

## **“Mark Gibbs: One Friend’s Perception”** **By Robert P. Brorby**

*The September 1986 edition of Laity Exchange, published just a few months after Mark Gibbs’ death, carried a selection of his writings. Also included in this edition was the reflection below by Robert Brorby, a longtime Vesper Society leader and friend of Gibbs.*

Where do you start with Mark Gibbs? How do you describe him? A doughty Englishman, a gadfly, a retired school teacher, a genial host, an acerbic critic, a constant traveler (only rarely at his own home), a country gentleman, an intellectual, a caring and courageous man? Yes, all of these and more. Why did we love a man we couldn’t hug (the English are very reserved!)? Was it his commitment – his passion – his integrity – his “stickability”?

I don’t know which characteristic appealed to me the most, but I liked Mark from the moment we met some sixteen years ago. Thereafter our lives intersected frequently – and at many places: San Leandro and San Francisco, Chicago and New York, Bad Boll and Frankfurt, London (The Goring Hotel!) and his beloved Corner Cottage at Muker. Oh Mark could be and was exasperating at times. (It takes one to know one!) But he was basically selfless. He would plead for Audenshaw or Vesper, but not for himself.

My last contact with Mark was on Saturday, June 29, 1986. Mark telephoned from Muker to inquire about my health since he learned I had recently been in the hospital. After I assured him that I was okay and we chatted about his recent trip to Germany, he told me he would call again in a week to check up on me! We both knew he was mortally ill, but he ministered to me. He died the next day!

From June 1977 through June 1986, Vesper Society published twenty-eight issues of *Laity Exchange* edited by “Mark Gibbs (London, England).” The articles in this twenty-ninth issue – with the exception of the Endpiece – are a selection from Mark’s writing which we believe gives a good perspective of his teaching – for indeed Mark was our teacher. It is important to reread them all because they show Mark’s “wholeness” – a faith-filled Christian concerned about ministry in and to the secular world by the Christian individual, the community and the institutional church and about.

Mark was perceived by many as a critic of the institutional church – and that he was – often with a sharp tongue or pen. But his criticism was based on his frustration with the institution’s concentration on “churchy” matters and the institution’s failure to understand that the Church in mission and ministry is primarily the Christian lay person in the secular world at work and at leisure. But he affirmed the church as both community and institution, the necessity of individual worship, prayer and evangelism and, nevertheless, the ministry of “churchless Christians” who

had expressed dissatisfaction with the institutional church by “voting with their feet.” He was insistent upon education, excellence and commitment. And he could communicate with humor.

Read him again – and listen, for you will still hear his voice. The Endpiece is by Bill Diehl – another friend of Mark’s. I think it is beautifully written. It also demonstrates the ripple effect of Mark’s ministry.

Finally, as we give thanks for Mark’s ministry and friendship, let us look forward. Two years ago, Mark began to prod us to move beyond the elementary learnings about “our common ministries.” In his editorial entitled “Beyond Chapter One” he wrote:

There are some disappointing signs that some denominations and laity centers are, as it were, stuck in “chapter one,” and not finding ways to explore the deep riches of Christian discipleship today. There is a certain tendency to respect rather glibly what are now, thank God, rather familiar phrases about “Monday morning ministries” and “enabling the laity” and “faith in the workplace.” How can we achieve some real quality in our understanding of these great Christian truths?

He called for “strenuous intellectual wrestling with some of the tough problems which face laypeople on Monday mornings.” That is now our responsibility. May we do it with Mark’s “stickability” and “style.”

But we must nevertheless hold to the great truth that God calls us to a first-class style of life in *everything* we do, whether it is our worship or our work or our sports and entertainment and holidays, our eating and drinking and loving. Nothing is exempt, until the hour of our death. (Mark Gibbs, “Saturday’s Ministries,” October 1982)