

3:36am What keeps you awake at night?

Given that I have so far cycled a total of 184 miles from Land's End, you may think that it is my legs which are keeping me awake, not least because I started this fundraising task having not been able to do much training over the past five months due to a pulled muscle and then Covid.

What is keeping me up today, at this ridiculously early time, is the thought of how the metres of climbing are before me in order to reach our destination, having already climbed 4100m.

Despite the challenges of all the above, none of these has caused me to get up and write these words this morning. What is keeping me awake is the thought that this is just Lee Rayfield on another of his cycling adventures, covering it with the costs of raising some funds for a good cause.

It is certainly true that cycling is something which I love doing and gives me energy. But this is not my motivation for what I been planning for months and in which I am now engaged.

As some of you who have read in the relevant blog I wrote at the beginning of this challenge (<https://bishopswindon.wixsite.com/my-site/blog>), what is motivating me is the question the BBC Reporter Karen Gardner asked me back in 2018, when the Diocese of Bristol purchased the Pattern Store building. I had shared with Karen the hopes that we prayed the Pattern Church might bring for the social transformation of the town. Karen asked me "Yes, but what is Swindon going to do for you, Lee?" She asked me the question several times before I said to her that I really didn't understand the question. Karen then told me a particular story which I will share in the blog at a later stage. That story changed me. What Swindon has done for me, is open my heart for those who find themselves "at the bottom of the pile"; young people, for example, who suddenly realise that the aspirations that others have are not going to be for them.

When the title "From the Bottom to the Top" came to me for this fundraising ride, I felt the touch of God's hand. Just as Karen enabled me to see people and situations which I had not properly grasped in my mind, let alone in my heart .

My hope is that this ride, and all that comes from it, will make a significant difference to many people who often find themselves unnoticed or forgotten yet whose stories and experiences should cause us to have enormous respect.

Those who live and work closely with some of the most disadvantaged in our communities – including church ministers – not only recognise the challenges they face daily, but the qualities that enable them to keep going when most of us would simply give up. "From the Bottom to the Top" is not simply about raising funds for those who will really benefit from them; it is about seeing the remarkable in people from whom we have much to learn.

Back in 2014, when I had not long recovered from Hodgkin Lymphoma, I rode from John O'Groats to Land's End in order to raise funds for our brothers and sisters in Uganda, with whom we have been linked for over 50 years. I was staggered by the sum that was raised: £16,000. In fact the last £1000 of that money will be used to support a significant trip I will be making later this year to Uganda. That huge sum, so generously provided by people across and beyond the Diocese of Bristol, has had a deep impact on many Church Leaders in the Church of Uganda, and through them an impact on their communities, and I am still hugely grateful for the generosity which people showed in 2014. Back then, I had not named a potential target but simply waited for what might be the response.

In this respect, perhaps setting such a high bar as £16,000 for "From the Bottom to the Top" may have been a mistake. Additional to this is that raising funds which can transform the lives of some of the most disadvantaged in Swindon through gifts at Christmas may simply press the right buttons for you. You may be wondering what might those gifts be, for example. In a research we have done leading up to this point, one of the things which would really make a difference to many people is a Bus Pass. This can make an enormous difference for those who do not qualify for one already, and do not have any kind of transport. This can certainly make a significant difference to what people are able to do, and a bus pass can be a source of going somewhere different, not just about making necessary journeys.

Bus passes are certainly going to be one source of blessing for many people, but we do want to keep horizons open for other means of support which people will find hugely valuable. We will be exploring this with various bodies who know the needs, including those in the Borough Council, charities, and church leaders who know their patch and the needs well.

Of course, if you live in Chippenham, or Malmesbury, or Kingswood, or another part of the diocese a long way from Swindon, "From the Bottom to the Top" may simply not feel like something to investigate and support. After all, there are plenty of other challenges which we come across, both locally and nationally, so why support something happening at the far end of the Diocese?

That is why the question "What can Swindon do for you?" is such a relevant one. It is that question which the Holy Spirit brought to me, might also impact you in a way which you might never have thought about.

As the Diocese of Bristol, and indeed as part of the Church of God and people of the Kingdom Christ came to declare and usher in, we are partners working in a Vineyard which stretches far beyond our immediate borders. I have been wondering whether responding to "From the Bottom to the Top" might reinforce the ways in which we understand ourselves as part of a Diocesan Family. My sense is that there are many factors which have been helping that to be more of our identity over the past few years, and although there is still a good deal of room to increase this sense, we are really making progress.

I wonder whether, responding from across the Diocese of Bristol to a need in Swindon might be a fresh statement of our identity as family, and also change the ways in which we respond to other needs in different parts of the Diocese. For example, there might be a particular venture in, for example, Yate, towards which others across the diocese will want to contribute.

£16,000 is a substantial sum. Nevertheless, if people across the diocese decided to give the cost of a cup of coffee or a pint of beer to help the most disadvantaged in Swindon, the size of the challenge would diminish considerably.

It is now 4:35 in the morning, and I need to be finishing.

Blogs are meant to be read in about two minutes, and this is at least 10 minutes' worth. In the light of this I will be passing it on to Chris Dobson to work out how best to offer this to those who have been following the journey so far. It may be that you have been looking at the blog or perhaps following "From the Bottom to the Top" via the Diocesan Facebook page.

Once again, here are the critical links for

the JustGiving donations: <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/from-the-bottom-to-the-top>

the WiX blog: <https://bishopswindon.wixsite.com/my-site/blog>

Please do commend this venture to your worshipping communities.

+Lee Rayfield
Bishop of Swindon