

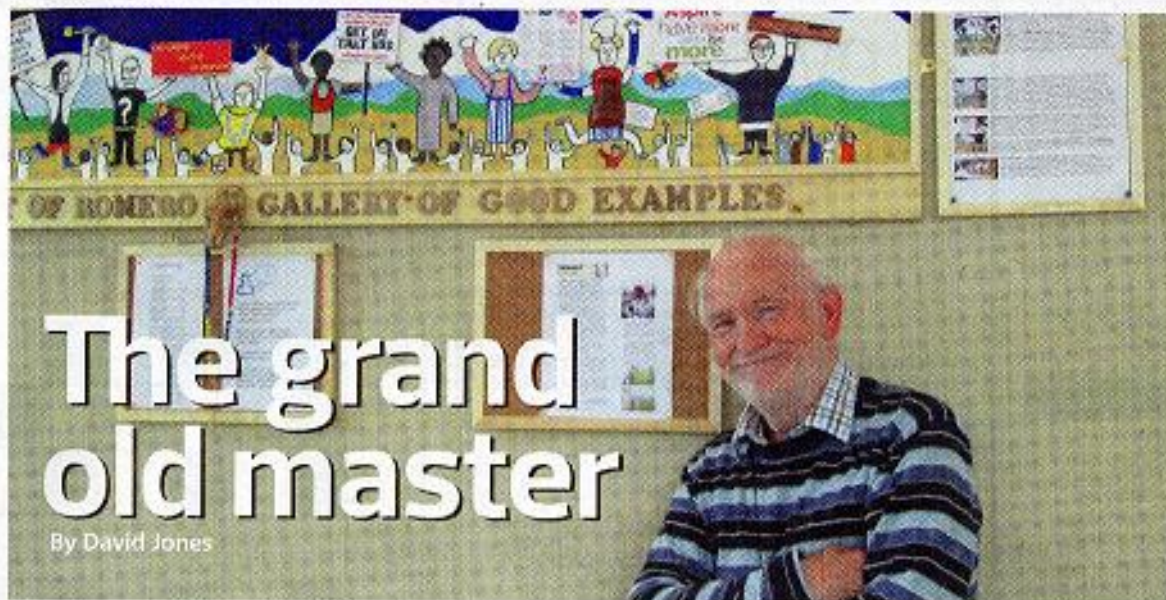
## The Last Word: How art can bring heroes of social justice to life in our Church communities

**H**ugh Gibbons describes himself as "something of a human Swiss Army knife", possessing as he does a wide variety of skills.

He is the social justice co-ordinator for the parish of St Joseph & St Margaret Clitherow in Bracknell and has been a parish and Portsmouth diocese CAFOD volunteer for the past 15 years. These posts though showcase just a few of his many talents. In recent times, the devout 72 year-old has created art for his local church and has been at the forefront of a unique project that involves schools and churches in producing inspirational works of art known as 'Romero Galleries'.

The origins of the innovative project date back to two years ago when, wanting to mark the 50th anniversary of CAFOD, Hugh created a hugely scaled-up copy of the familiar small and colourful crosses provided for CAFOD by a family of artists in El Salvador.

The seven foot cross, which he describes as "a bit like a stained-glass window lit from the inside, and is meant to be enjoyed by passing motorists, cyclists, pedestrians – as well as the pupils and parents at the primary school next door", was erected in the grounds of St Francis Assisi Church in South Ascot. It was, Hugh says, a thank you to all parishioners who had supported CAFOD for the past half a century. "It occurred to me," he recalls, "that it would be good to have something that would last for the next 50 years."



The cross was nicknamed 'Big Oscar', in honour of Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Goldanz, Archbishop of San Salvador, better known as Oscar Romero, renowned champion of social justice and 'voice of the voiceless', who was shot while saying Mass in 1980.

As with countless others, Oscar Romero has been a true inspiration to Hugh who says: "What appeals to me is that he was a shoe-in as a conservative safe pair of hands for the Church in El Salvador. But – like Rosa Parks – he saw injustice. So as the 'voice for the voiceless', he got on that bus because he knew someone had to, and he was there."

The colourful cross delighted

everyone who saw it including parish priest Fr Tom Tiaffe, who encouraged visitors to the church to touch it as a gesture of support for all those disadvantaged people across the globe.

Also impressed by the structure were staff members at St Margaret Clitherow Primary School in Bracknell, who wanted to commission Hugh to create a similar one inside their school. Instead, he suggested a horizontal gallery might be more appropriate and the idea of the Romero Gallery was born. The inspirational figures in the new gallery, which included the Virgin Mary, David Beckham, Queen Elizabeth II, the Good Samaritan and Florence Nightin-

gale, were chosen from all sectors of society by each year, and their choices and the finished work drew plaudits from the Vatican, Buckingham Palace, the United Nations and the Royal Society.

Explaining the concept of the galleries, Hugh says: "Art abounds in churches and schools. Many parishes buy in fine religious works in wood, stone or metal to grace their churches or halls. Classrooms and corridors are full of colourful paper or cardboard murals made by pupils and teachers. The Romero Galleries which have a mix of figures, chosen not by a committee but a whole community, show an alternative approach – one that's easy, worth-

while, engaging, specific and full of surprises and smiles.

"They help to showcase the ethos of parish or school and are a simple way of paying tribute to Oscar Romero with something that I'm sure he would have appreciated and welcomed."

Earlier this year, under Hugh's guidance and at the request of the parish priest Fr Danny McEvoy, another gallery was installed, at the parish hall in St Joseph's Catholic Church in Bracknell. The ecumenical Gallery of Good Examples includes figures nominated by 26 candidates for Confirmation. The panel depicts a wide range of inspirational individuals in a surprising line-up, from rugby legend Brian O'Driscoll to cook Mary Berry.

Others include Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and civil rights leader Rosa Parks who carry banners as in a rally, as well as St Joseph, St Margaret Clitherow and, of course, Archbishop Romero.

The tireless and devout septuagenarian creator of the distinctive galleries reveals that his old school song urged pupils to 'die of service, not of rust'. He says he would like to see similar galleries in schools and churches throughout the land. "The value of these galleries is their potential to educate, inspire, intrigue and amuse – and for many years ahead. I'd very much commend parishes and schools to consider one."

Further details about the Romero Galleries are available from: [www.spiritofromero.org/galleries](http://www.spiritofromero.org/galleries)