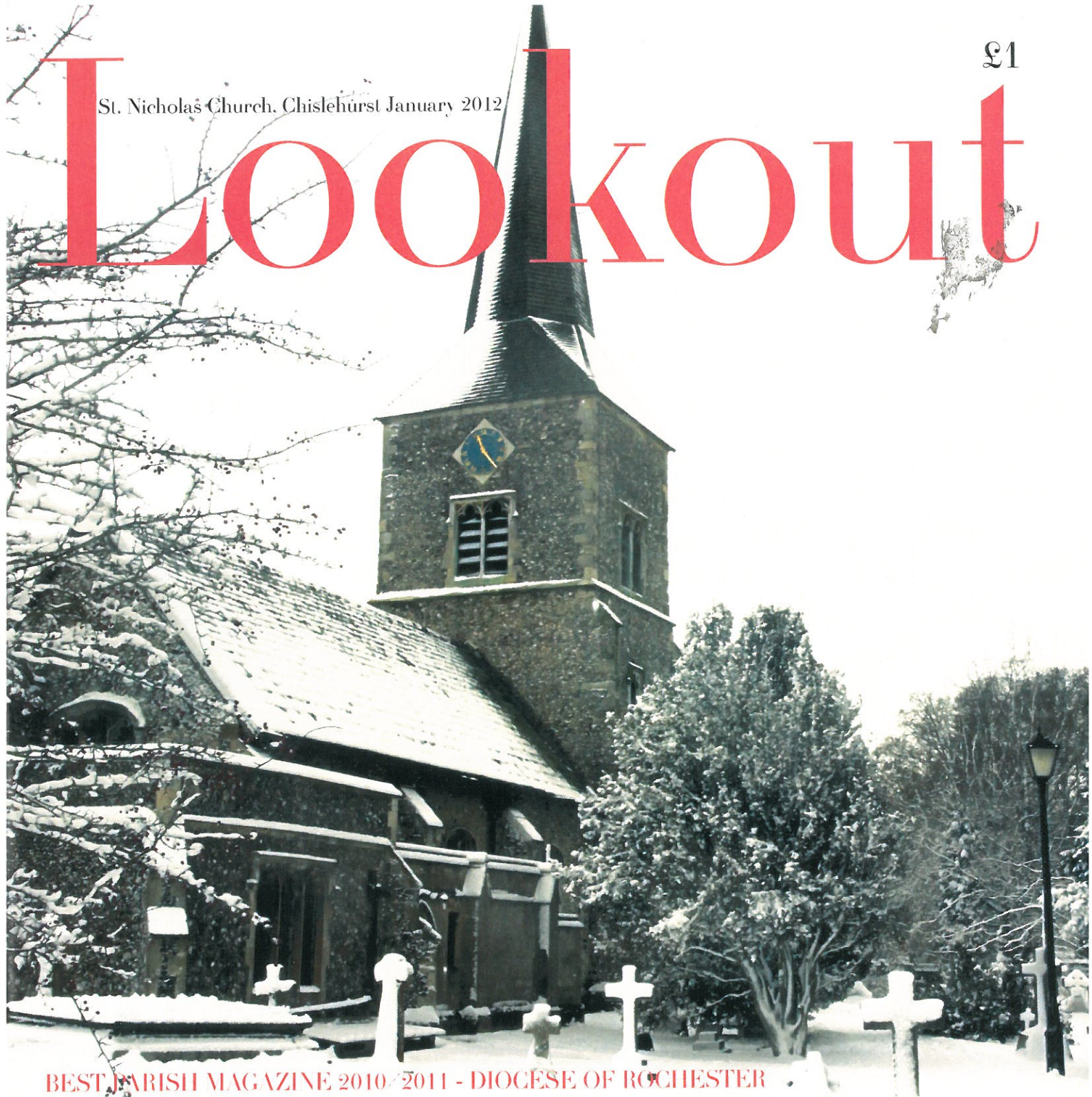


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# Lookout



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## JUNE'S JOURNEY: FROM DEACON TO PRIEST VIA ROMANIA



Reverend June Hurn is very clear about when and why she made the decision to become an ordained priest.

### JUNE IN ROMANIA

Twenty three years ago the Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was dramatically overthrown by popular revolt and the appalling conditions within Romania's state orphanages were exposed to the world for the first time. Most of us will vividly remember those images of woefully neglected children living in squalor, having been abandoned by their desperately impoverished parents.

Three years later in 1992, the Church of England voted by a narrow margin to pass the controversial legislation that would pave the way for women priests. The combination of these two monumental events would prove to be a turning point for June and her role in the ministry. As a retired teacher

she had only recently been ordained as a Deacon and described herself as perfectly happy in this role with no intention of becoming a priest.

That same year, June met Reverend Dr John Walmsley who had been invited to give a lecture on a diocesan course she was tutoring on. With the support of his parishioners of St Laurence Barkingside in North East London, Reverend Walmsley had founded a charity to aid Romanian children with HIV and AIDS. His lecture was a topical illustration of how Christ was at work in the world today. The charity later became Children in Distress which June has now been closely involved with for almost 20 years.

Under Ceausescu's 25-year reign, families were encouraged to have more children than they could afford as part of a grand scheme to create a larger working population and transform Romania from an agricultural based economy into an industrial power. The inevitable fallout was that an increasing number of children were abandoned at one of the many state orphanages, particularly if they had a disability of any kind.

Malnourished babies failing to thrive in these overcrowded institutions were given blood infusions using contaminated blood bought from abroad. Poor needle hygiene meant that the spread of HIV was rife within the orphanages. Today it is

estimated that Romanians make up 54% of Europe's children and young people living with HIV/AIDS.

The Mothers Union at St Nicholas raised money for the orphans which led June to go out to Romania to see for herself how the money was being spent. She was there for a month working with the children at a newly built hospice called St Lawrence, the first of eight centres funded by Children in Distress.

The charity now works across Eastern Europe to help children with all manner of disabilities, not just those with HIV/Aids. In its hospices and associated child development centres, children receive respite, palliative and end of life care or treatment and therapy. June travels to Romania up to three times a year and works specifically with children in two of the centres, St Margaret's in Bucharest and St Andrews in Petesti. Although the centres are now mostly staffed by Romanians, in those early days they were run by Christian volunteers from the UK. June was conducting Anglican services in the hospice chapel but it soon dawned on her that she would need to become a priest because the volunteers wanted to take communion, something she could not do as a Deacon.

This may not sound so remarkable today, but at the time it was a brave decision given the controversy surrounding women in the

priesthood. The first women priests were ordained in 1994 and June was among the first. She faced opposition, even from within this church, but accepted it graciously in the belief that it was what she had to do to meet the religious needs of the volunteers she was working alongside in Romania.

Many of the children that June encountered in her early visits were completely immobile. "The attitude at the time was that if the children were disabled in any way then they should be in bed. They would just be left staring at the ceiling, unable to engage with the world in any way," she explains.

June felt compelled to get them upright, convinced that it was the key to improving their quality of life. At the time there were approximately three wheelchairs shared between 50 children within the two centres. Much of June's working life was spent teaching at Marjorie McClure, a special school here in Chislehurst for children with disabilities. Her connection with the school led to them donating a child-sized wheelchair which June took out to Romania in 1995. She describes her delight at seeing a three year old boy, formerly bed-ridden, being able to wheel himself about and having a degree of independence for the first time in his life.



MADELIN IN 2010

On that same visit June met Madelin, a young boy with hydrocephalus, a condition that causes a build-up of fluid on the brain. It had been left untreated and as a result his head had grown to such an extent that it could no longer be supported by his body. The only way he could move around was if he was carried so June realised that he too needed a wheelchair, one that could be specially adapted to support his head.

From then on June became something of a wheelchair expert and has provided a countless number of specially adapted chairs, transforming the lives of these otherwise immobile children. Members of our congregation have very generously sponsored new wheelchairs and June has also



ALEXANDRU IN 2010

sourced second-hand chairs and adapted them herself to accommodate the specific needs of a child.

There are 25 children that she takes a particular interest in, photographing them in their wheelchairs each time she visits so she can keep track of who needs what. "They grow so quickly so it's just like a game of musical chairs with them all swapping and changing," she says. Thanks to the generosity of those supporting Children in Distress, there are no longer any bed-ridden children in the two centres that June works with. Sadly this is not the case across the rest of Eastern Europe and many disabled children remain confined to their beds.

This is not just a funding issue but a reflection of general attitudes towards the disabled. "There is a sense of shame about children with disabilities and they tend to be kept out of sight with no expectations of them," June explains. There is no public health service so parents are not going to get any help with a disabled child. This explains why so many of them are abandoned at birth.

**The economic situation in Romania is dire, with public sector workers being forced to take a 25% pay cut. "If nurses and teachers don't see a future for themselves, these disabled children have no prospects at all. They really are at the bottom of the pile. It's a desperate situation," says June.**

Children in Distress have been life-changing for the children lucky enough to be cared for in its centres. Most disabled children do not attend school which makes it all the more remarkable to hear about Alexandru, who was abandoned by his parents because he suffers from spina bifida and will never walk. Thanks to the sponsorship of members of our congregation, he has a wheelchair that enables him to attend a

mainstream school. This is almost unheard of for a disabled child. People were so moved by the plight of the Romanian orphans that a plethora of overseas aid agencies were set up in the early nineties. Many of these have not lasted the distance, but Children in Distress has just celebrated its 21st anniversary with a special service at Ely Cathedral. David Hope, formerly Archbishop of York and now Patron of the charity, led a celebration of all that has been achieved by its volunteers over the last two decades.

The ever-changing needs of the 25 children that June works with means that her work will never be done, but she takes pride in the fact that the Romanian carers working alongside her are growing in confidence and are showing a willingness to learn how the wheelchairs can be adapted.

As Romania does not manufacture children's wheelchairs, they will need to be brought in from the UK for the foreseeable future.

Gwen Lardner

If you would like to sponsor a child or a new wheelchair, contact June on 020 8467 2320 or visit the Children in Distress website at [www.childrenindistress.org](http://www.childrenindistress.org)