

All things *do* work together



Barbara Todd has lived, worked and worshipped in East London for over 25 years. She gained the NPQH through the Institute of Education and subsequently became a junior school headteacher. Barbara is currently the Partnership Tutor and a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of East London.

Barbara is married to Adrian, a chemistry and maths teacher, and they both form part of the leadership team of an Ichthus link fellowship in Leyton, called GateWay. They have two university-aged children: Emily and Joel.

From bad to good

As Christians, like St Paul, we believe and often talk about the fact that ‘all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes’. However, when things in life don’t go well, or according to plan, it’s often difficult to know how this truth applies in practice. Through the situations that I have faced during the last three years, I have had an opportunity to put this truth to the test. I found that, often, God has a surprising way of turning things around from bad to good.

I have spent all my working life living, worshipping and working in the East End of London, moving from ‘up North’ to go to London University and never returning except for holidays. I now feel that this vibrant, busy and ever changing part of London is where I belong, and I am thoroughly happy to be a part of this community.

Hello Mrs Todd!

I have taught, until recently, exclusively in large, multicultural inner-city junior schools close to where I live. I have been well immersed in the local community and have always loved – unlike many teachers that I meet – being enthusiastically greeted from across the street, shopping centre or Tesco with a ‘Hello Mrs Todd!’ I have been glad to get to know my children’s parents, of many faiths, and was even invited to a Sikh wedding for one of my former pupils. I know most of the local youths who hang around in groups on the estate where we

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The refurbished Edwardian school where Barbara was headteacher

live, and I am always delighted to bump into ex-students and hear how they are getting on at college, university and work. One of the members of my early classes eventually came to work as a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) at my school, and has subsequently become a valued colleague and friend.

Difficulties

In the late 1980s I took on a part time job-share at the school for which I had become a parent governor. After a variety of roles and co-ordinator posts there I suddenly, and unexpectedly, found myself appointed acting headteacher and then headteacher. However, as a result of the circumstances I later faced, I resigned from headship, with no job to go to, just over three years later.

From the start of my headship, the school was beset by crises, ranging from a spate of serious acts of vandalism and break-ins, to difficulties surrounding the cases of ‘looked-after children’ with extreme behavioural difficulties and staff with complex personal needs. In spite of all this, as a

...we know that in all things God works for the good to those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose

ROMANS 8:28 (NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION)

school, we managed to secure several awards, see a slow rise in SATs results, refurbish much of the old Edwardian building, see several staff successfully through the Graduate Teacher Training Programme and engage in a wide range of curricular and extra curricular activities. A staff, made up of people from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, gelled well together and enjoyed working together in the school.

Serious weaknesses

During my second year of headship, my teenage son became seriously ill with ulcerative colitis, needing weeks in a specialist hospital in West London (15 weeks in as many months) and, finally, two major operations. This coincided with an Ofsted inspection which put the school into 'serious weaknesses'. Everyone at my school pulled together and worked extremely hard, leaving us making 'good progress' in most areas after the HMI visit six months later.

...we can be sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good

ROMANS 8:28 (THE MESSAGE)

Those six months were a very busy and difficult time. But my friends, family and colleagues rallied round and were all brilliant. I could never have got through that time without them. My husband wrote emails to update people regarding our son's condition. Responses showed that Christian friends all over the world, many of them in difficult situations themselves, were praying for him and us, and frequently sent us encouraging emails and letters. We were very blessed and humbled by this. God is so good to us when He reaches out to us through the actions of His people!

Exhaustion and stress

By this time, however, I was suffering from exhaustion and stress. On top of it all, I was suspended pending two different investigations, and unable to have contact with my staff because of the regulations surrounding this. After much prayer, soul searching and discussion with friends and relatives, I decided to resign and take some time out. In the end, I was cleared of doing anything untoward on either count, but still felt it was time to refocus my life. I had got to the position where I had very little time for myself, my family, my church or even God, due to the pressure of work at my school. Not a good place to be!

...in everything, as we know, He co-operates for good with those who love God and are called to His purpose ROMANS 8:28 (REVISED ENGLISH BIBLE)

I then had no job, and no idea what to do next, except that I needed to spend a lot of time just chilling out. I 'encouraged myself in the Lord' by listening to ministry tapes and 'soaking' to worship CDs. I spent time with Christian friends and joined in a daytime Bible study group. For a while I had no idea at all what the future would hold. All I had ever expected or planned for had revolved around teaching. Prophetic words and pictures given to me in the past had indicated that I would be involved in 'sending out' teachers and school managers all over London. I had believed that God wanted to do this through me, but had no idea how this could be, now that I was no longer a headteacher. I wondered if this dream was now lost for ever.

A new beginning

As I started to feel better, I started to explore a number of options including working in a Christian bookshop. Whatever happened, I decided never to get to the point where life was so hectic and I was so exhausted again.

One of those who had rallied round during my suspension, was the previous headteacher of my school. He cheered me up by taking me out for coffee or lunch from time to time, and encouraged me to accompany him visiting his teacher trainees. He was now working part time at our local university Initial Teacher Training (ITT) department. Very quickly I realised that this was something I



The local area around the Baker's Arms pub

enjoyed doing, was worthwhile, used many of my skills and experiences and was much less hectic than school leadership. For a term I acted as a part-time professional tutor, doing observations of, and giving tutorials to, trainees on teaching practice. When permanent lectureships in education were advertised, I applied, was interviewed and appointed as a university education lecturer and tutor.

After the initial shock of settling into something that is so different in many ways from teaching in a school, I am now very much enjoying my new job. As the Partnership Tutor for the Primary PGCE department, I am responsible for liaising with schools and LEAs to set up block practices for our trainees. Already having many local contacts, and having previously been a headteacher, I am well placed to do this. I frequently find myself saying to heads 'having been a headteacher myself, I understand completely what you're saying'. This is a wonderful bridge builder.

God is so good to us when He reaches out to us through the actions of His people!

Stand together!

Through what has happened, not something I would have wished to go through, I have become a stronger Christian; more reliant on the Lord. As so often happens in these kinds of circumstances, I have already been able to encourage and support others with seriously ill relatives or going through difficulties with headship. I am now able to look

Don't try to stand alone! God Himself has designed us to stand together!

them in the eye, and genuinely tell them that I understand; I have been there too. To anyone going through troubled times I would say, dig deep into the Lord and allow your friends, relations and Christian family to support and encourage you, and lift you up and protect you through their prayers. Don't try to stand alone! God Himself has designed us to stand together!

My son, who himself has drawn closer to the Lord through his experiences and been an inspiration to many, is now well enough to have taken his AS levels, and to have been on a trip to visit our contacts in Uganda. The vision, given to me in the past, of sending out teachers and school leaders all over East London, is likely to come true on a wider scale than I ever would have thought possible. I am truly experiencing God turning bad to good. On top of this, I have just heard that a former Christian colleague, who I have worked with and supported for many years, has been appointed to her first headship in a local LEA.

■ Barbara Todd

...we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them
ROMANS 8:28 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)



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