

Charlotte Bannister Parker, associate priest at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, is currently part of the appeal committee working to renovate and modernise this iconic Oxford building.

But this is just the latest project Charlotte, 48, has found herself involved in over the years. In fact it is pretty hard to keep track of her busy life so far.

She is chair of the UK arm of The Children's Radio Foundation (which reaches more than eight million African children); she was co-founder of Learning for Life, a small charity focusing on educating girls in rural areas of South Asia; and, as the Bishop of Oxford's adviser for overseas programmes, she took her family to live in the townships of Kimberley and Kuruman in South Africa.

As a TV documentary producer, she filmed in life-threatening situations in Bosnia and survived a shipwreck off the coast of Kenya.

In contrast to these physical challenges, her spiritual journey began, aged four, in a cinema.

"I watched Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*," Charlotte explained. "He based the film on Luke, chapter 17 – 'The Kingdom of God is within man.' I decided I wanted my life to be for Jesus."

But what item from this active and busy life would she want to find washed up on the beach of our desert island?

Charlotte, daughter of Sir Roger and Moyra Bannister, was born in London in 1963.

"In the holidays we stayed at Church Field Cottage in the village of Lyminster, near Arundel. My father set up the Lyminster Occasional Orienteering Club and I have vivid memories of being lost in the snow in forests and, while crossing fields, being surprised by rare breed cattle emerging from the fog," she said.

"On your desert island, with an ordinance survey map of Arundel castle district, I would be able to relive those adventures."

In 1984, after taking a BA in Russian Arts, Anthropology and Politics at Durham, her first destination was India. Here Charlotte worked as a research associate for the Centre for Development of Instructional Technology (CENDIT).

She travelled alone, visiting women's development projects.

While based in Dehli, Charlotte found herself living in a garage – but a colleague at CENDIT, Anurvada Agrawal, came to the rescue and took Charlotte into her home.

"It was a wonderful experience – being taken in by this warm and loving Hindu family," Charlotte recalled.

"I got a taste of Hindu festivals – the fireworks of Diwali and being pelted with coloured powder at Holi.

"Anurvada is still a dear friend – she later went with me to Nairobi on a UNICEF conference and also came to stay with my parents in Oxford. Her family – from Rajasthan – gave me a carved wooden elephant. It would remind me of how they treated me like an adopted daughter," she added.

Charlotte worked for a while with Mother Theresa at the Home of the Dying and Destitute in Calcutta.

"Seeing I was upset by harrowing sights, Mother Theresa told me: 'Do not forget all you can do both here and at home'. She showed



Charlotte's web

Sylvia Vetta meets
Charlotte Bannister-Parker,
film-maker, charity worker,
mother – and priest

how you can make difference. The sisters were selfless people giving love without expectation of any reward," Charlotte said.

"I returned to the UK to give some lectures about my experiences and following one, here in Oxford, I was approached by Durham suggesting I embark on a master's degree in development studies."

To fund her MA, Charlotte spent six months as an associate producer for North South Productions, making documentaries for international non-governmental organisations (including UNICEF) and Channel 4.

"I started as a researcher for them and went on to work with them for more than six years. By the time I left, I was an assistant producer. I went on to work with the Television Trust for the Environment (TVE) as an associate producer and then to Central Television. In those days you were trained on the job!" Charlotte explained.

"As a journalist my first assignment was for International Press Service (IPS) in January 1984.

"I was employed as a research associate for CENDIT in New Delhi to write articles on the



**Charlotte Bannister-Parker
at the Univesrity Church of
St Mary the Virgin, Oxford,
with the portrait of
Leonard Cheshire by artist
Peter Greenham**

**Photograph:
Jon Lewis**

position of Women in Development for IPS.
“In July 1984, there was a United Nations World Women’s Conference in Nairobi and I attended the NGO Forum there where I represented CENDIT with my Indian colleague Anuradha and also presented the research from my articles,” Charlotte added.
“I spent most of the next eight years working in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Research shows that money earned by women goes into the family. In rural areas, I encouraged beekeeping as a means of income for women and for nourishment of their

families. We demonstrated safer methods of collecting honey and taught it on the radio with a song *Bees and Chamalie*.
“I explored ways that help illiterate and semi-literate people to learn using videos, flip charts and audio and visual means of communication, including a film in Nepali, and tested them out to see which was the most effective,” Charlotte explained.
“My thesis, *Development Communications in Nepal with Specific Reference to Women*, was based on this fieldwork. With Action Aid Nepal, I set up a solar-powered audio-visual

unit in the Himalayas and persuaded the oil company BP to donate the solar panels.
“The experience I gained managing these projects led me to co-found Learning for Life, a small charity that concentrates on educating girls in rural schools in South Asia.”
Charlotte then spent a few months back in the UK, where, as well as running the charity, she was involved in producing and directing films for television and other media, mainly concerned with Third World and development issues, including *Stolen Childhood* for
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Channel 4. Then, in 1991, she was invited to climb Mount Kenya to raise money for the Leonard Cheshire Foundation.

"I was keen as my parents have a portrait of the founder given to them by the painter Peter Greenham. Peter was a colleague of my mother, Moyra, at Ruskin College and taught my artist sister, Erin, at the Royal Academy.

"The Queen commissions paintings of people awarded the Order of Merit, and this is a copy of the one Peter made for the Queen. It has poignant memories of my family and of Leonard Cheshire and the artist.

"We did some rigorous training prior to the climb and were allowed a few days rest and recreation over Christmas. Seven of us hired a dow and headed for an island 13 miles off the coast of Kenya, where we could snorkel.

"But a few miles out, we were hit by a freak wave and the boat went down with all our belongings. We ended up clinging to an 8ft plank in shark-infested waters," Charlotte recalled.

"After five hours in stormy water, with no help in sight our chances of survival looked slim. Although exhausted, Omah, the son of the boat's owner Mohammed, swam and reached a nearby coral reef. If he could do it, we thought, so could we. Omar's father Mohammed showed us how to manoeuvre the plank to catch the current, bringing us nearer to the reef. We made it!

"The reef was home to gulls. They didn't appreciate us invading their territory and swooped down pecking at us.

"That Christmas Eve was the longest night of my life – but I will never forget the sight of a lantern approaching through the morning sea mist. The people from Lamu had spent the night searching for us. At dawn on Christmas morning we were saved," Charlotte said.

"We went on to climb Mount Kenya but that painting of Leonard Cheshire would remind me of Omar, the Muslim boy who saved our lives and it makes me think of the love that I have received from people of different religions – giving me a lifelong commitment to inter-faith dialogue.

"Fellow survivor, Nicholas Mellor, went on to co-found Merlin, a charity which sends medical teams into disaster zones. I am sure that personal experience motivated him."

In 1993, a chance encounter changed Charlotte's life.

"I headed for a walking holiday in Dorset. One person dropped out and we rang around for a replacement. A man called William Parker from Boston joined us."

William works for the Development Capital with the World Bank, focusing on emerging markets. Soon after meeting him, Charlotte was sent by Marie Stopes International to film in Bosnia – to show the psychological effects the war was having on women and children. She was one of the last two western journalists to remain in the Behatch district.

"I was with the women who sheltered their children in the village hall when the village was being attacked.

"The children were afraid and I will never forget the bravery of the women, who maintained a sense of normality in front of them," Charlotte recalled.

"They sang songs and created a makeshift hair salon, while all around their homes were

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Kofi Annan talks to Edward Mortimer and the Rev Charlotte Bannister-Parker at the launch of the Children's Radio Foundation in September 2011

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homes were being bombed and destroyed.

"Our film was used on BBC and ITV news programmes. Back in the UK, William was counting the minutes of footage used as that determined what we were paid for it. While watching me in that war zone he made up his mind to ask me to marry him.

"Shortly after this we went to Ireland where he proposed but requested a pre-nuptial agreement – that I never go back to the frontline."

They married in 1994, and have four boys, Roderick, 15, Hartley 13, Toby, 11, and eight-year-old James.

"I was concentrating on the children and on Learning for Life, when pregnant with Toby. I hope readers will understand, because it is an unusual experience – but I had a strong feeling of being called. It was not really new – just more intense. When I was 11, if anyone asked me what I wanted to do, I answered 'be a missionary'.

"But nothing could have happened without the support of my husband, William. In fact when I was ordained at Christ Church I said to the bishop, 'It is my husband who should be ordained into the earthly sainthood.'"

"I went to see my priest and was interviewed. This was followed by 'a year of discernment' when I worked in church as a lay assistant. Toby was born in July and in September I was chosen for training. My placement was in Blackbird Leys in the church of the Holy Family. I joined St Mary's in 2004."

Distressed by the scenes of torture in Abu Ghraib following the 'liberation' of Iraq, Charlotte visited the Imam of Oxford's Central Mosque and the head of the city's Asian Cultural Centre and asked how Christians could show solidarity.

Out of that conversation, came the annual

Friendship Walk and the 'One Earth, Many Faiths' conference. At least eight religious groups are now involved.

"I had no idea what reception I would get, but I know that people of faith can work together. In Bosnia I saw the tragedy of division that split families between Serb and Croat between Muslim and Christian. Love is what brings people together.

"Oxford now has an active Council of Faiths and we run lots of activities and together take part in OxClean and tree planting."

In 2007, the Bishop established links with the diocese of Kimberley, South Africa, and asked Charlotte if she and her family would live there for three to four months.

The idea was to support a refuge for the victims of domestic violence and projects for the treatment and prevention of HIV and Aids.

"Assured that it would be safe for us, the warmth of the reception dispelled any anxiety," Charlotte said.

"The children went to the local Catholic school, and William gave some supplementary education. At first they hated it, but when the time came for us to leave they did not want to go home."

"It has proved a transforming experience in their lives affecting each of them differently. My eldest son had been rather shy and he learned confidence in difficult situations. Hartley learned football, which he had not played before – and gained a star-studded reputation.

"We discovered that Toby has an uncanny affinity with animals. He called giraffes out of the jungle. His pet was a praying mantis. Because the services were long and in foreign languages, we let him take his pet with him to church. One day it escaped and sat on his head – I found it difficult not to laugh.

"All of my children became aware of how

well off they are – and understood the plight of the boys living in the townships. A carved mask given to us in Kimberley would recall that wonderful experience."

Charlotte's interest in communication continues as executive chair of Children's Radio Foundation (CRF). Through training and workshops, the charity helps young journalists develop confidence.

She said: "Young people have not been part of the development narrative but they are a voice that needs to be heard."

The former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan came to St Mary the Virgin to launch the organisation.

"We are currently reaching eight million young people in Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia, Tanzania and South Africa, and our aim is to inspire young people to use radio to tell their stories across the continent. Radio is an important educational tool in regions that do not have access to the Internet," Charlotte said.

At home in Oxford, Charlotte is involved in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin appeal.

Charlotte said: "As well as a place of worship, our church is a popular venue for concerts, lectures and public events – yet no major works have been undertaken in several generations. We need to make it fit for all its 21st-century activities and roles."

Her final choice for the desert island?

"The painting," Charlotte said. "It has so many connections, but I will also need my Bible – the edition given to me on my ordination, and signed by Bishop Richard Harries."

■ This year's Friendship Walk takes place on June 19 at 6.30pm. To find out more about The Children's Radio Foundation visit the website: www.childrensraadiofoundation.org