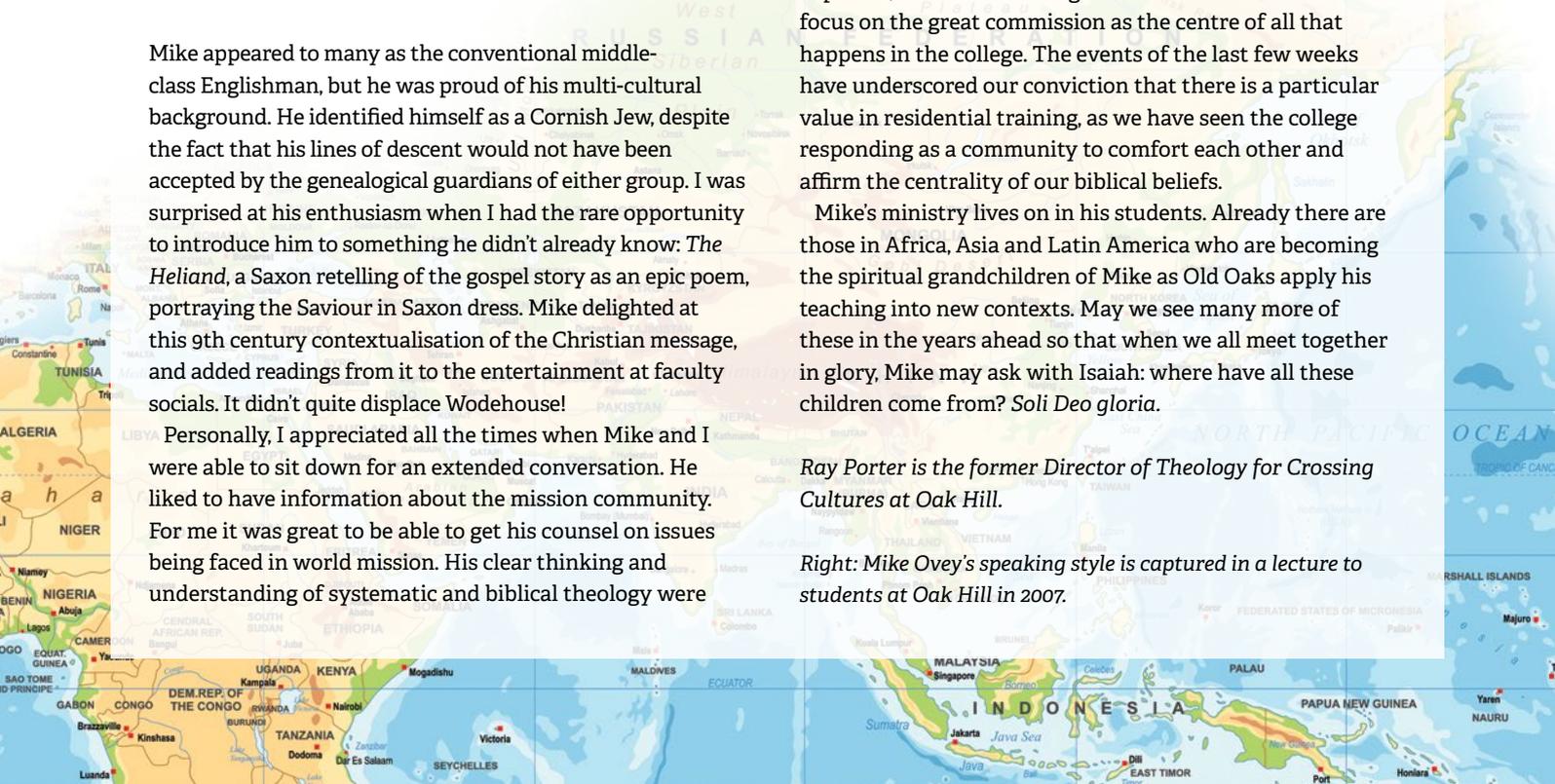
The TCC course benefitted greatly from Mike's vision of integrated training for ministry. Not only did it bring cross-cultural thinking into the main college training programme, but it also meant that those training for ministry overseas had the benefit of a proper training in biblical languages, biblical studies and systematic theology in a way that, I believe, is not to be found at any other college in the UK. Integrated training did not only mean that there was a consistent theology flowing through it all, but also that there was an evangelical warmth firing up students for the task of fulfilling the great commission.

With Mike taken from us so much earlier than we expected, there is a challenge on us all to continue to focus on the great commission as the centre of all that happens in the college. The events of the last few weeks have underscored our conviction that there is a particular value in residential training, as we have seen the college responding as a community to comfort each other and affirm the centrality of our biblical beliefs.

Mike's ministry lives on in his students. Already there are those in Africa, Asia and Latin America who are becoming the spiritual grandchildren of Mike as Old Oaks apply his teaching into new contexts. May we see many more of these in the years ahead so that when we all meet together in glory, Mike may ask with Isaiah: where have all these children come from? *Soli Deo gloria*.

*Ray Porter is the former Director of Theology for Crossing Cultures at Oak Hill.*

*Right: Mike Ovey's speaking style is captured in a lecture to students at Oak Hill in 2007.*







# PASTORING THE PASTORS



It has been said that Mike Ovey's enduring legacy will be his students. Fiona Gibson reflects on how Mike invested his wisdom, intellect and care in developing a generation and more of students to be the best possible gift they could be to Christ's church

Like everyone else, when I heard the news that God had called home one of his most faithful and effective servants on Saturday 7 January 2017, I didn't actually believe it at first. I couldn't believe it. How could Mike Ovey be gone? How could such a giant of theological thinking and ecclesiological insight have been taken? To say nothing of the immense personal loss to his wife and children. What strange providence was this?

To so many of us who had the privilege of studying under his teaching and leadership at Oak Hill, Mike was more than 'just' a principal. He was a mentor, deeply and personally interested in each one of us, and keen to shape us to be the best we could be in the service of God and

his church. He had a knack of seeing things in each of us that we didn't see in ourselves, of spotting the particular gifts and talents God had given us that could be polished, nurtured, and honed.

That was certainly true of me. When I started training at Oak Hill, I was, in my own eyes, a wife and mother who'd spent the 14 years since leaving university as a teacher and a lay children's minister and hadn't really had to write anything much more intellectually demanding than a shopping list! And yet, nine years after that, I am now a part-time PhD student researching *acedia* and its modern manifestations under the supervision of Dr Justin Stratis and Revd Dr Howard Worsley at Trinity College, Bristol. Quite a turnaround, which is

due, under God, to the mentoring and guidance of Mike Ovey.

Mike was one of the first to spot academic potential in me, and invited me to an interview in his study part way through my first year, to suggest I approach Ministry Division for funding under the Potential Theological Educator criteria, so that I could do further study at Oak Hill. When I realised he was serious, I took a deep breath and, with the help of my fellowship group tutor and another member of the faculty, started to prepare for the interview.

When I heard I'd been successful, along with another member of our year group, I rang to tell Mike the news and his PA told me that, yes, he'd heard, and was bounding round his study with a broad grin on his face. Such was Mike's pleasure in the success of any of his students.

It was Mike who encouraged me to stay on for a fourth year of study

and complete an MTh, and Mike who encouraged me to consider postgraduate research. My only sadness when I recently passed my upgrade viva to progress from the MLitt/MPhil programme at Trinity to the PhD programme was that I couldn't email Mike to tell him. Not that he'd have answered the email, of course! He was hopeless at answering emails, but I know that either he'd have rung to congratulate me or, the next time I was down at Oak Hill, he'd have beamed that face-splitting smile and offered to toast my achievement in the best coffee Southgate could supply.

Studying under Mike was a gift from God. He had the most powerful intellect of anyone I've met, and yet never, ever used that to make anyone feel small or inadequate. He could see through an argument to its heart with laser-like precision and yet to his students was kindness personified. He taught us that we were stewards, not owners, of the mysteries of grace and that our high privilege and calling was to pass those mysteries on to others so that they too might appreciate and delight in the wonders of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. He didn't just teach us that, he modelled it for us.

It wasn't always easy. He wanted us to be the best we could be and knew there was no shortcut to that. He made us work, and work hard. A three-hour doctrine lecture with Mike

was an exhausting and exhilarating experience. When we answered one of his questions, we knew there would be one of three possible responses: a slightly pained look, or a double-handed wave towards himself accompanied by the words, 'Looking for more...' or, most prized of all, the gleam in his eyes, the slowly spreading smile, and the 'Yes!'

But in the end it wasn't about the knowledge and the academic study in and of itself for Mike. I vividly remember his address to us in opening week when we began our studies. He said that if at the end of our time at Oak Hill we could parse Greek and Hebrew on sight, explain deep doctrine and exegete any passage, yet left Oak Hill loving the Lord Jesus one jot less, he and the rest of the faculty would have failed in their task. For first and foremost he and we were to be, by the grace of God alone, disciples of Christ, lovers of the Lord Jesus, delighted and transformed by the love of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of the many videos of Mike posted on the Internet after he died was of a sermon he preached at an ordination at St Helen's Bishopsgate. With what is now almost unbearable poignancy, when preaching on Acts 20, Mike said of the Ephesian elders facing life without the apostle Paul, 'No more casual stopovers in Miletus to catch up, shoot the breeze, and get the advice.' That's what I, along with so many other students past and present, am

going to miss most. The times of going back to Oak Hill, catching up with Mike, and getting the advice.

We valued those times hugely. We valued them when we were students and we valued them even more when we'd left. We knew it was part of the ongoing commitment Mike had made to God and to us that he would invest his time, intellect, wisdom and care in developing a generation and more of students to be the best possible gift we could be to Christ's Church in whatever capacity we were called to serve. He would put aside whatever he was doing, he would ask after each member of the family, he would ask after our ministries and further studies, he would pray with great pastoral insight and care, and we would leave feeling stronger for his care and his prayers.

I can honestly say that, humanly speaking, if it were not for Mike, I would not be doing what I am doing in the service of God today. And I know that is true for so many other former students too.

A retired vicar I know commented in response to one of my social media posts about how much we former students would miss Mike's influence and ongoing advice: 'And now Mike would be saying, "Over to you all, now."' In God's grace, may we all rise to that challenge.

*Fiona Gibson is Vicar of the parishes of Willington, Moggerhanger and Cople, Bedfordshire.*

# IN AWE AT THE BEAUTY OF GOD



We will remember Mike Ovey even more for his kindness than his brilliance, says Nick Tucker, who knew Mike as a friend and colleague. If we wish to honour him, we must do so by borrowing a little of his courage, and imitating him as he imitated Christ

When Ronald Reagan occupied the Oval Office, he kept a small plaque on his desk which said, 'There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he does not mind who gets the credit.' I have long thought that Mike Ovey proved the truthfulness of that particular maxim. Since he died, many have mentioned his 'complete lack of ego', and there is more than a grain of truth in that comment. Yet there was actually something rather more impressive about Mike than a lack of ego. The truth was that, like all of us, Mike did have an ego; it's just that his was nailed to the cross.

He knew that an implication of the gospel is the annihilation of our pride, and so Mike gave his life to teaching others, whom he hoped would be 'better' ministers and theologians than

he was himself. I submit that this testified both to his godly humility and to another aspect of his character (which I rather think was also a sign of the Spirit's work in Mike), his astonishing capacity for optimism.

I believe in the long run, it will be Mike's willingness – indeed his desire – to see others take the credit for his achievements that will, ironically, establish his legacy. Although Mike could write brilliantly, as can be observed from the popularity of his *Themelios* editorials, he chose to invest himself more directly in developing the ministries of others. Thus he shunned the limelight and the *kudos* of being widely published, in favour of the unsung work of enabling others to be 'God's best possible gift' to the church. In so doing he did a great deal to shape

the ministry of a generation of pastors around the country. Whether or not a historian of the 21st century church, writing in a century or two, picks up on the significance of Mike's ministry, we can be sure that his labour was not in vain.

Much has been said about Mike's skill as a teacher. He had a remarkable capacity to understand impossibly complex things and then present them with such order and clarity that they seemed accessible to the least academic of us. But simple comprehension was not enough. As a teacher Mike forced us to examine our ideas and to be willing to exchange them for better – more scriptural – ideas, when they didn't withstand scrutiny. In this, as with so many other things, Mike did not ask his students to do something to which he himself was not willing to submit.

Mike had the sort of intellect that could have protected him from pretty much all criticism and rebuke – he

could always win an argument if he wanted to. (I remember Heather letting slip once that Mike had kept himself calm during a frustrating talk given in the college chapel by translating it into Greek and then Latin in his head.) Nonetheless, I can recall on several occasions being privy to Mike's willingness to let God disagree with him and seeing him model repentance and faith when convicted by God's word.

In this regard, Mike's commitment to good theology was not a job, nor even a hobby: it was his life. He was a passionate theologian – but he was not just a theologian, he was a *theophile*. He was clearly in awe and wonder at the glory and the beauty of God, and this was simply infectious. He taught each of us privileged to be in his classes to wonder at the perfection of God and to delight in his beauty.

This was transformative for us, as students, just as it was, clearly, for Mike himself. Of all the ideas I associate with him, perhaps the one that comes most quickly to mind is that God, as Trinity, is in his essence self-giving, other person centred, love. I associate this particular theme with Mike because of the delight he took in showing us the utter generosity and goodness of God, but also because it was, in the end, the quality in which he most reflected his Saviour.

This was the man whose plate was always overfull, yet who sat with me for hours at a time after the sudden death of my brother; who turned up last Christmas to my mother-in-law's

funeral in the midst of a punishingly busy period at college. Over and over again from friends and fellow students, I have heard the same testimony: we will remember him even more for his kindness than his brilliance.

Anyone who knew Mike will attest that he was no ivory tower theologian. This was partly because of his quirky personality. Mike could be, at times, the very embodiment of *bathos*. He may have been the man who taught me to love the works of Anselm of Canterbury, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo (to list just three of the As), but he was also the man who once accompanied me to the cinema and on discovering there were no tickets for the film I had suggested insisted we should see instead the unpromisingly titled *Vampires Suck* – and then went on and on about how brilliant it was. (It really wasn't.)

Quirky personality aside, however, Mike couldn't be an ivory tower theologian because of his twin loves for Christ and his church. In the end, Mike's love for theology grew from and fed both those loves and the consequence is seen in the lives and ministries of his students.

Given his character, it is small wonder that so many people have been so deeply affected by Mike's untimely death. At the time of writing, several weeks have passed since we received the tragic news of the 7th of January. However, it is still the case that when I encounter old Oak Hill friends, their

grief is still very evident and near the surface. Mike was a man who loved deeply and widely, and he was loved deeply by a wide range of people in return. I only hope he knew just how much, in the dark and lonely moments that leadership inevitably brought.

Our sadness is testimony that, insofar as I've ever met anyone who fulfils this ideal, Mike really was the best possible gift we could have hoped for as a friend, as a pastor, as a teacher, and as a theologian. But our sorrow alone is not sufficient tribute to Mike and the blessing he was to us.

If we wish to honour Mike, we must do so by borrowing a little of his courage, and by imitating him as he imitated Christ. We must be willing, as he was, to lay aside our own small ambitions and give ourselves, ego and all, to the service of God's kingdom. We must be willing, as he was, to suffer in the service of the truth. We must be bold, as he was, to proclaim the truth in its fullness. And in the end we must let that truth reshape us, and not allow ourselves to reshape it.

I know, because I saw it at close hand, that this was far from easy for Mike. And it won't be easy for us. But I also know, because Mike used to remind me constantly, that 'God is no one's debtor'.

*Nick Tucker is Vicar of St Bartholomew, Edgbaston, and was formerly Research Fellow at Oak Hill College.*

*Right: Mike at the Oak Hill end-of-year hog roast in June 2014.*



# A better dream



**Like many evangelicals of his generation, Mike Ovey had a bad experience of theological education in an Anglican college. But instead of writing off theological training altogether, he dared to dream of something better, says Mark Thompson**

Why would a man with the extraordinary mind and gifts of Mike Ovey devote more than 20 years of his life to theological education? He was a wonderful pastor and a fine preacher. He was skilled at one to one and small group work and had a passion for evangelism. Why would he want to step back from the coal face of Christian ministry and engage in something that many evangelicals continue to think is of dubious worth?

Mike would have disputed the assumption behind the question, of course. He never saw himself as stepping back from the coal face and he rejected entirely any suggestion that the value of theological education was dubious. Quite the opposite, actually. He saw theological education as vital for the health of the churches.

I suspect there were two powerful impulses that explain Mike's passion for theological education as a ministry which serves the churches and seeks to honour Christ. The first was his reaction to the horrendous experience of theological education that he shared with many of his generation. The

struggle was not at all unexpected. After all, evangelicals had suffered, even at reputedly evangelical theological colleges in Britain, for generations. However, you had to experience it to know how dreadful it really was.

The reaction of most in the 1970s and 1980s (and of some still today) was to conclude that theological education was simply something you had to endure, and which did you no good at all. The way to remain sane and sound while you were at theological college was to do student ministry in the local university. There was plenty of good work to get on with there (e.g. caring for Christian students who had come up from the camping movement). You just ticked the boxes you needed to tick to get through the college experience as quickly as you could, while you got your real training elsewhere.

A number of today's leaders would quite openly admit that they survived as an evangelical, and have thrived in full-time gospel ministry since, despite their theological education. Of course it helped that many of them had the resources of a public school education, and the literature produced by the revival in evangelical scholarship in the mid 20th century, to draw on instead.

Shut down, don't let it impact you, and get on with ministry elsewhere – that was the standard reaction. It would be foolish to suggest that this is not the case in many places throughout Britain still today. When evangelicals are derided, and paganism (and worse) openly embraced in the theological college you are attending, such a reaction from believing men and women is perfectly understandable.

One friend told me it took him two years after leaving a leading evangelical Anglican theological college in Britain before he regained his confidence in the Bible. Another was told by his tutor that the tutor and his colleagues were on a mission to move anyone who came from an evangelical church to 'a broader, more adult and enlightened theological position'.

Mike, as you may have guessed, did not react in the standard way. He just could not do that. So he engaged his teachers in debate. He presented the counter-evidence to the liberal positions that were advocated from the front of the lecture room. He railed against the unfair caricature of conservative evangelical thought. It deeply disturbed him that it should be

*Right: Heather and Mike Ovey in February 2007, shortly after Mike's appointment as Principal of Oak Hill.*



this way. Surely a theological education should strengthen confidence in the word of God, rigorously prepare men and women for a lifetime of faithful ministry, equip them to face the challenges and answer the questions of inquirers, and stir them to go out and reach the world for Christ. Why should churches send precious members of their congregations to be taught by unbelievers who would actively seek to overturn their convictions? Yet Mike did more than challenge the foolishness he endured in theological college. He dared to dream of something better. He thought through what it would be like for a theological education to nurture faith and prepare people for ministry.

Mike had a good idea of what he wanted to see in theological education: deep and extensive engagement with the scriptures; clear, biblically anchored reformed theology (where the Bible, not a system, shapes a coherent theology); the development of consequential thinking; theological reflection on practice; the development and strengthening of necessary skills for pastoral ministry. Confidence in the scriptures should be strengthened; evangelical convictions deepened and expanded; Christian character developed through service and sitting under the word of God in the context of community; preachers and teachers equipped to feed God's people, nourish faith, and defend against error in teaching and practice.

The college could be, should be, a fellowship of teachers and students which looks beyond itself to the mission field of every nation, tribe and people group. The vision of re-evangelizing Britain and reforming again the Church of England ought to be presented before the students.

It is this positive vision of what theological education could be that provided the second powerful impulse for Mike's passion and focus in the ministry of Oak Hill. It would be reinforced and enlarged by his time in Australia, following his curacy at All Saints Crowborough. He was invited to join the faculty of Moore College and had the opportunity of seeing an Anglican theological college where evangelical faith was nurtured and deepened, and men

and women were prepared for a lifetime of word ministry. It could be done, under God's good hand! The context of the Church of England was, of course, markedly different from the predominantly evangelical Diocese of Sydney. Moore College could not simply be duplicated in Britain. But the positive energy Mike gained from seeing theological education done in the way he had dreamed it could be was obvious to his friends when he returned to the UK in 1998.

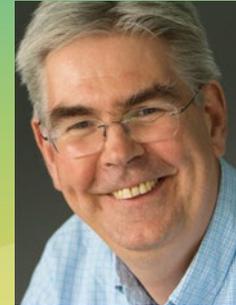
Evangelicalism in the UK and elsewhere in the world seems periodically to go through periods of anti-intellectualism and a deriding of theological education. When the academy is dominated by liberal institutions who derail those who attend them, once again this is perfectly understandable. However, without the most rigorous theological education we can provide, we are sending men and women into an increasingly challenging ministry environment ill-prepared. The practical, intellectual and even political challenges of evangelical ministry in the 21st century need carefully thought-through responses that are grounded in a deep knowledge of the scriptures and an awareness of the consequences of the positions we might hold on any particular question.

In the early 20th century, evangelicals in England were at the mercy of liberal theologians who were not being answered because there was no one to answer them. Herbert Henson's description of 'an army of illiterates generalised by octogenarians' was certainly over the top, but a capacity to ground God's people deeply in the knowledge of God anchored in the Scriptures did appear to be lacking.

Mike gave himself to theological education for over two decades to ensure that did not happen again and that God's precious people, redeemed by the blood of his Son, might not be 'tossed around by every wind of doctrine', but rather might be able to 'make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you'. That's why he would argue he was right there at the coal face of ministry, doing one of the most important tasks there is.

*Mark Thompson is Principal of Moore College, Sydney.*

# Independents and Anglicans together



**At the time of Mike Ovey's death, Oak Hill had almost equal numbers of Anglican and Independent students training together for gospel ministry. John Stevens pays tribute to Mike for shaping the vision, the faculty and the curriculum of Oak Hill to make this possible**

I first met Mike Ovey in the late 1980s when he was an ordinand, training in Cambridge. I was newly converted, and was reading the Bible weekly with another ordinand. Our paths crossed regularly over the intervening years, but I only began to get to know Mike personally after he was appointed Principal of Oak Hill. I was then one of the pastors of City Evangelical Church in Birmingham, and we sent a significant number of men from our congregation to train at the college. We began to work together much more closely after 2010, when I became the first National Director of FIEC.

Mike and I had much in common. We were both lawyers by background, and had both taken the BCL, an elite postgraduate masters degree in law, at Oxford. However I

was always conscious that Mike was far brighter and more able than me, with his encyclopaedic memory and grasp of arcane philosophy, though he never used his brilliance to intimidate. Our legal backgrounds probably gave us both a deep appreciation and love for systematic theology, which is perhaps the result of being trained to value a tidy mind and logical coherence.

More than this, we both shared a passionate conviction about the importance of high-quality theological training for gospel ministry, though for different reasons. Mike was deeply aware of the inadequacy of the theological training he had received, where evangelical convictions were all too often challenged rather than reinforced. This gave him a determination to ensure that the next generation received a better training than had been available to him.

Having chosen not to pursue ordination in the Church of England, I found myself with no viable option for theological training, and I lacked money and a supportive family or church. There was also no obvious non-conformist college to attend in the UK that offered reformed theological vigour in a contemporary context.

In my early 30s, my wife and I toyed with going to the United States or Australia, but providentially found ourselves planting a church in Birmingham, and the moment passed. I have been fortunate to be able to gain a reasonable theological base from reading and the help of friends, but I am also very conscious of the lost opportunity of a more formal theological training, which may have made me a more effective church leader. While I have been able to get by, through self-discipline and perseverance, most people would not be able to equip themselves in this way, and so for the vast majority a biblically faithful theological training is essential for a lifetime of gospel ministry.

Mike's great achievement has been to transform Oak Hill into an outstanding theological college that caters for the needs of both Anglicans and Independent students training for pastoral ministry. He has gathered an excellent faculty, and those attending the college know that their evangelical convictions will be strengthened rather than undermined. Mike himself has been at the forefront of defending the truthfulness, authority and sufficiency of scripture and the propitiatory atonement of the cross against neo-liberals arising from within evangelicalism.

The development of Oak Hill has been part of a wider renaissance of reformed theological training institutions in the UK, which has included WEST/Union, London Seminary, and more recently Edinburgh Theological Seminary. The options available to men training for FIEC ministry today are much better than at any time in my Christian lifetime, and in large part this is Mike's legacy to the British church.

From the moment I became FIEC National Director, I and my team worked closely with Mike, and the other theological colleges, to ensure that the needs of Independent students were both understood and addressed. Mike was deeply sympathetic to the needs of FIEC, no doubt helped by the fact that he and his family were members of an FIEC church in Enfield, which gave him a unique ability to both understand conservative evangelical Anglicanism and Independency. He was always prepared to listen to our concerns, and to accept our well-intentioned criticism

and suggestions. He was patient with some of our wilder ideas and gracious in the face of our misunderstandings or misreadings.

Mike and I didn't always agree, but I appreciated his direct honesty and knew that he was always motivated by a desire to serve the gospel and to help us to achieve our objectives in the best possible way. Mike was also understanding that FIEC could not support any one theological college above others, and was prepared to respond to my advice that each college should seek to provide the best training it possibly could, on the basis of which potential pastors would make their own choices about training options. The result was that an increasing number began to choose Oak Hill, influenced by the location, quality of faculty and the blessings of being part of a wider student body.

Mike's commitment to meeting the needs of FIEC was evident at multiple levels, and leaves a lasting legacy that I very much hope will be continued. It was a surprise to many within FIEC to discover that Oak Hill is not constitutionally an Anglican college, but a private charitable trust established to train men for Protestant ministry, which is licenced to train Anglican ordinands.

This enabled Independent students to feel they were on an equal footing with Anglicans training at the college, which was further aided by the appointment of FIEC pastors to the Oak Hill council. Mike oversaw the appointment of Independent and Presbyterian faculty members, and nurtured and employed some of the most able young Independent theologians.

The appointment of Dan Strange as Vice Principal was an important signal of the place that Independents enjoyed within the college, and the appointment of Graham Beynon as Director of Free Church Ministry ensured that Independent and Presbyterian students were schooled in their history and ecclesiology, and prepared to exercise leadership within their particular church traditions. It was a special delight for FIEC to be able to partner with Oak Hill in the appointment of David Shaw, who serves half-time as a member of the college faculty, and half-time as the FIEC Theological Advisor.

**The life's work of Mike Ovey has been to ensure that we have institutions that are able to provide the theological ballast that will enable the Bible-rooted evangelical recovery to endure, in the face of challenges old and new**

These appointments have ensured that there is a close linkage between the academy and local churches, so that training is always with a view to the reality of gospel ministry. I have been impressed by the strides that Mike and Dan have taken together to develop an integrated curriculum for students, and how they have sought to compensate for some of the historic weaknesses of theological training. The recent appointment of Tim Ward to the faculty will strengthen the quality of the homiletics element of the Oak Hill course, ensuring that students are better equipped to serve as preachers.

The developments at Oak Hill were matched by a renewed commitment of FIEC itself to training the next generation of gospel workers, and of encouraging them to obtain the best possible preparation for their future ministries. Under the leadership of Trevor Archer, FIEC Training Director, the HUB conference has helped over 500 men and women consider the possibility of full-time gospel ministry, and provided a clearer pathway into training. We have been grateful for the support and input from Oak Hill at these conferences.

The FIEC Training Fund has raised more than £1m, much of which has been used to help support students who have chosen to study at Oak Hill. This renewed commitment to training, taken together with the vastly improved provision of theological training at Oak Hill and other colleges, has greatly strengthened FIEC and its churches. They have helped to revolutionise the culture of FIEC, establishing

high-quality training as the norm, and dispelling the negative view of theological colleges that was a natural reaction in the middle of the 20th century.

Full-time residential theological training is inevitably costly, and there are those who consider it to be an unaffordable luxury. It is not essential for everyone, and not possible for some. The increasing provision of high-quality part-time and distance learning options is to be welcomed. However the long-term health of the church will be best served if there are a good number who are able to benefit from the highest quality, full-time residential training, which combines academic rigour with a commitment to local church ministry.

The theological and philosophical challenges we face in a post-Christian culture are ever more complex, and pastors without a deep grounding in God's word, systematic theology and church history will be more vulnerable to false teaching and less able to strengthen and equip their congregations. We need a generation of well-equipped pastor-teacher-theologians. We also need to ensure that we identify and nurture the gifted theologians who will serve the church in the next generation.

The spectacular decline of the church in the 19th and 20th centuries bears witness to the catastrophic consequences of a failure to grapple with theological challenges to the gospel. Warm hearted piety and revivalistic enthusiasm are essential elements of evangelicalism at its best, but unless they are coupled with theological understanding they are no defence against the dangers of liberalism and secularism.

Recent decades have witnessed a slow but steady recovery and growth of firmly Bible-rooted evangelicalism. The life's work of Mike Ovey has been to ensure that we have institutions that are able to provide the theological ballast that will enable this recovery to endure, in the face of challenges old and new. We give thanks to God for him, and all he accomplished, and we resolve to continue his legacy for the sake of the health of the church and the need of the gospel in our nation.

*John Stevens is the National Director of FIEC.*



# THE A AND B SIDES OF MIKE'S LOVE



**Efrem Buckle, South London pastor and former student at Oak Hill, salutes Mike Ovey as 'an intellectual Ninja', and for his commitment to make theological training accessible to diverse communities. But most of all, he remembers him for his love**

Like most people, I was stunned to hear of Mike's sudden calling home to glory. I was minutes away from stepping up to preach when I got the text. The initial shock very quickly gave way to an overwhelming sense of honour and gratitude. The honour of having not only studied under Mike as a student, but also having known him as someone I truly considered a friend. Having never enlisted in active military service, I imagined this is what

*Left: Mike surrounded by Oak Hill students (in the midst of a prank played by a student wearing a chicken costume) during the annual college photograph, October 2012.*

it must feel like to receive news that your illustrious general has laid down his life on the battlefield.

Mike was a rare man, one who was strong, and yet oh so very kind. A man who I would venture to sum up in one word: love.

My interview for a place at Oak Hill was quite a nerve racking experience, as you would expect. I remember my first meeting with Mike so well. When he asked what I had been reading lately, I thought I was on a roll when I answered, 'Escape from Reason, by Francis Schaeffer.'

I saw Mike's eyes light up, but I wasn't well prepared to elaborate on his follow-up question, 'What have you found

interesting about it?' The blood rapidly drained from my head, my eyes glazed like a deer in the headlights, and I sat convinced I had just flopped my place at college. Mike so graciously ignored my interview nerves and pitiful attempts to answer. He went on to gleefully outline the basic premise of the book, which not only reassured me, but also enlightened me in a few short sentences. I was totally put at ease, but more than that, I had my first introduction to the sincerity of Mike's love.

Mike's love was like a classic vinyl record with great music on both sides. On the one hand he clearly loved Jesus. Not in a merely sentimental way, but rather with a hard bodied, razor sharp theological fortitude that was a wonder to behold. 'Wonder' being the operative word.

I actually had a name for Mike that really resonated with us guys from South London, 'Mike the Mind Merkah!' You see, to us Mike was an



intellectual Ninja. So unassuming, lacking the swagger and pomposity of one so eminently well read, and yet he would drop weighty knowledge on us in such a free, jovial, and even casual way, it would take an average of five days for us to comprehend the extent to which he had actually reconfigured our brain synapses.

There were often times I didn't know I had been touched, glossing over some profound truth, not even understanding what Mike had been talking about. But when the light bulb moment came, sometimes weeks later, I was hardly able to stand as I staggered in awe and wonder of the Lord.

Mike was, as us hip-hop heads would say, a beast in the scriptures, and yet a very humble beast at that. I came from a background where theological intellectuals were not only few and far between, but were very often looked down on in favour of those who had so-called spiritual power and prowess. The Lord had rebuked me for that mindset, and Mike made me hungry for understanding. He so beautifully modelled the empowering and liberating strength of sound theology, that has been well thought through.

It was Mike's B side, the other side of his love, his rich love for people, that caused me to really believe that

theological education wasn't an end in itself. Mike made it connect to reality.

A little known fact about Mike is that he very almost added rap concert promoter to his long list of great achievements! Space doesn't permit me to fully explain, except to say this was a tangible example of Mike's love for people: his open-hearted embrace, and his commitment to see theological training made accessible to more diverse communities.

This was the liberating reality of relationship with Mike. We came from different worlds, but it didn't matter. I will always appreciate how his compassion was considerate but wasn't condescending; his care and encouragement was enabling without being paternalistically patronising. He was just as keen to listen, to learn, and to trust, as any of his students; a truly rare and precious brother indeed.

I'm forever grateful to the Lord for Mike Ovey and his impact on my life and ministry.

The living Christ embodied in men,  
Frail frames, empowered bodies, risen with him,  
Jesus revealed through vessels of flesh,  
Legacy of life despite tasting death,  
Grace gripped the grateful,  
Flawed and yet faithful,  
Christ glorified, the Messiah on high.  
Salute!

*Efrem Buckle, former student at Oak Hill, is Pastor at ecclesia, Lewisham, and a trainer at London City Mission.*



# A commitment to biblical training

**David Peterson, who served as Principal of Oak Hill immediately before Mike Ovey, traces Mike's early theological career, and outlines the pattern of study, reflection and prayer at Oak Hill which provided students with biblical training for contemporary ministry**

God blessed Michael Ovey with singular gifts of personality and intellect, which many people came to appreciate, and from which they benefitted. But few people know the way in which God honed and developed those natural endowments over the course of Mike's life. Reflecting briefly on that process, we may begin to see something of his vision for

*Above: David Peterson and Mike Ovey, shortly after Mike's appointment as Principal of Oak Hill in 2007.*

ministry and the way he sought to train others for it. I first met Mike in 1989 when he was struggling with the kind of theological education and training he was receiving at Cambridge. At the same time, he was actively involved with Heather in youth ministry at the Round Church. Here, I was introduced to Mike the passionate minister of the gospel and Mike the thoughtful academic. These two dimensions of his character had already been wonderfully nurtured by his previous church experiences and his legal training. They came together remarkably in the ministry he had at Oak Hill.

Mike did something that seemed so obvious, and yet apparently escaped the notice of many of his contemporaries. He looked carefully at the culture in which he was called to minister, examined what the Bible says about the kind of pastoral leadership God requires in his church, and reflected on the way he saw effective gospel ministry being initiated, sustained, and expanded in other countries. He came to the conclusion that people in Britain were being inadequately prepared for ministry, because the dots were not being joined!

He saw a kind of anti-intellectualism in some evangelical circles, which did not recognize the need for formal theological education, or was content with a minimalist approach. Postgraduate study was regarded as unnecessary, even harmful to the cause. Yet few asked where the next generation of evangelical writers and teachers would come from, or considered how the training of ordination candidates could be improved.

To pursue his vision, Mike saw the need to train himself further. In 1995, he jumped at the opportunity to study for an MTh degree at Moore College in Sydney. As he wrote his dissertation on truth in John's Gospel, he lectured part-time at the college and observed a far more intensive and integrated pattern of theological education than he had seen in the UK. We only overlapped for a short while at Moore College, before I came to be Principal at Oak Hill, but I knew he was someone worth watching for the future development of the college.

Mike became the Kingham Hill Fellow at Oak Hill in 1998, providing him with the support he needed to pursue doctoral study at King's College London, and to teach part-time at Oak Hill. This was a hard road to travel, because he had a young family to care for, he loved giving pastoral care to students and their families, and was invited to speak regularly in churches and at conferences. He was writing papers on contemporary issues and preparing new lectures each week, and yet had to find time for research and writing on the doctrine of the Trinity!

Since Mike and I shared the same vision for the development of a theological college and the training of ministers of the gospel, I feel confident about stating the vision in this way.

If we reflect on what the Bible teaches about pastoral leadership, we discern that it is fundamentally 'testifying to the good news of God's grace' (Acts 20:24). Just as Paul and the other New Testament writers bring every pastoral issue back to the gospel, so church pastors should strive to deepen the way those in their care understand the gospel and its implications.

For Paul, this involved 'preaching the kingdom' (Acts 20:25), and proclaiming 'the whole will of God' (Acts 20:27). Both of these expressions suggest that the gospel was explained within the context of God's kingdom plan, as revealed progressively in the Old Testament. In other words, Paul taught what is called today biblical theology.

However, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, Paul goes on to speak about people arising from their midst to 'distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them' (Acts 20:30). Sadly, this has proved true ever since! As well as teaching the Bible faithfully, pastors can learn from church history how to discern false teaching and help their congregations deal with it appropriately.

Systematic theology is also a valuable aid in this connection, because it reveals the way distorting one doctrine can impact on the understanding and response to other doctrines of the faith. Systematic theology shows

the pastor how to arrange the Bible's teaching topically, consider the relationship between apparently contradictory doctrines such as divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and integrate the whole.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle expands on some of these themes, outlining the need for pastors and teachers 'to equip the saints for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (4:12-13). This suggests that pastors need to be trained to minister the word of God in personal, as well as public ways, and to learn how to involve every member in the process of building up the church in love and truth (4:14-16).

Here we have the framework for an education that equips pastors for a profoundly biblical pattern of ministry. First, there must be a grounding in biblical studies that provides a deep knowledge of the Bible and its implications for contemporary churches and the world in which we live. Ideally, this will involve the teaching of Greek and Hebrew, so that ministers can better understand the meaning of the original texts and use resources such as commentaries with discernment. Biblical theology must be taught in a way that helps people understand 'the whole will of God' and how it is consummated in the person and work of the Lord Jesus (cf. Luke 24:25-27, 44-49 – one of Mike Ovey's favourite texts).

Second, there should be an extensive exposure to church history, systematic theology, and adjunct subjects such as ethics and apologetics. Christian ministers need to think theologically and apply that reflection to their teaching in public and private, their goal-setting, and every aspect of congregational leadership.

Third, there should be training in cultural analysis, the understanding of people and the way they respond to God and the gospel, and in communication and leadership skills. The college can begin this training, but it must be extended and developed on the job, as churches employ student ministers and as graduates move into full-time posts. Indeed, every aspect of ministerial training must continue

beyond the college experience. So patterns of study, reflection, and prayer must be initiated that will motivate and equip graduates to continue to progress in biblical patterns of ministry.

There is one final aspect of the vision that needs to be explained. Residential training is often criticised for being an expensive and unnecessary luxury. Many colleges today only provide part-time options or online courses. From a biblical point of view, what may be lacking in this provision is the pattern of mutual ministry outlined in a passage such as Ephesians 4:11-16.

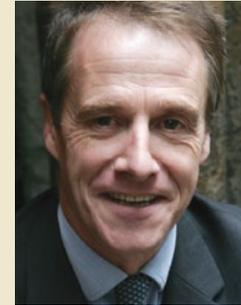
The theological college is an academic institution that must conform to a range of requirements by validating bodies. Daily access to tutors, library, and other students engaged in the same programme is a key factor here. In another sense, however, the college must be like a church, where gifted pastors and teachers minister the word of God to equip the saints for their works of service. Daily interaction with those leaders and with one another in reflecting on the teaching is a means of growing in 'the knowledge of the Son of God' and becoming mature together.

Moving from the church where you have been nurtured to a college community where people think and speak differently about the faith may be challenging, but it is an important preparation for a lifetime of ministry in different contexts. A residential community can be a place to nurture patterns of care for one another that will strengthen individuals and families for the struggles that lie ahead.

Mike Ovey was passionate about residential training, because he saw how it could develop more effectively the sort of ministers who would nurture and grow the churches in God's way.

*David Peterson was Principal of Oak Hill (1996-2007) and is now Senior Research Fellow and Lecturer in New Testament at Moore College, Sydney.*

# FAITHFUL, WARM ENCYCLOPAEDIC



William Taylor, who trained in theology alongside Mike Ovey in the 1980s, reflects on how Mike's convictions were deepened by the experience, and how he and Heather went on to forge a ministry based on warmth, love, and personal involvement

Those of us who shared with Mike the experience of theological education in a liberal college in the 1980s have little difficulty in understanding his passion to provide something better.

I first encountered Mike at a weekend organised by Hugh Palmer for a small group of men considering ordained ministry in the Church of England. Phillip Jensen, visiting with his wife Helen, was the guest speaker. There were around 12 present. Most were already on their way to theological college. Six months later, we found ourselves as first year students in a theological institution that had profoundly lost its way. We grew to know each other very well.

Those responsible for educating Church of England clergy were so

confused that the syllabus for which they were responsible had almost no theological coherence. Absence of a shared trust in the authority and sufficiency of God's word meant that every department and each tutor 'did what was right in his own eyes'. There was no direction, little unity, and the valiant attempt of a few faculty members to discharge their responsibilities faithfully was largely dissipated by the failures of the majority.

All who have been taught by Mike will have heard of the absurd 'liturgical dance' classes. These were simply the tip of the iceberg. Such was the loss of confidence in the word of God that mystical readings of the parables included passing around mustard and

cross seeds whilst 'meditating' silently on the parables of Mark 4 (the seeds weren't even from the same plant as the mustard tree and my recollection is that someone ate them as they made their way round the group!).

No one present will ever forget Mike's response to two middle aged female amateur therapists who insisted that he 'must feel angry' following a ministry placement in a local psychiatric hospital. The college authorities turned a blind eye to flagrant sexual misconduct by students within the 'federation' of theological colleges of which we were supposed to be a part.

While some of us responded by laughing at the institution – it certainly deserved it – Mike found himself deeply and appropriately troubled, distressed and on occasion, rightly angry. It was the lack of integrity, the absence of spiritual courage, the moral compromise, and failure by those in leadership to prepare men and women

for effective Christian ministry that caused such offence. I think he saw it almost as a form of abuse, certainly an abuse of trust.

For those from an evangelical background, 'progress' in the annual review with college tutors was measured not by steps forward in godliness and the necessary gifts of a gospel minister, but by whether or not there were signs of the individual 'broadening' from their evangelical convictions and becoming more compliant with a compromised institution. Mike was deepened in his convictions, not diluted.

At one point, Mike was told by his academic tutor in the Cambridge Theology Faculty that although he had 'the brain and ability of a first class candidate, he would only ever achieve an upper second class degree while continuing to argue his evangelical views'. He continued to hold his biblical position. Mike and a small band were prepared to distance themselves from fellowship with those living in open defiance of biblical sexual ethics. Rather than discipline those living in sin, the college authorities responded with hostile opposition to Mike and his men. Mike stood firm.

Throughout this period Mike not only immersed himself in his studies, but also in gospel ministry. He had the wisdom to select papers in the Cambridge Tripos that would prove

of future use in ministry: biblical languages, exegesis (John's Gospel and Ephesians), early church history, and philosophy. By careful selection of courses that might prove useful, Mike was equipping himself for his future work.

Simultaneously, he and Heather devoted themselves to the members of the Round Church youth group, and their home became the regular meeting place for teenagers. The love and respect of those young people for Mike and Heather was to be replicated throughout their ministry among the numerous individuals with whom they spent time showing patient care, personal interest and love for each.

The mixture of academic rigour, faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, integrity, and a profound concern for the kind of ministry that entrusts gospel truth to reliable people 'who will be able to teach others also', became the hallmark of all of his and Heather's life together.

Many have commented both on Mike's near encyclopaedic knowledge combined with relational warmth and sense of fun. Who else could administer the *coup de grace* in a game of Trivial Pursuit (while all competitors languished on one correct answer) with an answer to the question: 'Who scored 60 home runs for the New York Yankees in 1927'? Who else, over breakfasts each day in Nairobi, could quote effortlessly from Plato's

*Symposium*, cite Juvenal's *Satires*, and move without pause into a rendition of one or other Monty Python sketch?

Who else could move from intense theological debate and the gracious correction of a diocesan bishop, to minutes later in the pub, roaring with laughter with a long standing friend as they reminisced over the old days?

Of the dozens of men and women attending Oak Hill from St Helen's in the last decade, not one has failed to be touched by Mike and Heather's warmth, love, personal involvement in their lives and, above all, intense desire to see them properly prepared for a lifetime of gospel service. All have been challenged to take their relationship with the Lord Jesus and their study of his Word with deepest seriousness.

Mike learned from bitter experience the damage that can be done by an inadequate training for the most noble of all tasks. He raised the level of academic theology and training for biblical ministry in the Church of England and beyond. He equipped men and women to stand firm in the faith not only by his own example, but also by his careful analysis of error and by faithfully standing for biblical truth.

Congregations and individuals across the nation and much further afield will thank the Lord for his gift of Mike and Heather to his church – as do I.

*William Taylor is the Rector of St Helen's Bishopsgate.*

# A BRILLIANT LEGAL MIND



Protecting the personhood of the unborn child, preserving the Christian character of marriage, and opposing the passage of religious hatred legislation were just three of the parliamentary issues to which Mike Ovey contributed, says Andrea Williams

Mike Ovey's death is hard. It is not welcome. But as Mike would have reminded us, 'We do not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.'

I have struggled with Mike's death, because he was one of the great and faithful leaders of our times. I am not sure I have ever met anyone with such intellectual, legal and theological brilliance. He stood out in this way when I first met him in my twenties at St Helen's Bishopsgate. At the time we were both aspiring lawyers. We have known one another ever since, and although we did not see each other often, Mike was someone I would call a few times every year and ask for

critical help. Without fail, he would take my call, respond, and sometimes work through the night to help me with legal drafting, responding to a parliamentary consultation or running a campaign.

Mike was always kind and patient with me. He was a comfort to me. I felt that he understood me and was on my side. That was so precious, because leadership is all too often the loneliest of places. He always knew how to think about and solve the problem. As tributes have poured in to him, I realise that this humanity was expressed by him universally.

Mike's death is not the end of the story, because the story of his work continues. God will bring beauty from ashes. We already see this in the men and women in ministry who understand the cost of Christian

discipleship in 21st century Britain and beyond. They know the cost of ministry in our times, and they know how to minister to men and women living their lives in an age of open rebellion to God. Many of the new and rising generation of evangelical ministers in our country, with vision and entrepreneurial spirit, and with vibrant and growing ministries, were students of Mike and his team. Like the men of Issachar in the Old Testament, this rising generation understands the times and speaks the gospel for the whole of life.

Mike's influence on our work at Christian Concern and the Christian Legal Centre was profound. I brought him in, at critical moments, to look over legal drafting on amendments to bills and responses to consultations; to help to brief members of parliament; to assist in lobbying them for kingdom purposes. His brilliance was a core

component of the preservation of our freedom to preach the gospel during the passage of the religious hatred legislation through parliament in 2006. He helped draft amendments to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, which sought to protect and promote personhood for the unborn child. He helped draft policy for the campaign of Nadine Dorries MP, seeking to give every woman access to counselling when confronted with an unintended pregnancy. He also worked hard on amendments, concepts and speeches to promote biblical marriage when David Cameron's government pushed through legislation to 'extend marriage' to same sex couples.

Today he would be at the heart of our conversations on 'British values' and the government's attempt to define 'extremism'. Whether he was drafting, briefing, lobbying, leading, or cajoling, this most brilliant of legal minds, shaped by stunning theology, captured all ideas for Christ under God's lordship and sovereignty.

Mike was a leader who had a holy discontentment with the status quo. His heart was to change, to move, to reach out, to grow, and to take the next generation of gospel preachers, local church leaders, and training institutions to new dimensions of ministry for our times. Mike lived the words of Paul: 'Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies

behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3:13-14).

Mike was wonderfully and appropriately intense, full of the zeal of the Lord for the things of him. But he also had a joie de vivre. I have very fond memories of spending several weeks with him and Tony Jones lobbying in parliament; there was a serious job to do, but we were also able to rest and laugh with one another.

Mike was energetic. He delivered. I never heard him boast or condescend when his great intellect was evident to everyone else in the room.

He was a deep thinker and knew that careful and rigorous thought was not contrary to a reliance on prayer and divine revelation. He instilled this in his students. Mike understood the times but held fast to the gospel. He was critical in the best sense of the word; not gullible or faddish or trendy, but speaking forcefully into the times. He was not afraid to speak the truth or expose those within the church who peddle a false gospel.

Mike had a vision for the future of the church in our nation. He could see the power of God overshadowing the problems of the future in the midst of seemingly overwhelming opposition. And he made a plan to counter it. Every new church, every agency, every new ministry, every institution, every

endeavour, is the result of someone having a vision and setting it out. Many churches, ministries and endeavours have been started, sustained and encouraged because of Mike.

Of course, I and many of his legal generation wanted him to be a lawyer. But he had a vision to train and raise up the next generation; to build the local church. In his teaching, he championed all we stand for at Christian Concern; that the gospel is public because Jesus is Lord of all creation. He sacrificed much for this and was in it for the long haul. He has not lived to see the fruits of his labour, but I believe that we will and that our children will be told of him. The Lord knows and sees, and as Mike would tell us, the Lord is in control.

I know that Mike's legacy will continue at Oak Hill, that students will grow in their grasp of public theology, and that the church will rise to the challenge of applying the gospel to every area of private and public life. It is our joy at Christian Concern to have the ongoing support of Dan Strange, built through our relationship with Mike. Thank you, Mike, for your great example. I, among the many, am greatly affected by your life, greatly thankful to our God, and greatly saddened by your passing.

*Andrea Williams is Chief Executive of Christian Concern and a member of the Church of England's General Synod.*

# The best possible gift



**Dan Strange, who served as Academic Vice Principal of Oak Hill under Mike's Ovey's leadership, and who worked with him to create the college's distinctive approach to theological education, explains their joint vision for training the next generation of gospel ministers**

As a lover of all things classical, and because he was infamous for his oblique introductions to lectures (and much human conversation for that matter), our late Principal would be grinning at my somewhat dramatic illustration taken from Homer's *Odyssey*.

Like Ulysses, our hero Mike Ovey steered the good ship Oak Hill in a swashbuckling but expert way between twin perils: Charybdis the whirlpool, and Scylla the monster. I had the great privilege of being his first-mate on the adventure.

Our whirlpool was the decidedly 'mixed' formal theological education we had both received and that we wouldn't wish on anyone else. Through bitter experience we recognised that cut from the moorings of biblical authority and the apostolic Jesus revealed therein, academic theological studies is a vortex of vain human imaginings: not healthy, but gangrenous; not integrated within itself, but angrily dissonant; not for the church, but for itself; too much Athens

and not enough Jerusalem. We recognised that the emperor has no clothes and needed to be called out.

Our monster was an ecclesiastical anti-intellectualism and amateurism towards theological training. Although in part a reaction to the perils of the whirlpool, it was knee-jerk, pragmatic and worryingly short-termist. The results could be shallow and simplistic, unwilling to engage with the world and its complexities, cut off and so cut out of conversation. It was a ghettoized Jerusalem with little interest in anything Athenian, which resulted in a poverty of seeing the implications and applications of biblical truth. Lots of machete, little scalpel. Mike and I recognised that we didn't want to take part in the race to the bottom.

Of course, constantly defining yourself against what you are *not* is never the most edifying pursuit. Fortunately, the course Mike and I were charting was founded on a distinctive and exciting biblical vision *for* theological education at Oak Hill. We were determined not to get bitter, but to get better. Moreover, we were determined to train students to be better than ourselves.

It is a mystery of sovereign providence that the Lord would call Mike home with the journey only just gathering momentum. But I am so thankful to the Lord that the narrative we had been working on in the months before

*Right: Mike Ovey in a staff meeting at Oak Hill in 2014.*



Mike's death was completed and had gained enthusiastic acceptance within the college. Let me give you a taster, hoping that you are going to want more.

Our mission centres around the pattern for gospel ministry set out in Ephesians 4:11-13. In those verses, the ascended Christ gives gifts to his church. These gifts are people: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Our pattern is a virtuous circle of servanthood between Oak Hill, its students and our churches.

Oak Hill's task is to serve students by enabling them to become the best possible gifts of Christ to his church. Our training is highly adaptable and integrated to meet the challenges of rapidly changing times. To achieve this we recruit faculty who can model servant leadership not only in what they teach, but also in the way they teach.

We live and learn in community, offering students essential time to listen, debate, reflect, pray, and grow in love for Christ in the fellowship of others. This is not a time out of ministry. Rather it is a redirection of ministry for a time, and for long-term gain. That gain includes lifelong skills, lifelong habits, lifelong relationships, and lifelong learning. Students are taught to see themselves as servants of, rather than masters over, the church and the word of God. We are stewards of the mysteries of God. We do not possess knowledge of God, it possesses us. Our aim is not merely for students to receive the information they need for ministry, but the transformation which comes from reflecting with others on being Christ's gift to God's people. Students learn to love Jesus more deeply so they can explain him more simply.

We serve Anglican and Independent churches by training together, and recognising our distinctive polities. We display a gospel unity and also encourage firm convictions on secondary matters. We want to encourage churches to be ambitious for the gospel. We want to see more people coming to believe the gospel, and more believers living the gospel more deeply. This growth can happen when, in the goodness of God, congregations are taught and mobilised for mission by more leaders who are better trained. We look

to the churches to support and expand the work of the gospel in genuine partnership. We must work in partnership to produce more and more, better and better gifts to the church.

An inspiring vision? I hope so. Certainly it's an aspirational vision and it's one that's never been more urgent. Men and women are still dying in their sins. The world is as fractured and fragmented as ever it was, and even more so. We have an incredible message of hope for a hopeless world. For that we need more training, not less.

We now have to navigate without Mike at the helm. But, resolved and galvanised, we know where we are going, and hope you are going to follow. As we plough forwards on the course Mike set, I end with the challenge he always gave to prospective students:

I suspect many of us feel that the kind of theological training we're going to outline here is very costly. Very costly financially, very costly relationally as you leave other ministries, and perhaps geographically distant from friends.

Fair comment. Absolutely. It is costly. But, I must tell you it is too costly not to. Not having word ministers who are Christ's best possible gift means what? It means God's people are more unsafe from false teaching, un-serving of each other and the world, and un-united under Christ's headship but under some substitute. My fear is that what I have seen in the UK over my Christian life are churches which are more and more unsafe, un-serving and un-united.

Please do not short-change the people you will minister to by not training properly to be Christ's best gift. Costly? Too costly not to.

*Dr Dan Strange is Acting Principal of Oak Hill College.*



### Oak Hill College

Oak Hill College is a theological college in North London, training men and women for ministry in the Church of England and other spheres of Christian service. Its validated programmes have been developed, and are delivered and assessed by the college. They are awarded and quality assured by Middlesex University.

### The Kingham Hill Trust

The Kingham Hill Trust is the registered charity that owns Oak Hill College. It has contributed spiritually, financially and practically to its development. The Trust has delegated responsibility for Oak Hill to the College Council and the Principal.

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*Left: Mike Ovey in his study at Oak Hill in 1999.*

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**'We want you to be better than us. We want you to be more faithful than us. We want you, spiritually speaking, to tower above us, so that the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ stands high in this land and men and women may know the blessings of eternal life. That is our dream for you.'**

Mike Ovey, preaching to ordinands at their ordination, 2016