

**Creating 'Of things not seen'**  
*An interview with Jim Grover, the photographer*

***How did 'Of things not seen' come about?***

A photography friend recommended that I challenge myself with a photo-essay...something local...something to really get under the surface of...and something to evolve over several months. 'On my doorstep' was a necessity so that I could pick it up whenever I had some free time from my business career. I knew I wanted it to involve people.

***Why Kit?***

I thought that the working life of a priest could make an interesting story; I had little idea of what the role entailed beyond the Sunday service, and suspected that was the case for most people. We have subsequently discovered that, as best we can tell, no other photographer has sought to tell such a story, making this unique.

I had met Kit Gunasekera, the priest in charge of St James', Clapham, just once before through our respective cats; the vicarage is just behind our garden and our cats are mutual visitors! I had never been into his church even though it is just around the corner from our home of 17 years.

One Friday afternoon in the late summer of 2014, I walked into St. James', somewhat hesitantly, and asked Kit if I could shadow him for a year with my camera, and tell his story. Quite an ask really!

***What happened next?***

He asked for time to think about it...it was hardly something he had expected!

And then he came back and said 'yes'. I learnt much later that he sought guidance from God, through prayer, which left him with a feeling of peace and, thus, implicit support; he also sought the advice of his wife, Jill, and his archdeacon, both of whom were supportive. His only concern was that there wouldn't be enough to interest me...how wrong that proved to be!

***Did you agree any ground rules up front around what you could and couldn't shoot?***

Not really; Kit was remarkably trusting.

I offered, at the outset, that he had at all times the right to ask me to leave any particular situation or to put my camera down without any hesitation; some of what Kit does is very personal and intimate. I also offered that no final images would be published without his consent. But there really were no 'ground rules'; we just took each other on trust and got going.

Over our year together, there was only one occasion when Kit asked me to stop taking pictures. I was photographing him on a London tube early one morning; an agitated passenger got up and confronted me. As we left the tube station Kit asked me not to take photos of him on the tube again; he felt it made him a centre of attention.

### ***How did you go about preparing yourself?***

This was my first photo-essay. So I looked at the work of other photo-essayists, from the original 'greats', such as Eugene Smith, to contemporary story-tellers such as Carolyn Drake, and I researched their experiences. I scoured the web to learn more about the Church of England, the 'job spec' of a priest, and what it is like to be a priest.

And I sought advice from professional photographer friends. One of them warned me that on most days I'd come back with nothing worthwhile, such is the nature of reportage photography (at least in terms of images...there were always interesting experiences and stories!), and then some days I'd come back with 'gold'; there were many of the former and, luckily, enough of the latter!

One thing I decided at the outset was to make this a year-long project so that I could really get to know Kit and his life, and also experience the complete Church calendar. But I also wanted a definite 'end'. In fact the year turned into 14 months and I can understand why some photo-essayists work over much longer periods; I could happily continue this story.

### ***Did you have a theme or story in mind, either at the outset, or as the project unfolded?***

I knew little about ministry, and Kit's life, so I just let the story evolve with no fixed ideas. The original theme agreed with Kit was deliberately broad: 'A Year of Kit's Ministry'.

A few months in I thought I had a possible theme to develop. Sitting with Kit in his vicarage office one morning, Kit wrote the word 'Battle' with a yellow highlighter on an annual feedback form from one his congregation.

At that time I was seeing so many challenges for Kit: a small church congregation that wasn't growing; a 'full on' job with almost no time off; issues the CoE was wrestling with; financial losses for Kit's church; a big Christmas campaign that failed to attract any newcomers and a Christmas Day congregation of only 41. It would not have been difficult to focus on the multitude of challenges that a priest, with a small and low-income congregation, faces today in a place like South London.

But as I experienced more of Kit and his life, of his very diverse congregation, of the people he connects with in his Parish, of the fellow priests that he works with in the community...bigger and more powerful themes became clear. Of spiritual strength...of the energy-giving properties of belief...of service and commitment...of the many kindnesses alive in the church today...of the value of community...and of the power of faith.

And hence the photo-essay title which my wife, Ruth, noted down having heard the words spoken by a priest. It's from the Book of Hebrews...and felt apt in so many ways: 'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'.

### ***You don't cover Kit's personal life...why's that?***

At one level this is all about Kit's personal life as he is in an intimate relationship with two people: his wife Jill, and God, with whom he talks every day.

Early on I was seeking images that sought to bring this to life; for example their dining table neatly set for two, but with a bright light coming through the window behind. I considered spending 24 hours living with Kit and Jill. Once when Jill told me that they were going on a camping holiday together I told her, with a straight face, that Kit had agreed that I could come along!

But I decided that the story to focus on was Kit's working life, his ministry; for me it was more than enough.

### ***How did you work with Kit?***

Kit would tell me what he was up to in the days ahead so I could decide when to join him (I had to juggle this project with my professional work commitments).

I spent a lot of time with Kit in the vicarage, drinking coffee, and just chatting about his life...what ministry meant to him...what he hoped for...what he was wrestling with...the (very many!) differences between my Corporate life experience and his Church life experience...and his beliefs. During many of these conversations I left my camera in my bag. After each meeting I would make notes of our conversation.

As I got to know Kit and his ministry better, it became clear what I should be looking for.

The images are shot as reportage; Kit just got on with whatever he was doing, as though I was not there, and I took photographs whenever I saw something interesting. Sometimes I asked him to do things that he had described to me (like his very early morning prayer ritual), things that I knew his job entailed, or things that I'd seen him do before, to coincide with a time when we were together.

It was important to me that the photo-essay was an authentic portrayal of his ministry. As the project progressed a few portraits and 'constructed images' came to mind, and we shot some of them; but when it came to creating a coherent selection these jarred with the body of work and were discarded.

***How much time did you spend with Kit?***

A lot! My image files tell me that I took images on 93 days. On some days it was a matter of grabbing an hour, or so, together, or shooting some images in the church alone; on others I spent much of a working day with Kit. In total I spent 63 days with Kit.

***Did you share your work with Kit as you went along?***

No. I showed him images from the first few days together, just so he would get an idea of what I was 'seeing', and to gain his trust. But I chose not to share them on an ongoing basis to avoid any risk of him becoming complicit in any way, or doing things that weren't authentic.

***How difficult was it working with Kit's parishioners and in Kit's church?***

At the outset I felt very self-conscious with Kit's parishioners. What they saw was a complete stranger, with a camera, coming into their tightly-knit community, their church services, and their lives: some of them must have had their doubts.

I went out of my way to connect with them, to get to know them, and to be sensitive and discrete with my camera, especially when photographing, for example, during church services. I was selective in what and when I shot; so I've typically not taken a close-up of somebody in the middle of personal prayer (unless I felt they wouldn't mind), waiting instead for the 'Amen' moment. And there was an occasion when a parishioner was weeping with Kit; whilst it would have made for a very strong image (and I was itching with my camera!), I just did not feel it was an appropriate moment to capture.

I ended up assuming the role of the St James' 'church photographer', capturing many church occasions and events for the congregation and the web-site (and in colour!), which was a lot of fun. I also sought to directly involve the congregation in the photo-essay, giving them disposable cameras and a 'loose brief' in a bid to illuminate the very varied lives of those that Kit ministers to. A selection of their images will be shown at the exhibition.

I know I have broken one of the cardinal rules of a photo-essayist (at least in some photo-essayists' eyes): I have become part of the story. A completely unexpected bonus of this experience is that I have become a very active member of Kit's church (a journalist recently described me and my wife as 'St. James' stalwarts!').

### ***How did you edit down to a final selection?***

With great difficulty! It was brutal and painful as I had to discard images that I loved in order to get down to the 46 images that make up the final exhibition selection. It was very important to me that the selection captured the breadth of Kit's ministry that I had seen and experienced over our year together, so that was always an important 'check' for me, even if that meant having to discard some individually strong images, and (equally painfully!) visa versa.

Katy, my curator, came into her own: she brought an independent curatorial eye and held the tension around which images were important and worthy of inclusion, both separately and as part of the whole, and which weren't. I also shared a larger selection with a couple of photographer friends, whose judgment I valued and who were completely divorced from the story and were thus simply considering the strength of individual images.

My dining room table became engulfed in 3 x 2 photos...and the selection kept changing. After much, at times, heated debate and a few 'time-outs' for reflection Katy and I finally aligned around a selection.

### ***So looking back how has the experience been for you?***

I knew this was going to be a different experience for me right from the outset. At our second meeting Kit and I got into a conversation around how the personal performance appraisal process works in the Church of England...as part of me seeking to understand how Kit was seen to be doing, as a minister, by his boss (I come from a Corporate world where there are a multitude of well-defined people processes for such purposes!).

I asked Kit who he was accountable to. His response? 'I am accountable to God'. I knew at that moment that I had found a new world to explore and now, all these months later, I understand his response.

I've learned a lot about ministry, the working-life of a minister in South London, and the Church of England today: its many challenges and opportunities, and the difference it can and does make in the community. I've also learned what it takes to craft a photo-essay, to do reportage photography, and to work in black and white.

But there have been some unexpected, and very real pleasures, as a result of this project.

I've made a multitude of new friends who've shared some wonderful stories with me, about their lives and about living in Clapham (some have lived here since before the second world war).

I've been privileged to experience some intense, intimate, and beautiful moments that will stay with me for a very long time.

And, most significantly, I've been inspired by Kit, his ministry, his resolve, his faith, and his beliefs. As a result, I have learned more about myself and, totally unexpectedly, have reconnected with my own faith, which gives me new purpose and energy. And that is quite some bonus!

***Finally...what next on the photography front?***

I'd love to do another photo-essay; it's such a rewarding and challenging experience. But for now my priority is getting this exhibition mounted and seeing how others respond to it. Then I'll decide 'what next'...