



14 December, 2017

News:

'Baptists do theology - and do it well'

A new event which gave space to Baptists engaged in theological research took place this week

Despite some weather-related cancellations, more than 70 people gathered for Theology Live! on Monday (11 December) to hear 13 short papers and to interact with the speakers.

The day featured a range of speakers and subjects.

They included Ruth Moriarty, minister Christ Church New Southgate (Baptist & URC LEP), who introduced her research into the church meeting and its practice of discerning the mind of Christ.

She explained she is interested in the reasons for silence and non-participation, and how the meeting can truly reflect the mind of a congregation if it fails to hear from all its members.

'I'd like to reclaim the church meeting by introducing the value of participation,' she said.

The next phase of the research is a series of interviews, which will take place over the next 12 months.

Trevor Neill, minister of Yardley Wood Baptist Church, gave an insight into his research exploring the failure of Baptists in Birmingham to engage with the white working classes.

In an address which quoted Margaret Thatcher's understanding of Christian faith, he explained how there was an over-emphasis on personal salvation, which is no longer counter-cultural in today's atomised society.

He spoke of the error of viewing people as projects. 'What are we converting people from, and discipling them to?' He added that the thinking of many congregations

needs to catch up with the activity of projects such as foodbanks and debt counselling services.

Other papers included a focus on hospitality in the Old Testament, and how it's not as straightforward as it seems; exploring the inclusion of physically disabled people in Baptist church communities; Baptists and celebrating the Lord's Supper; and universalism and the revisiting of purgatory.

After each paper, where time permitted, there was an opportunity for discussion.

The day concluded with Baptist theologian Steve Holmes offering some thoughts. He asked what it means to do Baptist theology: does it mean theology done by Baptists, theology done for Baptists, theology done with a focus on specific Baptist concerns, theology done in a Baptist way? Steve said that Theology Live! represented all these ways.

He reminded those present that there is a history within the Baptist tradition of saying theology is not needed: we just need to read the Bible and do what it says. The place of the theologian and scholar can thus be viewed with suspicion. However, he said Baptist theology at its best is always rooted in the local church, Baptist theology is most often done in the conversation between pastor-theologians and their congregations.

The day was organised by Simon Woodman co minister at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London, where Theology Live! took place, and Andy Goodliff, minister of Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend.

Simon said, 'It was exciting to have a group of over 70 Baptists gathering to share in a day of theological input and discussion. Despite the weather and cancelled trains, people came from all over the UK to hear some excellent papers.

'Sometimes we hear worries that Baptists don't 'do theology' any more, but if Theology Live! is an indication - they do, and they do it well, and they want to do more of it.

'Questions remain about how our next generation of pastor-scholars will be funded and trained, and these are important questions; it will be a great loss to us all if people with a gifting and calling to scholarship are denied the opportunity to serve our Union in this way.

'But we clearly have a rising generation of able theological thinkers who are willing to answer the call to think deeply about the things of God in relation to Christ's body the church.

'My hope is that the relationships and conversations that begun at Theology Live! will continue in ways that positively shape our shared future together as Baptists.'

Andy explained how the day had built on previous events: the near decade of consultations organised by Paul Fiddes and others called Baptists Doing Theology in Context; the work of Sally Nelson and the Northern Theological Consultation; and Catalyst Live, organised by BMS World Mission.

'We want to continue what they started, and are doing,' Andy said, 'but recognise that sometimes being a Baptist theologian/biblical scholar can be a lonely thing. We don't believe it has to be.

'We felt the papers were all of high quality and got us thinking in lots of different ways and reflects that Baptists are doing theology. We knew that already, but hopefully more people are aware of that now too.

'We definitely hope to do another, all the signs from the day and noises from people were "Yes please." We are both committed to fostering spaces and opportunities for thinkers and scholars, pastors and practitioners to both reflect and inspire on the task of theology.'

The talks at Theology Live! are available to listen to here:

<http://www.bloomsbury.org.uk/single-post/2017/12/11/Theology-Live-2017>

Baptist church on Songs of Praise

A Baptist church whose minister is battling cancer was featured on Songs of Praise last weekend

Filming for the BBC's long-running programme recently took place at Hope Baptist Church in Plymouth, with the resulting edition broadcast on Sunday (10 December) at 3pm.

It all came about after the show's producers were moved by the story of minister Andrew Gardiner, 59. Andrew was diagnosed with bowel cancer in May last year, which had spread to his liver by the summer of 2016.

During his treatment he has experienced sudden bursts of creativity, writing numerous songs and poems testifying to his faith in God. He has developed a new ministry, called Rising Hope, which has resulted in two singles with a third due to be released in December.

The writing was also ignited by the visit of Songs of Praise: in the four days between receiving the initial call from the show and filming taking place Andrew was inspired to write an Advent poem.

Andrew has arranged for the poem to be printed on bookmarks, which he is now encouraging churches to give to visitors and members at their festive services, and individuals to use as gifts for friends and family (for more information see below).

'The people making the show said it would be great if I had a poem about Advent, which I could read as part of the service,' Andrew said. 'At the time I didn't have one, but as soon as I came off the phone the words were forming in my head.'

'I wrote the first two verses immediately, the next four not too long after. When I next spoke to them, I said "I now have a poem".'

It was in keeping with his experiences over the past 18 months. His songs, which have sold on iTunes and racked up several thousand views on Youtube, have all formed quickly. He believes they have been given to him from God.

'I cannot explain it any other way,' Andrew continued. 'I don't sit down and think I'm going to write a song now. They've just come to me, and I've caught them.'

It's led to numerous opportunities. He's been featured regularly in the Plymouth Herald, while in March he was interviewed by Clare Balding for the Radio 2 Good Morning Sunday show, resulting in one of his songs being played just before Ed Sheeran. Now his story, his compositions and his congregation will be before a nationwide audience on Sunday.

'I still have a calling to proclaim Christ and spread the gospel,' Andrew said. 'Through all this God has given me a platform to speak about Christ.'

'I can hardly believe that a section of the True Identity video (above) will end up being shown on BBC 1.'

'Life is just a bit crazy!'

The Songs of Praise filming almost didn't happen. On the day Andrew woke up with temperature hitting 40 degrees. Just hours before filming he was due to begin he was covered in cold flannels and making prayer requests on Facebook. Gradually he became well enough to participate.

He was interviewed in his home at length, before his family was filmed as though it was already Christmas. The cameras then moved to the church for service. Many of the congregation had rallied at short notice to pack the building, which also included visitors interested in appearing in the programme. Carols and the poem were filmed, before Andrew, not wanting to miss an opportunity, preached a gospel message.

Andre Gardiner Songs of Praise

'120 people turned up, at three days' notice,' Andrew said. 'When they finished filming the band just carried on worshipping.'

'It was fantastic, incredible.'

Songs of Praise was broadcast on 10 December on BBC1 at 3pm. Catch up on iPlayer <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09jhb8p>

Big rise in Night Shelter use

In 2016-17 more people than ever before were forced to use church and community night shelters

Projects in the Housing Justice Church and Community Night Shelter Network provided emergency accommodation to almost three thousand (2923) people experiencing homelessness during the winter of 2016/17.

This is an increase of 53 per cent on the previous year's figure, and double the number of people receiving support in 2012.

Church and Community night shelters are voluntary led projects, encompassing people of all faiths and none who staff emergency shelters during the winter period to provide emergency accommodation for people with nowhere else to go. Guests are provided with a camp bed, bedding and a hot meal, usually in a church building, community building or other faith building. Most receive no funding from government or local authorities.

During the winter of 2016/17 on average, each shelter remained open for 102 nights, 40 per cent of guests stayed in the shelter for less than a week, while 30 per cent stayed longer than a month.

Of the 53 community-based projects who were able contribute data for the year, each hosted an average of 55 people experiencing homelessness, if this ratio were replicated across the full network of Church and Community Night Shelter Projects across the country, it would equate to approximately 6,000 people (projected figure 5,885).

Just two years ago, this figure stood at 3,640 guests across 65 shelters, showing significant growth in the network's capacity.

Underpinning this huge rise in guests at night shelters is the significant rise in rough sleepers since 2011 (134 per cent) owing to issues such as welfare reform and the ending of a tenancy in the private rented sector.

As demand grows church and community night shelters are undergoing a rapid expansion; two years ago, there were 65 shelters operating in the network. Today, there are 107 projects in the Housing Justice Network.

Throughout the year, the network saw contributions from 4,284 volunteers across the country, contributing a total of 273,605 hours. This equates to an average of 6,673 hours per shelter, representing a significant investment from each community.

Kathy Mohan, Chief Executive of Housing Justice said, 'Today's figures show that the housing crisis is becoming a homelessness crisis with such a significant rise in the numbers of people being forced to sleep on camp beds in church halls up and down the country.

'Typically guests staying in night shelters will not be recorded in street-counts and official measures of homelessness. Street rough sleeping, and potentially street fatalities would be higher without these incredible projects and their volunteers.

'Tonight and throughout the winter, thousands of people will put in a shift at their local shelter to give hospitality to those experiencing homelessness. We commend the exceptional work of these shelter projects and the compassionate, professional way they provide hospitality.

'But these appalling numbers must be a wake up call to local authorities and to the government that a significant number of people are relying on voluntary services for that most basic of essentials, shelter.

'The government should must take note of the work grassroots projects are carrying out and work with them to achieve better outcomes for guests in night shelters. Most of all the government should look urgently at what can be done to support these projects, increase bed spaces and plan more sustainable housing solutions for night shelter guests.'

Mission despite obstacles

Even in the face of threats against them, the young Baptist network in Turkey is discovering a hunger for the gospel. By Daniel Trusiewicz

Turkey may be called the cradle of Christianity. Some missionary journeys of the apostle Paul took place in today's Turkey, and the seven churches (Rev: 2-3) were located there too. Nowadays more than 80 per cent of nearly 70 million Turkish citizens claim to be Muslims and all the Christians counted together comprise less than one per cent...

There are eight associated Baptist congregations in Turkey which together form an alliance. The main goal of this still young network is to cooperate and encourage each other for witness as well as overcome the obstacles.

Their chairman is Ertan Cevik, pastor from Izmir (ancient Smyrna) and pastor Orhan Picaklar from Samsun (on the Black Sea coast) plays an important role in this cooperation.

Story of Pastor Orhan

Several years ago Orhan found an advert for a free New Testament. He had requested one and some-time later the post brought a copy of the Gospel of John.

He was very impressed while reading it but did not know anybody in his city to talk about the issues he had just read.

Later a change of jobs moved Orhan to another Turkish city and he continued reading the New Testament. One day a colleague at work shared about his Christian faith and they began studying the Bible together. Soon one other believer joined in, and later he invited them all to a Christian church.

After a few years Orhan had been called to the Black Sea coast and start a new church there, so together with his family moved to Samsun (a population of around 500,000). Soon he started sharing the gospel and found many receptive people and the new believers asked him to be their pastor.

Ever since Orhan and his family have been in Samsun they experienced numerous attacks on them. Letters and emails with threats as well as aggressive phone calls have been regular offences against them. A sheer sign of a cross or another Christian symbol could instigate outrageous anger of the extremists who would viciously insult the attenders, break windows in a Christian building etc. Several years ago Orhan got kidnapped by a group of extremists who held him in a custody wanting to stop the Christian activity, however without any success...

Agape Church

This was the beginning of the Agape Church in Samsun. The group opened a website and discovered that there were thousands of entries which was really effective method in reaching out to local people. Numerous people visited this newly opened church and wanted to ask questions about the Christian faith. Besides the website visitors are also drawn through personal contacts.

The congregation in Samsun is like a large family. There is a great deal of devotion and strong spiritual bond that connects the believers. They meet several times during the week, not just for a worship service. They organise regular open door baptisms, usually in a pool or in the Black Sea.

No public Christian events are allowed except for some activities in prisons. And, yes - they do have many requests from prisoners who ask for visits.

Recently many refugees from Syria, Iran and Afghanistan have arrived in Turkey and the Agape Church takes care of some of them by way of distributing food, blankets, coal etc.

The Agape Church - after many years of trying - has finally received a permission to build its own sanctuary that will serve their growing ministry and an opening of this new building is planned for December 10, 2017.

Agape is the only evangelical church within a radius of six hours drive in any direction. They continue the work of discipling believers who are scattered throughout this vast area as their goal is to establish more churches. The region includes 16 towns and is inhabited by more than 7 million people.

Pastor Orhan often says: "In our country every Christian is a missionary who should be ready to suffer for faith."

Church Planting in Ordu

The Agape Church is currently planting a new congregation in the coastal city of Ordu, 130 km away from Samsun where many people are ready for the gospel.

They meet regularly for a Bible study and worship, and the majority are Iranian refugees. An assistant of pastor Orhan from Ordu is being trained to lead this new planted congregation and this is what he wrote in the recent report:

"We had about 20-25 people attending the services before last Christmas but earlier this year many Iranian refugees arrived and some of them joined our group. We started hosting over 70 people in our 30 square meter room, so now there are two services one after another, and 2 midweek Bible studies as well as other meetings in Turkish, Farsi and English.

Yes, we feel overwhelmed with the Iranians but also several Turks visit us. Often the Iranians bring to church their Turkish friends. There are many people who come and ask questions. Our congregation has grown to 150 people of different nationalities.

The follow up is a challenge as the workers are few... Another challenge is that we often work through translators.

Recently two Turks made professions of faith. They attend meetings and read the Scriptures on their own. This summer we baptized 10 new believers. We see an urgent need for more leaders and currently are training some Turkish believers and the English-speaking Iranians. We are very grateful to our mother church from Samsun as they provide much help. They visit us every Thursday which together with prayers, advise and encouragement are priceless."

Your intercessory prayers for the Christians in Turkey are invaluable!

Daniel Trusiewicz is Mission Coordinator in the European Baptist Federation (EBF). The European Baptist Federation, with the generous help of its Mission Partners, has developed partnerships to facilitate evangelism and the planting of new Baptist churches in Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. This story first appeared on the website of the EBF, and is republished with permission.

Reflection

Three lessons to learn from events in 2017

By Chris Goswami

After the shocks of 2016 it seemed like there was nothing left to happen!

What with the UK's BREXIT vote and the election of America's unpredictable president – how do you top that? Well 2017 didn't have the same shock value, but it did have its share of defining events. Here are just three – with three still to come.

We're not becoming morally better, we're becoming confused

Fifteen years ago Michael Fallon (the recently resigned UK Defence Secretary) placed his hand on the knee of a female journalist.

Was it predatory sexual harassment, or was it clumsy and stupid? What was the context? Was there light-hearted banter? I don't know. But if you read the female journalist's account, she regards it as an amusing story from her past that was blown out of all proportion. She says we appear to be returning to an age where:

“... every interaction between a male politician and a woman is now the subject of righteous investigation”.

More serious was the recent suicide of Carl Sargeant, the Welsh Labour Minister. Sargeant was immediately sacked when allegations of inappropriate conduct emerged against him. He was never actually told what he was being accused of. But there was a quick trial by Twitter and four days later he took his life. His family claims there was a lack of common courtesy and natural justice.

Have we entered a frame of mind where we automatically and self-righteously believe almost any accusation? Our media has, and I think maybe we have. Accusations get media coverage whilst an accusation that later proves false does not

get equal treatment. It's just not a great headline to say "... umm it didn't happen after all".

We need to take care. There are sexual predator-villains in our midst. Jimmy Savilles, Harvey Weinstains; and even worse, those who operate invisibly in our offices, schools, organisations, and, we must say it, churches. Michael Fallon also has other accusations against him – and in any case it's never acceptable to place a hand on the knee of someone who isn't intimately known to us. But we need a proportionate response. And we don't help the cause of young women by telling them they are all victims.

Lining up to shout "burn the witch" after every #metoo accusation may make us feel morally superior. But it does not make us morally better.

Christians with traditional views are now the Heretics

Do you have opinions which you believe to be Biblical and traditional? If you do, then YOUR views are unacceptable.

Traditional, Biblical views do not conform to the politically correct agenda of our liberal western society. In that sense, you are promoting unacceptable opinions. You are a heretic.

Over the past year examples included a church school banned from conducting assemblies and teaching on "traditional marriage" disappearing from school lessons on sex and relationships. Oxford University came close to banning its Christian Union. And we heard about the Christian parents blocked from adoption because they think children should have a mum and a dad. In every case, it's the traditional view that is shouted down.

This topic boiled over in June when Christian Tim Farron resigned as leader of the Liberal Democrats. This was because of his answers to a journalist who repeatedly peppered him with the question "Is gay sex a sin? ... Is gay sex a sin?" Farron was singled out because he dared to have a view based on his faith (even though, bizarrely, his view is liberal!). At his resignation he commented:

"I seem to be the subject of suspicion because of what I believe and who my faith is in ... we are kidding ourselves if we think we yet live in a tolerant, liberal society."

Well known commentators and interviewers behave as though ANY opinion arising from faith must be ridiculed and excluded. Shows of faith are allowable at times of national ceremony like a royal wedding, but otherwise they regard such opinions as intolerant and a dangerous threat to society. Unfortunately, these people fail to see

that their position is itself therefore an intolerant worldview that does not allow any other worldview.

The search for spirituality has never been greater

Every year a survey pops up somewhere that claims to show a national decline in faith.

And 2017 was no exception. In September the British Social Attitudes survey reported that 53% of people in the UK are now “non-religious”.

That sounds like bad news.

But this survey was not about faith. It was about people’s association with organisations such as the CofE or the Catholic Church. We already know fewer people attend formal Sunday services. That’s not news. People have been leaving mainstream Sunday services since the 1950s. Before that we had “Christendom”, when everyone had to go to church to fit in with society. You became a Christian by inertia, you were born into it. Although some hearken back to the good old days when the pews were packed, they were packed with nominal believers, attending against their will.

But not only is this not newsworthy, it misses what really is interesting: the spirituality we see all around us.

Successive studies report that 50–60% of people claim to have been “influenced by a presence or a power”. Nick Spencer from the think-tank Theos in a recent interview stated that eccentric and paranormal spiritual beliefs have been on the rise over several generations. A study earlier this year concluded that the main reason for young people coming to faith was a church building. And of course there is always interest in meditation techniques, horoscopes, an after-life and so forth.

It makes sense if you think about it. Few of our friends are hardened atheists ie would state “there is no God”. Most have some personal idea of spirituality. It is often primitive – like when a minister friend of mine was asked to baptise a dog (seriously) — but it’s there.

We can dismiss it as superstition, or we can try to work with it. Primitive spirituality can be a millstone or a stepping stone for churches. Which one? Well that’s down to us.

We live in unsettling times (as well as interesting). We see that society is morally confused, and yet wants to marginalise the clarity that can come from clear Biblical

teaching. But we also see people who are spiritually aware, often searching, if we can only tune in to their search.