"You a nun?" This must be the question I am asked more frequently than any other, when I wear my habit in the streets. It usually occurs when I am hurrying to a meeting or rushing to catch a booked train. But this kind of question is a real opportunity for mission, and I try to answer it as fully as time will allow.

There are some surprises, of course. On one occasion I was sitting reading on a train when a lady, seeming to appear from nowhere, suddenly presented herself before me, and with an anxious expression on her face said: "I don't go to Church, but I do mean to." I wondered how I could have prepared for that type of encounter; and yet I felt there must have been some kind of process going on in this lady's life that I was not aware of. She had come to a particular moment in her journey of faith, and seeing me sitting there, she felt she should declare her intention. I often wonder if that lady did start going to church, and if that was the case, I was certainly privileged to be a part of the preparation.

It is hard to know how we can respond to every God-given opportunity which comes our way. But preparation and mission go very much hand in hand, I believe. These little signs of the Kingdom must surely indicate the preparation we need to carry out God's work.

The preparation for a Parish Mission has a clearer framework initially. When I investigated my first mission with a view to leading it, I was told that twelve months preparation would be of benefit to the people. But in one parish the people asked me: "Why this long? What could we possibly do in twelve months that we couldn't do in two?" But I think preparation is much greater than simply carrying out tasks. It helps a parish to work together on a common theme, so that they grow together spiritually. The mission is the focus for future preparation, and like life itself it is an ongoing process. In another parish where I was a team member, the people took this point very seriously. They called their mission "Springing into Life" because it represented a springboard from which they could launch with new energy into the future.

Every mission leader may guide the people through this year of preparation in a slightly different way, but I usually start with a basic timetable covering the ten days or so of the event. A basic plan would include Sunday services, Morning and Evening Prayer, a daily Eucharist, a daily team meeting and provision for meals. If the parish has a regular weekday Eucharist or social event, these would go on to the basic plan at the times the people were used to. Having completed this task there would follow a waiting time as the people of the parish met in their various groups, discussed my suggestions and added a few of their own; and then came back to me with their ideas. I always feel a sense of excitement when the people come up with bright and innovative schemes, and I am asked to include more events, services and
school visits on the timetable. This shows that the people are engaging with the preparation and owning the mission event, and a greater part of the community is prepared to be involved. If there are two or three churches in the parish, I enjoy working with the people and the mission team on parallel services, study groups and events. Towards the end of the preparation time, there is usually a flurry of emails asking for one or more items to be squeezed into the timetable, and I have to be careful in case my team of three might suddenly be doing the work of four.

During this preparation time, I try to encourage a sharing of tasks with more people drawn in as the planning goes on. There would be different groups working on different aspects of the mission, but the most important group from the very beginning is the prayer group. Not only are they responsible for producing the mission prayer, but they encourage others to pray their way through the preparation to the mission itself and on into the future. Every part of the planning is a part of the mission, and every little task and prayer leads into the next stage of preparation. So the mission gains momentum as we gain enthusiasm, and the parish grows spiritually as a result. I always feel it is a privilege to be this closely involved with a parish. But I am very aware that my involvement is short, and the people must be left to continue their own mission in that place. Where I live, however, it is quite a different story.

St Mary's Church in the Parish of the Divine Compassion, Plaistow, takes a fair proportion of my energy and enthusiasm. We plan to have a Franciscan Mission in 2012. Brother John will be leading it and I will take part as a member of the parish. But in fact our mission goes on all the time as we work and worship together, care for each other, make plans to encourage outreach and build community life. One of our outreach opportunities has come through a group called E13 People United, which seeks to bring the people of Plaistow to a greater understanding and knowledge of one another. In May 2011, over 70 people took part in a Faith and Neighbours' Walk linking the five major faiths in Plaistow. The walk was just less than a mile, yet our preparations for it took place over a year. One task was to bring somebody from another faith to the next meeting, which meant that the membership grew, and the tasks naturally multiplied, but they bound us together as a people of faith. Through the planning, we gained in understanding and respect as well as increasing awareness of our rich diversity. We had grown as a group of people by the time we walked together through the streets of Plaistow. If that event was our Mission, then the preparation had been a far longer journey.

I see preparation and mission very much in partnership, with the mission itself as the outward sign - the fruit of our work. But preparation, the basic groundwork, is real work for the Kingdom - God's work in the world.