

**Before I Die Again:** The Autobiography of the Founder of the Samaritans, Chad Varah (Constable 1992), 384 pp, £17.50 hbk

Chad Varah's achievements are considerable: above all, the creation of the Samaritans with branches all over the world, an organization that must have relieved untold amounts of human misery and suffering. The author explains how he came to found the Samaritans in 1953 after reading that there were three suicides a day in London. His story is told with frankness, energy and with a sense of purposeful controversy. Varah describes how he pioneered 'listening therapy', the non-judgemental help for the suicidal, and how through vast experience he became a self-proclaimed sex-therapist.

He takes his reader through his international travel itinerary to world-wide Samaritan branches; and, as vicar of St Stephen's Walbrook in the City of London, describes his long and painstaking refurbishment of Wren's masterpiece, culminating in the successful installing after much controversy of Henry Moore's travertine marble altar.

Autobiographies are fascinating reading and this is no exception. What an individual chooses to tell or not to tell is intriguing. In *Before I Die Again* any personal detail about Varah's wife and family is missing, as are the social, political and ecclesiastical events that parallel his life. Instead the reader is entertained with graphic descriptions of a range of sexual issues: lesbianism, transsexualism, masturbation, homosexuality, pornography, child abuse and genital mutilation. There is no introspection but an animated engagement with the people whom Varah succeeds in befriending and supporting through these crises. His professionalism comes from his standing alongside and listening: a desire to understand an individual's situation in all its pain, complexity and desperation.

Varah emerges as an idiosyncratic, autocratic and combative person: admirable, but frustrating in his sweeping judgements. He manages to hold together his radical defence of pornography, a conservative view of Christian doctrine, and a vigorous defence of reincarnation. There is no attempt to explore any personal agendas at work in his life or comment on the socio-political factors that interface with the individual realities of drug dependence, suicide or expressed emotional and sexual problems. He relates his delight at meeting members of the royal family alongside his continued ministry in the City of London, which is still effective nearly twenty years beyond the normal age of retirement.

Perhaps today's Church of England is incapable of producing clergy like Varah and, if so, we are much the poorer. His life and work are marvellous reminders of the days when society nurtured and sustained a spirit of altruism. Varah's example should be an inspiration to work for human freedom and wholeness in a society where suicide is a cruel and complex reality.

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