

# JESUS IN THE BROOM CUPBOARD?

A Play in One Act

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## **JESUS IN THE BROOM CUPBOARD?**

Winner of the 2017 Arts Centre Group drama competition on the theme 'Faith in the Community'

## Synopsis

The old Ebenezer Chapel has been transformed into the 'Help and Hope Mission', seeking to adapt its work to the needs of a changing society. Led by Pastor Derek, it has developed a range of programmes, ministering to the homeless and to victims of addiction. Some of these programmes receive financial support from the local Council.

Now 'Help and Hope' has come under fire from a group called 'Secular Sanity' which claims that the Mission is 'fundamentalist, homophobic and patriarchal', and calls on the Council to withdraw all funding.

Should the church continue to accept funding from the state? Can there be compromise without sacrifice of principle?

## List of Characters

**Fred Backhouse:** Late middle-age. An old stalwart who runs the Comeback Café, providing meals for the Homeless.

**Antonia Champion:** In her twenties. A student and a volunteer at the Mission.

**Pastor Derek:** Mid-thirties. In charge of the Help and Hope Mission. The driving force behind the Mission's progress. Not a deep thinker but an extrovert with a warm heart.

**Harry:** A recovering alcoholic who works on the Mission's allotment.

**Councillor Angela Warburton:** Early middle-age. Business-like. A local politician.

Time: The Present.

Place: The 'Open Space' : a room in the Help and Hope Mission [formerly the Ebenezer Chapel]; a town somewhere in the United Kingdom.

Running Time: About an hour

## JESUS IN THE BROOM CUPBOARD?

*The Open Space at the Help and Hope Mission. Evening. Stage right is the exit to the Worship Zone. To the left is the exit that leads to the Comeback Cafe, and the street. There is an assortment of tables and chairs. Fred Backhouse is sorting through a pile of old paperback books. Antonia comes in left from the street.*

**Antonia:** Evening Fred. Good to see you hard at work.

**Fred:** I'm sorting through this box of paperbacks. Some of them just aren't fit for the Charity Shop.

**Antonia:** Let's have a look. What's this? [*takes the book from Fred.*] 'Off Piste' by Deborah Lovelace [*reads the blurb*]. 'Young Sally Wishbone is hoping for excitement on her first skiing holiday with hunky boyfriend Tim Longstaff. There are thrills aplenty on the ski slope but the action gets even hotter when Sally meets those party people in the après ski.' You shouldn't be reading this, Fred. It's you that's off piste.

**Fred:** I'm just weeding out the dirty stuff.

**Antonia:** [*teasing*] Censorship!

**Fred:** Simple book selection.

**Antonia:** Honestly Fred, this book's nowhere near as naughty as the rubbish you can get on the internet

**Fred:** I know it's everywhere nowadays, but we are still the Help and Hope Mission. We do have standards. Here's something more suitable for a young lady.

**Antonia:** [*reads*] 'Helping and Hoping: The story of Ebenezer Chapel, 1859-1959'.

**Fred:** A slice of our history. I was just a lad when that came out.

**Antonia:** Is that where the name came from? The 'Help and Hope Mission', from the title of this book?

**Fred:** Could be. We had a big congregation in those days. Choir, Sunday School, Boys Brigade.

**Antonia:** And now we're a Mission working with the homeless, running the Comeback Cafe, born again - to meet the needs of a different world.

**Fred:** 'Born again' is one way of putting it. 'We'll be 'banned for bigotry' if some folks get their way .

**Antonia:** Come on, Fred. Things aren't as bad as that.

**Fred:** My dear Antonia, I think they are.

**Antonia:** Fred, please. Don't call me 'dear' and do call me 'Tony'.

**Fred:** Sorry, Tony. But if things aren't as bad as that, why has Pastor Derek called a crisis meeting?

**Antonia:** I've no idea. But he did say he wanted one of the volunteers to turn up. He didn't say why. It's terribly hush hush.

**Fred:** I suspect that we are going to meet a lady from the Council. Sorry, Tony: a *woman* from the Council. Could be make or break for us.

**Antonia:** Let's look on the bright side. 'Make', not 'break'.

**Fred:** I hope you're right. But if the worst happens, half our work could be in for the chop. So let's be on our best behaviour when the Councillor comes. And remember, I may keep calling you 'Antonia' but at least I've never ever told you to go and make the tea.

**Antonia:** No, Fred, you haven't.

*Pastor Derek comes in. He carries a file of papers.*

**Derek:** Hello, folks. Nice to see you. To see you - nice. Sorry I'm late.

**Antonia:** I had to finish my essay in a hurry and came rushing. Just what is this top secret meeting all about?

**Derek:** You remember that letter in the local paper, from the crowd that calls itself 'Secular Sanity', criticising our work?

**Fred:** You shut them up good and proper with the answer you sent.

**Derek:** I only wish I had. I've got a cutting with the letter somewhere here. *[He produces a newspaper cutting from his file]* This is what they say about us: *'The so called Help and Hope Mission is in fact a fundamentalist, patriarchal and homophobic group which practises exclusionary proselytism while professing to provide impartial social care.'*

**Fred:** Exclusionary what?

**Derek:** It means that we encourage people to get converted, Fred. That's what it means.

**Fred:** And why not? Why shouldn't we try to share the Good News? This mission is open to anybody and everybody: it always has been. Back in the old days at Ebenezer Chapel, during the slump, my granddad used to run farthing breakfasts for hungry children. Every hungry child was a welcome child. And nobody ever forced them to sing hymns for their supper.

**Derek:** You know that Fred and so do I. But Secular Sanity are out to get us. *'Find out what the Christians are up to and tell them to stop'* is their motto.

**Antonia:** Come on Derek, I don't think that's quite fair.

**Derek:** Isn't it?

**Antonia:** I do support the work that Help and Hope is doing. That's why I come here as a volunteer. I may not agree with all the doctrines but I can see that we are meeting a big need in the town. The night shelter, the work with alcohol and drugs. It's great stuff. But sometimes I feel that Secular Sanity might have a point when it comes to...

**Fred:** *[interrupting]* Drugs. That reminds me. I've got a bone to pick with you, Derek.

**Derek:** *[He is used to Fred]*. OK Fred. Let's go ahead and pick it.

**Fred:** Condoms in the gents' toilet. Last Sunday morning . Before the service.

**Derek:** Say that again.

**Fred:** I found a tin full of free condoms and with a notice 'Please help yourself.' Not what people need to get into the mood for worship.

**Derek:** Sorry Fred, that shouldn't have happened. The condoms should have been removed . They were put out during Dr Clark's clinic. When the clients come to get their methadone.

**Fred:** We encourage them to 'Go forth and fornicate'.

**Derek:** No, Fred. Many of Dr Clark's clients, as you know, just can't cope with babies. We don't want them to start a family when they haven't finished with drugs. So we agreed with Dr Clark to provide the free condoms. They were put out on Thursday for the clinic. But they shouldn't have been left in the toilets over the weekend. It won't happen again.