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Interviewer: Eoin Dunne, King's College London

Interviewee: Father David Allen, vicar of St Clements church

Venue: St Clements Vicarage King Square, EC1

Purpose: Part of the One History, EC1 in the making oral histories

E: If you don't mind me asking where and when were you born?

D: I was born in Wisbech Cambridgeshire 21st June 1970.

E: If you could just tell me a bit about your childhood and your youth?

D: I grew in rural Lincolnshire in the middle of nowhere and I went to University first at Durham to read Geology and then after a year out working at St Albans Cathedral I went to study theology at Ripon College Cuddesdon at Oxford having been called to the priesthood in the Church of England, so I had a curacy in Grantham in Lincolnshire. After 3 and a half years I came to London almost exactly 10 years ago. I spent my first 3 ½ years in West Hampstead as a Senior Curate and then I came here about 6 ½ years ago as the Vicar of St Clements.

E: Why did you choose to go to the church from your geology degree?

D: I had always been from the age of 11 or 12 a member of my local church, I had been an altar servant, altar boy and I decided, my call was never a very dramatic one, but I felt that that was what God was calling me to do and frankly if I didn't do it no one else was going to do it so I decided that was what God wanted me to do. But first of all I was advised to go and do something completely different so I did Geology which I have always loved and after that I spent a year out deciding whether I ought to be ordained or want to be ordained and working for St Albans Cathedral for then the sub-dean Colin Slee, now the Dean of Southwark and it was during that year that I went to what they call a selection conference which is where they decide whether you are the right kind of material to be a priest in the Church of England. After that I went away to College so it was a long process really I decided I wanted to be a priest when I was about 15 or 16 and I was ordained Deacon about 10 years later.

E: You say you started your first position outside London?

D: Yes, in Grantham in Lincolnshire for a teen Parish which is the Parish which covered the whole town of Grantham and my first boss there was a man called Bob Reece who is now a Canon of Westminster and my second boss is still the Rector of Grantham a lovely man called Chris Andrews, so I had a very good 3 ½ years there. When that was over I decided that I wanted to come to London partly because so many of my friends with whom I had been at College were in London and as I had no family ties in Grantham, then I should try something completely different. Which is what West Hampstead certainly was.

E: In you came to West Hampstead, how did that come about?

D: I happened to know the vicar of the two Parishes I worked in St James's West Hampstead and St Mary's Kilburn he had been Chaplain to the Bishop of Oxford when I was at College and I knew him a little bit through that and he was looking for someone to be his Senior Assistant and look after one of the two churches, St James's and we had a good conversation and I was interviewed and I got the job.

E: So from there you then came straight to this area?

D: Yes after about 3 years I decided that it was time to move on which is right for what they call Second or Senior Curacy, it was time for me to be an Incumbent I was about to be 32. I asked someone at a Clergy meeting were there any Parishes that were becoming available. The guy who was a friend of the last Vicar here said "oh well there is St Clements King Square," which I had never heard of but I knew was in this area. I was at another dinner and one of the other people present was Paul Baggott who is the Vicar of the Holy Redeemer the Church in Exmouth Market, so I said Paul "do you know anything about St Clements King Square?" and his eye lit up and he said "would you be interested?" "well, yes I would," "ahh," he said "leave it to me". I then got a call from the area Dean which is the senior Clergyman in the borough and he talked to me about it and we decided that he would talk to the Bishop who looks after the appointment of Clergy I went to see the Dean of St Pauls because the Parish is under the Patronage of St Paul's Cathedral which means that they have a hand in the appointment process too and having also met the Parish representatives one of whom was actually a man called David Hyams who I think you've met. A lot of what I say about the History of the area comes through David's vast knowledge of the history of EC1. I met with him and a man called Nigel Fletcher and I was duly appointed. I came here and was formally inducted as Vicar of St Clements on the 8th September 2002.

E: Did you know much about this?

D: Nothing, nothing at all to be honest. When I was in the process of being appointed I actually came to find the Church and I was told it was a nice Church but it was a 'difficult' area as we say politely so I walked up from Barbican Station and I walked up Goswell Road and I turned the corner as you do and I looked across the park and I saw the Church and I burst out laughing, because there is this little early 19th Century Church surrounded by these enormous tower blocks it looks quite incongruous really when you see it for the first time. So I walked up and I could see that my predecessor was a good man but things had been left, a little bit neglected, let's say. It looked like there was lots of good things to be done, so I was happy to apply.

E: So as it had been neglected a little bit, how did you find starting out? Was it hard?

D: It was very hard, because I didn't really know anybody, my predecessor hadn't really known anybody. The congregation was very small, less than 20 people on an average Sunday in fact during Lent leaving and me arriving the Congregation had gone down to about a dozen so those first few Sundays it was very hard work, because there were very few people to relate too and although I am very assiduously

went around and visited as many people as I could that still left me with an awful lot of spare time. Fortunately I introduced myself to the St Luke's Centre which has been a very productive and fruitful relationship and tried to get to know the area by wandering around, getting to know some of the local shop keepers and again there has been some very fruitful relationships. To start with I wasn't quite sure what to do the Church roof leaked the Church hall had tenants, a commercial day nursery who were in arrears to the tune of a 5 figure sum, so it was an uphill struggle, frankly. With a small Congregation and no income it meant that it was quite tough. The diocese was very understanding but they can't expect to run a parish if they are not receiving any money with which to pay a priest and that is the problem that we have faced through my time here although the congregation is now a lot larger and we usually get around 40 or so on a Sunday and we had a very good turn out over Easter. Most of my congregation are people who are either retired or are working single parents or on benefits and it's not a wealthy congregation and we have always needed to find money elsewhere, we now let the hall to a florist company who are paying us commercial rent but that's been after a period of two years where we have had a great deal of uncertainty the roof is now repaired and that project has cost us around £130,000 which we have had to raise a quarter to a third ourselves and that's taken a lot of time.

E: You say it's been hard to get people and to build the congregation up do you think that's partly because of the area?

D: It's partly because of the area yes. A lot of people, this area has, unlike a lot of the East End an awful lot of social stability relatively speaking partly because of, I perceive, the policies of the Old London Borough Finsbury and when the slum clearance came both before and after the war particularly after the bombing but also because the housing was in such poor condition by the time it reached the 1950s when they replaced huge areas with new housing, they simply decanted people out to the edge of London while they rebuilt the area while they built the area and then decanted them all back in again, so there is still quite a large number of people or have been a very large number of people who have very long memories and very deep roots in this area it also means this area has until quite recently been very white for the East End because its been so stable, socially stable now that group which came back to this area as young families, are well, the children have grown up and they have moved out and generally that means they have moved away and often out to deepest Essex and their parents have began either to move to be with them or to die and an awful lot of the funerals I take and I take probably about one every ten days, most of those are local people who have lived in this area a long time not necessarily in this exact part of EC1 but certainly in this part of Central London so that kind of social stability is beginning to break down and it's also happening of course because of the increasing number of new builds both rented and for sale which is happening around the edges of my parish. The Parish itself is a triangle; Goswell Road, Old Street and City Road, the top of EC1 as it were. The rebuilds particularly along City Road but also along parts of Old Street, Iron Monger Row and Goswell Road as well and some of the streets between Goswell Road and Central Street, have meant that the socio economic background of the area has changed very, very markedly in a way that's not really as visible as it might be, because a lot of these new builds people don't involve in the local community they work in the City

they go away for weekends, they don't socialise in the area. I'm sure other people have told you this but in the last census over 20 per cent of the area described themselves as middle or upper management in an area which is traditionally seen to be very poor and is still in Church terms is what they call an Urban Priority area and of course has attracted money for a single regeneration project in EC1 New Deal. So the social inequalities are now enormous in a way they weren't, the way that it was more monochrome 20 years ago. I think in 1981 there were something like in the whole Bunhill ward there were 31 owner occupiers and now of course it's in the 100s and 100s plus of course private rented accommodation. Right to Buy has changed things enormously as well, people have brought their Council flats and then used the capital to move out and the people that move in are very different. So the area has changed extremely rapidly in the last 20 years.

E: So you have been here 6 years have you noticed that change in the 6 years and how does that affect your work?

D: I call it the coffee shop count, when I arrived there were 3 coffee shops in the parish there are now 6 including an organic coffee shop though that has just closed a victim of the recession no doubt. But the number of coffee shops in the parish have doubled basically and I think that's always an informal but important indicator of a certain kind of social class, partly it's the influence of the university as well, because the number of students at the university has continued to increase although most of them live off site or at home the number of students coming into this area for their classes has continued to increase and that's going to affect it too.

E: Because you work here you live in this area, how have you found living in this area, because you came here from West Hampstead? It's quite a different area, very different. How do you find this area to live in?

D: I generally, more than most people, find I can easily live just about anywhere. I like this area very much, I like the fact that it's very central, I like the fact that there is a sense of local Community here in one strata at least in the community which I relate to it reminds me of the village I grew up in. So people will stop me and ask whether I am feeling better from my cold and things like that because they have heard. So I've found people generally very welcoming also I like being in central London it's easier to get to the city in the west end although I don't enjoy the heady social world as I might, at least I know it's there on my doorstep or at the other end of the 55 bus route. I have always felt, I have never felt particularly unsafe in this area so I've never worried about crime. I have always found people to be friendly enough, not necessary effusive but not unfriendly.

E: You said that you kind of feel a sense of community I guess that comes from your work; there are people that you see every week?

D: I am very lucky because I came into this area in a unique position because I already have a role unlike everybody who lives here. A lot of professionals who work for local people live in other parts of London or outside London. I'm only one who lives actually in the area, I'm one of the only who people can ring

the bell at midnight or phone at midnight and occasionally they do which has good and bad parts to it but it gives me I think a unique insight into how this area works but also the advantage has been all the way along that I came in with a very specific role that people can recognise whether they see that as positive or negative they know who I am.

E: As the population changes do you think the community feeling changes in the area?

D: It has a little and it will continue to do so as that older generation of people who have lived here a long time disappear for one reason or another that is going to change and I think that is going to accelerate, certainly after the recession is over, as people come and want to live near their work places in the city and people in the area who are older and want to live somewhere less crowded and less busy. The new builds around the area are going to start increasing the population density again, this area as you no doubt you are aware, has probably about the a quarter of the population density of 100 years ago, maybe only a fifth, but that population density is now changing it went right down through the war years and afterwards when the area was rebuilt and now it coming back again because of the new builds population is increasing.

E: How do you see the Church and your role fitting in with the changing population?

D: Well I think the Church has been hanging on here because it's one of the few things that is left, a lot of the local facilities disappeared and we're left and St Luke's Centre are left and one or two local business are left, that's partly because of the fast declining of the population. Now it's turned a corner then these things are going to be more important and I think St Clements has an opportunity to work again more closely with the community and make itself more relevant to a wider selection of people who may not come into church for services to worship and pray but nevertheless be I think the fashionable term is community anchor. I've had a good relationship with EC1 NDC I sat on the board for a couple of years and I also have a continuing relationship with St Luke's Trust and their centre just across the road in Central Street which I visit on a weekly basis, there is potential for St Clements to do more as the area changes what those things are I don't know they will depend on how the area changes and the other people around me and the ideas that we come up with.

E: When you came to the area it was a needy area?

D: It still is a needy area, I think the danger is that as the area becomes more wealthy the people who are still in great need will become less and less obvious and seem less and less important although there are not too many or fewer of them, I think there will be more, there needs will become less important because there will be more people who are louder and more articulate asserting their own needs and requirements from local services. The people who are coming into the area will fall into two types; as the turnover in Social Housing increases as people die off those places which are leased, those places will be sub let to students or will be brought by young professionals, people who are quite mobile who actually have a store of money and an education, those places which are local authority let, the people who are coming in will generally be very poor, they will be increasing of different ethnic backgrounds

where English is not the first language in the house. We are seeing that in the Church school in St Luke's in Radnor Street, so the gulf between those two groups is going to get bigger.

E: Do you think that will be good for the area? Or how do think that will change the area?

D: Well I don't want to give a judgement about if it's going to be better or worse I think that's what's going to happen and I think it needs to be realised and I think it needs to be dealt with. I think there is always a danger when there is great social inequality in a very small area that you smooth it all out then everyone is quite moderately happy, moderately wealthy. Where actually there is going to be quite a few people who are extremely wealthy and quite a few people who have very little indeed and very little way of accessing the important services they need. I think local politicians and community leaders are going to have to be very vigilant about that.

E: From that, how do you see the services in the area, do you think that the area has good amenities, good services?

D: I think one of the problems is that it doesn't have, certainly in this parish, there is no doctors' practice and it means certainly the elderly on the estate here have to totter over to Pine Street and when Pine Street is closed that introduces enormous amount of uncertainties about the provision of local primary care and I think that's going to be a big issues in the coming years , how we actually provide primary care for allot of vulnerable groups who are here, when the people who are paying the council tax in large amounts are the people who don't need those health services, they are going to be young and they healthy they are going to have access to private medical care.

E: Other things as well, do you think there is a lot for people to do in the area?

D: I come from the country so I think the kids have an awful lot of youth, that sounds terrible doesn't it, I am starting to sound like my Grandmother, they don't know how well off they are. I think there is good youth provision here obviously it needs to be so, because in urban areas we know that young people become so easy disaffected and badly influenced. So it's important that those services are here but I think they are pretty damn good, I mean with Toffee Park with Drum and Golden Lane and after school clubs which I think a lot of the local schools have invested in heavily, I think they are pretty well cared for. I also think that the local community policing not just for young people but for the whole community has been a very good thing, because this is the kind of area where because a lot of people use public transport rather than cars, there are a lot people walking down the street and a lot of people therefore to see police walking down the street and that's been quite important and I think people have appreciated that.

E: Have you noticed the difference in that kind of thing since you came has the area got safer? Is it a nicer area now?

D: It's difficult to separate one's perceptions from reality I mean I know the area a lot better and I know the kids a lot better and I find some of it a little less intimidating then when I arrived. My perception is that there is no serious crime that I find threatening around here, we have had problems over the years with stolen scooters and young people being anti-social but not in the way the Daily Mail enjoins us to resist. So I think that this area is relatively safe and this is always famous last words although the kids trespass to get their footballs which makes me cross and I shout at them for breaking down my fence I have never really been threatened not by anyone who, obviously when you are a priest you tend to attract people who have mental and emotional disorders who can be very aggressive I never really felt threatened by anybody and no one at the house has been pretty safe, no one has tried to break in. Famous last words perhaps we will be burned down tomorrow by arsonist or something but I never have a particular problem with crime, in fact less so then West Hampstead, I find this area to be safer.

E: Working in the church in this area how has it compared to the other areas you have worked in?

D: It's better and worse, in the sense that the local community provide enormous amount of good will and I don't think it's just me being a nice guy, but people are very supportive appreciate my ministry appreciate that I am often around and they will talk to me. This area, because the traditional white working class has been in a church for generations and I mean generations, it means that people are very loath to come over the threshold. So in West Hampstead I didn't have the kind of network or community support that I have here nevertheless people would come in and have the habit of coming in and joining the congregation and becoming part of things, and just coming in Christmas and Easter and things like that, here they just don't. There are my congregation of 40 there will be 4 men over 60 in that church going is women's work and it has been the way I suppose in the working classes for over 100 years it's woman's work, so participation of local people in church life remains extremely low.

E: Have you found the newer people into the area are not interested in being involved?

D: Actually it's the newer people that sometimes we get it's the people that have been here for generations who will want me to bury them or their partner or their mother or whatever and will be very welcoming, but won't have any other contact with the church at all.

E: Why do you think that is?

D: I think the church has consistently failed to speak to them, their parents, their grandparents and their great grandparents and we have our uses and we are nice people but what we do has very little relevance to their lives and there seems to be no easy answer to that, I'm sure if there was an easy answer we would have thought of it by now. It's very interesting that other churches, I mean, we would call ourselves an Anglo-Catholic parish are services are full of light and colour and incense and candles and movement and all those things. Churches have a very different understanding of worship what you might call happy-clappy they can work in the suburbs in the inner cities they have the same problems as we do, they are not interested people see no particular relevance why they should turn up on a Sunday morning. It doesn't mean that people show any ill will or antipathy they are just not interested.

E: Do you think it that they are not religious or they don't think they need to turn up?

D: I think it's a combination I think some people have their own ideas some people feel that the church is part of that grand sort of "you must think this way". They see the church as it is often portrayed as a negative influence; we are judgemental, uncaring, boring, fantasists. We might be nice people and do good things but actually. If people's lives are hard they don't often stop to think about the big questions, that's very sad, and I try in my small way to get people thinking and to use the phrase keep the rumour of God alive in Finsbury, but it's hard work, the people will say my colleagues' we know it's not church going territory. People aren't particularly open to the idea of a spiritual experience and being part of the life of worship and community. We are the only church in the ward, we have our friends at Wesley's Chapel on the lower part of City Road and I get on very well with the Ministers there especially Jennifer with whom I work at Moorefield's Eye Hospital. Bunhill Row, St Joseph's the Roman Catholic Parish is now serving with St Mary's Moorefield's. We have a Pentecostal community from West Africa who worship in St Clements on Sunday afternoon we are all there is in Christian terms. Muslim's use the Vibast centre on a Friday as a Pray hall, but that's the Religious activity in EC1 or this part of EC1.

E: Do you find there is much cross over, do the different groups interact and support each other?

D: We support the Liberty Christian Centre who worship on Sunday afternoon by giving them a fairly low rent and access to as much as we can to support them, we have good relationships with Methodists, though they have a close relationships with St Giles Church in the Barbican. I have my Anglican colleagues' in Middleton Square and Exmouth Market and North of City Road in Prebend Street we get along very well. But day to day I am here on my own as it were.

E: You say you were on the EC1 Board? How do you see the work that they are trying to do in the area?

D: EC1 for the first half was beset by political difficulties with a small 'p', there were a number of members who were working to insist on a particular strongly left wing agenda, and saw the Board as a kind of political unit within the wider borough as it were something that was autonomous of the London Borough of Islington and therefore could be used as a platform for attacking the LBI and particular ways of understanding Government policy so that was a running sore frankly for the first few years and almost got EC1 closed down frankly at one point. Things are much calmer now but there were some very, very sticky moments with the Board and with the Executive and frankly at times it wasn't very much fun. Which is shame because the money that EC1 had and the ideas that came for its use have generally been very good. Infrastructural projects, in terms of improving the local environment, in terms of capital projects in the schools in terms of Estate Security have all resulted in measurable, visible, tangible positive effects and I speak as someone who was Chair of the Education sub group for most of the two years I was on the Board and we invested millions of pounds in local schools and supported major capital projects and small capital projects and made a difference to that the way local children learned and I am very proud of that. It's very interesting that an awful lot of work that people wanted was security work even though the crime rate is relatively low people felt vulnerable. I think

whatever you might say about that the security works on the estates have made people be less vulnerable and that can only be a good thing an improved morale within the local community makes my job a bit harder because I can't turn up unannounced or deliver the parish Christmas card with quite as much ease as I used to, but these works have been important and I hope that before EC1 is finished that they will be able to do more work in the area improving the environment. The areas it has been less successful in my view are the areas which are terribly, terribly hard to do which is things like employment and adult training and we all know how difficult those goals are to tackle. The Government find hard, Government agencies find them hard, there is no surprise that we shouldn't find them hard too, which is not to say the projects have been in vain they have worked very, very hard to make any noticeable change.

E: So you think the work they have done people do notice and it changes people's views of the area?

D: In almost a subliminal way because people don't notice these things, they really don't notice these things, it's like you put a new picture on your wall and you will notice it the first day and maybe the second by the third day it will just be the picture that's always hung there. When you walk up to Old Street station you see an area which when I arrived was pretty grotty, pretty grim, pretty dark, untended flower beds and now that's very different it feels much more open, they spent quite a lot of money but that whole corner of the ward is now very different. I am sure that even now in the recession there are more shops and more economic activity going on along that strip than there ever was before.

E: How do you see the area moving forward, how do you see the regeneration, how do you think it should go, should the housing change or is it suitable?

D: I think what you tend to forget is that the housing built around 1960 like this is, was built to a higher specification than modern housing the rooms are bigger, they are lighter and although the original kitchens and bathrooms aren't up to the standards that we would expect now, actually when they were built they were palaces and we forget that. The area that looked very pretty in 1950 but basically it was a slum it was a very pretty slum people were in those 3 storey houses around King Square a family to two rooms with a kitchen out on the landing and no bathroom and a loo out the back in the yard. When they came to these places in 1961 and 62 they thought they had come to heaven. We forget that very easily, and if you go to people who have particularly leaseholders frankly who have spent time and money updating and upgrading their accommodation they are really lovely. Their external appearance I am afraid is a little bit grim, I would say they were designed by a pupil of Lubbeck who obviously didn't go to lectures very often. But internally they are of a good standard and I think the problem for any planning authority is that when new housing comes along it continues to be of a good standard because if housing is of a bad standard it will be fine for 20 years after that it will become a slum. One of the reasons that this has not become a slum well for a variety of reasons is partly because the housing has actually been of a good standard it needed the work and a lot of money has been spent over the last 10

years and certainly the new windows, new bathrooms, new kitchens were all necessary but will those things in place you still have a good housing stock.

E: I don't know if there is anything you want to talk about?

D: Not really, I think we have covered most bases, I think it's a case the area is going to go on changing and certainly after the recession is over, at a potentially accelerated rate, the projects that you will no doubt be aware of two, the City Forum for the YKK plant on Central Street, will all increase the population of the area, they will change the social and demographic profile and that along with other developments the renewal of Ironmonger Row Baths and sports centre will all continue to change the area.

E: Do you think the area is ready for that change?

D: The area has to be ready I don't think there is a question, that is not a question that arises the area will change, all areas do change and they go on changing and this area has absorbed a lot of change in the last 50-60 years and because city fringe is going to be changing all the more rapidly because of that. I think local politicians and community leaders and indeed the whole community who is interested in the future of this area needs to be terribly on the ball about how those changes take place and that's one of the reasons why I spent time with EC1 New Deal because either we have a voice in directing how these changes happen or they will just roll over us, change will happen here and either we take the opportunity to have a voice or we sit back and grumble and do nothing and it will happen anyway because of the immense financial pressures on the council and in the city itself.

E: Unless there is anything else, thank you very much.