



### About the Author

One of 10 children in his family, J. Michael Povey was born and raised in Bristol, England. After his training for ordination at St. John's College in Nottingham, he was ordained Deacon at Bristol Cathedral in June of 1976 and Priest at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, that December. He served four congregations there. Father Povey is now retired and lives in Sarasota, Florida. He and his dog, Zion, have an active ministry of sharing joy with women and men who live in retirement homes, and who are coping with memory loss or dementia.

### About *Vintage Voice*

*Vintage Voice* is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Stories are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the *Vintage Voice*! Send your submissions to [vintagevoice@cpg.org](mailto:vintagevoice@cpg.org).

# VINTAGE VOICE



## Bruised but Not Broken

by the Reverend J. Michael Povey

Now that I am retired, I find myself reflecting on the toll it can take to be a public witness to fundamentalist faith—as I was in my youth—and on the painful secrets we may keep.

One afternoon in Arlington Park in Sarasota, Florida, this got me thinking about the Jehovah's Witnesses who sit quietly in public places, ready to have conversations with passersby. My dog and faithful companion, Zion, and I had come across two Witnesses, both teenaged lads, on a bench. Despite the heat, they were attired nattily in long-sleeved shirts with ties, dress pants, and dress shoes. I paused and greeted them. When I asked which Kingdom Hall they attended, they extended a warm invitation to me to visit it some time.

I explained that as a retired Christian pastor, I would be unlikely to accept that invitation. "But," I added, "I am deeply depressed about the vicious persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, and am very disturbed that I don't know of even one mainline church that has protested this." That led to a tender conversation.

At the other side of the pond, Zion and I met two more teen Witnesses, who were packing up for the day, probably to avoid the threatened rain. We also had a wee chat. After they moved on, I noticed that one of them had left his Bible Bag on the bench. I called out to them and said that I would bring it to them in the parking lot.

These were all fine young men, indeed, but much too young to be at this business. All they could do was to parrot what their elders have taught, probably fully convinced of their truth (for now), and masking or burying their doubts and questions. They have a price to pay. Jehovah's Witness children do not say the Pledge of Allegiance and they have no social life apart from that at their Kingdom Halls. So they are probably social misfits at school. How do I know this? Because I was once where they are.

### An Awakening

No, I was not a Witness. I was a "keen young Christian" (as they say in evangelical parlance) in the Plymouth Brethren, a very fundamentalist group: going to the Brethren's outdoor preaching sessions in local parks,

housing estates, or the villages near my native Bristol, England—and feeling very embarrassed about the whole endeavor. There I was at the age of 14 or 15, attending adult prayer meetings and praying out with all the high-sounding phrases that I could echo from the senior saints.

I lurked at the edge of the preaching circle and handed out those ghastly gospel tracts, an activity from which I was banned for a while because I had not yet been re-baptized. I was the first of my group to be re-baptized. That's what keen, young, born again Christians do.

People told me that I “prayed like an old man.” One of the youth leaders took me aside and said that a young person like me should stop imitating the elders. Point well made, of course, but I took it as an affront to my desire to be known as a teen super Plymouth brother!

With three of my pals, I formed an *a cappella* singing group, which we rather grandly called The Bristol Gospel Quartette. For about four years we sang and preached all over the south of England.

Yes, indeed, preaching from the age of 16. But this was not good! Much too young. Much too self-assured. Much too precocious, with a master's degree in people pleasing. And a secret.

Around the age of 19, I worked for a while with an English evangelist who fancied himself “Britain's Billy Graham.” He and his wife had a home in Eastbourne, a tony middle-class English town, and she flaunted a mink stole. After I stayed with them one night, we took the train from Eastbourne to London the next morning, traveling in the first class Pullman dining car and enjoying an expensive breakfast. Yet, this man and his wife described themselves as poor! Their ostentatious lifestyle made me think that he might be in the evangelism business for the money. Even as I wondered about this, I worried about my secret, a secret that called my whole evangelical faith into question.

I then worked with another itinerant evangelist, who traveled from town to town in a mobile home converted from an old parcel delivery van. We stayed with farming people who lived near Tewkesbury and Gloucestershire, and then with a gamekeeper and his family on an estate in Yorkshire. We did no evangelism.

This second evangelist had been influenced by what was called the Charismatic Movement—speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, etc. He took me aside in Yorkshire (by now I was 20) and told me that I was demon-possessed and needed an exorcism. He never named the demons, but I knew what he meant. He had discerned that I was gay.

Whatever I was and whoever I was, I knew that my “demons” were not demons, and that any exorcism would be a denial of who I was.

Upon my refusal, he gave me train fare and I high-tailed it back to Bristol, bruised badly but not entirely broken. Still, there was not a soul to whom I could bare my soul.

### **Grace Abounds!**

In due course I found my way out of the Plymouth Brethren and into tentative wholeness in the Church of England. Eventually, I entered the seminary at age 28 and was ordained four years later.

Grace abounded for me. Finally, my secret was no longer a deadly sin. When I met the four young, pleasant Jehovah's Witnesses in the park that day, my heart went out to them. They reminded me so much of myself, seeking a wholeness that is often hard to find in fundamentalist groups. I pray not about their theology, but for their souls, so that they may grow into the wholeness of life that has been God's gift to me.



19 East 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
[www.cpg.org](http://www.cpg.org)