

Book Review – Richard Higginson

David Sheppard: Batting for the Poor

By Andrew Bradstock

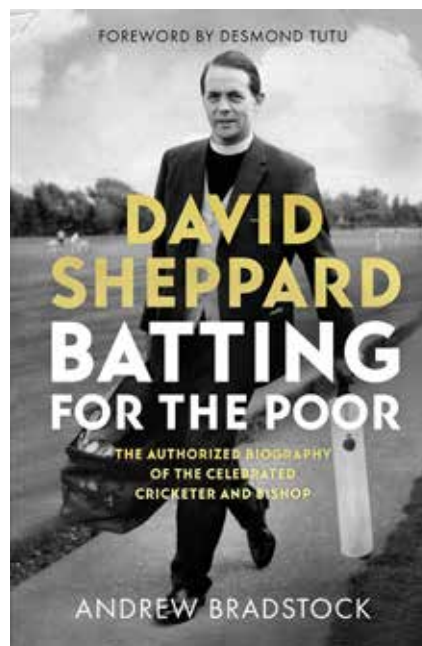
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As a boy from a Christian home who developed a passionate interest in cricket at the age of seven, I have to confess that David Sheppard was one of my childhood heroes. I eagerly devoured his early autobiography, *Parson's Pitch*, when it was published in 1964. Interestingly, it had the same cover picture that SPCK have used for Andrew Bradstock's authorised biography: the handsome young Sheppard striding out purposefully, dressed in clerical attire and carrying his cricket bag and bat.

Sheppard came from a privileged public school background; what he later described as Comfortable Britain, though he lost his father to illness at the age of nine. He attended Sherborne School where by unrelenting discipline and practice rather than huge innate talent he made himself into an outstanding cricketer. The scores he compiled as a student at Cambridge University from 1950–3 are extraordinary; he made 227 and shared in an opening stand of 343 against the touring West Indians, who later bamboozled England in the test matches. As Bradstock demonstrates, if Sheppard hadn't sacrificed his cricketing career to get ordained, there is little doubt he would have become a cricketing great; in a short and patchy career he still compiled no less than 45 centuries. What is truly striking (and reflects the privileged circles which then operated) is that whenever he took time off from the parish and made himself available to play for Sussex or England, he was picked automatically; so it was that he played a key part – scoring a century – in the famous Old Trafford victory over Australia in 1956 when Jim Laker took 19 wickets.

However, as Bradstock tells us, by then Sheppard's life-story had taken a decisive turn in another direction. During his first term at Cambridge he

experienced an evangelical conversion, and became a regular attendee at VPS (Varsity and Public School) camps, often called 'Bash' camps because that was the nickname of the man who ran them,



Eric Nash. Following a call to ordination, he trained at Ridley Hall (1953–5), where he became aware that the Gospel had a social as well as a personal dimension – demonstrated for instance in the message of the Old Testament prophets, or Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. This awareness influenced his decision to choose a curacy in what was then a poor area of London (St Mary's Islington, 1955–7); from there he went to be Warden of the newly formed Mayflower Family Centre in Canning Town (1957–69).

Along the way David married Grace, and their relationship forms a significant plot within the bigger story. Bradstock diplomatically acknowledges that one of the less glorious episodes in Sheppard's story concerns his leaving Grace with chickenpox on their honeymoon (admittedly with her agreement) in a

remote hospital in Italy in order to fly back to England to play cricket. Grace was a person of nervous disposition, and she subsequently developed agoraphobia; this unusual start to married life can hardly have helped her, but the relationship recovered and she emerges as a heroic figure whose confidence and distinctive ministry blossomed in later life.

As is well known, Sheppard developed a lifelong commitment to inner-city ministry, both in terms of building up the church in those areas and improving the quality of life for working-class people. His two books *Built as a City* and *Bias to the Poor* give expression to this. His proven record at the Mayflower was reflected in his appointments as Bishop of Woolwich (1969–75) and then Liverpool (1975–96). Meanwhile, Sheppard's social concern developed into political concern and involvement. In the 1960s he took a bold stand on apartheid and boycott of sport with South Africa long before it was fashionable to do so. In Liverpool he collaborated closely with the Roman Catholic Archbishop Derek Worlock to improve ecumenical relations but also to bring hope and unity to a seriously run down city that was suffering from high unemployment and slum housing.

Bradstock describes how Sheppard made himself unpopular with the Thatcher government by his prominent role in the Commission on Urban Priority Areas which produced the 1985 *Faith in the City* report. This was vilified by the likes of Norman Tebbit as Marxist theology because it was critical of Government neglect of these areas. The report made numerous recommendations to church and nation. Its lasting achievement was to set up the Church Urban Fund which financed many beneficial inner city projects.



David Sheppard playing cricket, as wicket-keeper, with local boys in the street, Islington, 1956.


Sheppard and Worlock had some success in persuading business to reinvest in Liverpool. As a result areas of the city such as the docklands were dramatically transformed. In retirement he became a Labour peer. He favoured redistribution of wealth through higher taxation, which he saw as wider application of the Christian principle of being 'members one of another'. He died from cancer in 2004 at the age of 75.

The question may well be asked: why review this biography in a journal devoted to faith and business? The answer is not simply because Andrew Bradstock is a member of the ICF Exec, though that is true; he has brought to this task meticulous research, an elegant style and just the right amount of fascinating detail. It is also because Sheppard's ministry impinged increasingly on the areas of work and

business as his life proceeded. For the most part, Bradstock steers clear of critical judgment, being content to let events and others' opinions speak for themselves, but in the final concluding chapter he makes some shrewd observations. He comments: "...there was something of the 'patrician Anglican' about Sheppard...He thought the Church's presence in every community, through the parish system, gave it the duty and authority to speak for those without a public voice. But it was more a voice *for* the poor than *of* the poor. The Church might hope to empower the poor when it spoke on their behalf, but it saw itself, not the poor, as the agent of change" (p.293).

This leads me to make a final observation relating to business. Sheppard was zealous in encouraging working-class people to come forward

and offer themselves for leadership in the Church. But did he encourage people from inner-city areas to develop their own businesses, to become Christian entrepreneurs? I see little evidence that he did. I believe this was a significant blind spot, even though we must recognise that he lived in a more corporate age, when large companies employed a far greater percentage of workers and few thought in terms of branching out to develop their own enterprises.

Whatever his flaws, and we all have them, Bradstock's biography left me in no doubt that David Sheppard was a great man. A good case could be made that he is the most outstanding all-round Anglican leader of the post-war era. I warmly encourage all FiBQ readers to buy and imbibe this compelling story of his life. 



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including Faith, Hope & the Global Economy and (with Kina Robertshaw) A Voice to be Heard. He is an international speaker on business ethics and the theology of work.