



22 August, 2018

News:

'It became like Noah's time when floods destroyed all.'

Aid agencies have been stepping up efforts in the flood-stricken Indian state of Kerala

Though rains have mostly subsided, an unknown number of people are still stranded or without food and water, and resources at packed relief camps have been stretched. More than 300 have died as a result of the flooding, and "thousands remain marooned," according to BBC News.

GFA (Gospel for Asia) World-supported teams have used boats to search for and rescue some of the missing, and visited relief camps to deliver urgently needed supplies, including medicines, food, water and toiletries. Workers at GFA World-supported Bridge of Hope centres have also been distributing supplies.

Dr. Daniel Johnson, the leader of GFA World's-supported medical ministry which has been helping with the relief effort, told how he and the rescue team he was part of had to spend the night in the upper floor of a flooded home because they were unable to return to their base in the dark.

One man who joined with GFA World-supported workers spoke of working for eight hours to save his mother-in-law and some of her neighbours.

'We were all in neck-deep or chest-deep flood waters,' he said. 'It became like Noah's time when floods destroyed all.' Eventually, by 'God's grace,' they were able to get to safety.

GFA World founder, Dr. K.P. Yohannan, who visited relief camps to help with the distributions said, 'Even as the immediate crisis ends, the need for help will continue for a long time. Tens of thousands have been affected by the monsoon, and it will take years before any of them have any normal life, because they have lost everything.'

Yohannan appealed for continued prayer and support for those in 'desperate need' in the region.

'This flooding has devastated crops and completely ruined homes,' he said. 'It will take the helping hands of many around the world for the people of Kerala to get their feet back on dry ground.'

Donations to support GFA World's disaster relief work in Kerala can be made at www.gfauk.org/flood.

The Blaby story - lessons from church growth

A story of God growing His kingdom through the older generation, over-ruling our pre-conceptions

It was at the age of 39 that I fell head over heels in love with Jesus - quite late - but it is a love that has grown. I am as passionate about Him today as when I first met Him. My late husband then did the same and through New Wine, we became very involved in the healing ministry. I had no thoughts of leading a Baptist church.

But at the age of 61, God called me to lead Blaby Baptist Church - my first church leadership role - with no official training or qualifications (and still none). I had been in the Baptist Union for six months when I was asked the question, "Do you want your own church?" from a regional minister who did not know me and who had never met me. I immediately said, "Yes" and it was only later when reflecting on this conversation that I concluded that we both must have responded to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

So, 18 months later I was appointed to Blaby where I met a group of older people who still wanted their church to grow.

This was going to be our first lesson - that God can use people of any generation to grow his kingdom if they have that passion for Him.

At that time there were about 25 regular people in the congregation on a Sunday morning mostly in late 70s/80s and in many ways, they were back in the dark ages. Administration was done on a type-writer, the constitution was on foolscap paper and I was the only one with a computer. Worship was what I call a four-hymn sandwich of traditional hymns played on the organ.

Today, I am still the only paid member of staff - part-time. All other activities are organised by the congregation. But we now have about 90 in church shared amongst

the morning, Messy Church and uniformed congregations, and we have a worship group with more modern music. We also have a community of about 200 people using the building weekly and this gives us so many opportunities to share the gospel.

We did learn very early on that dependency on God was essential for kingdom growth.

Having passion for kingdom growth was great, but that did not mean doing things how we wanted. I was involved in numerous conversations on how the church wanted children and teenagers as they had had in the past (about 200 of them) but even practically that was not going to happen. Where were these youngsters coming from and who was going to run the groups?

We had to seek God's will for His church at this time and the only way to do this was to pray and seek His vision.

Physically the older people were not strong enough to undertake a huge amount of outreach but they could pray and although this is the obvious thing to do, sometimes we do put our dreams before God's plans.

As we prayed, God gave us a picture of what the church would look like - a family of mixed ages whose lives were centred on Jesus. We were also given advice that church growth would come through "welcome and worship", and so concentrated on those two areas. Within a month of praying two pianists, one of whom was a worship leader, offered to play once a month, so immediately we could start to introduce some more modern songs. We continued to pray and I continued to sow vision every month reminding people of the picture God had given us so that we knew where we are going - and we kept to it,

And people have come in, not the families that I had expected but interestingly mostly from broken church backgrounds. It seemed as if God was growing his team, putting in place key people for the future. We had to learn that sometimes God does things differently to our ideas.

The people that came stayed because of the welcome: simply being friendly and giving them time to chat and get to know one another over a cup of coffee. It seems very simple but being welcoming was key to our growth.

However, the path was not always smooth and even wanting to serve coffee after every service instead of once a month brought the objection that nobody would want to do it. So I made the coffee and although the objectors still only stayed once a month, soon the coffee rota was full! I also began to have people for coffee/meals and today many of the congregation do the same which develops and strengthens fellowship.

It is important to model what you are hoping for

Early on I also realised early on was that Blaby was a church that lacked confidence in itself. They had been battered by always being compared to larger churches and had even been advised to close. They needed “success” to regain that confidence in themselves in the Lord. So we held a good old-fashioned Christmas bazaar, something they were used to doing and felt comfortable with. People came and the reaction of the congregation was “was wow-this is good-and we have done it.” You could see them grow. It is crucial to give your people confidence as success breeds success.

Importantly this type of event has given gave me opportunity to talk to people, and out of this has come one of our current leaders. So we learnt not to dismiss using the old-fashioned ordinary events as a vehicle for the gospel.

Funerals/traditional carol services and Christingles continue to bring people in to faith. We also celebrate everything we can, from baptisms to wedding anniversaries and even membership. This makes people feel special and gives confidence to the congregation as they see the church grow.

We continued to pray and the next significant thing was that God brought in a young lady who was pregnant and passionate about the gospel. When her son was born she started an informal drop-in morning for Mums and Toddlers. We built up relationships with the mums and they now regularly come to Messy Church.

God brings in the people he needs to grow His church.

We have since had worship leaders, children’s workers, a treasurer and administrator and a man with experience in building a new kitchen which we needed, all at a time when they were needed before the church could grow.

God’s timing is perfect for His plans

So far it is a lovely story of a growing church.

But of course, it is never all plain sailing. A couple of groups struggled to keep going. I did not close them down but let them run their course and let them make the decision.

Then we had a major split and 10 people left-a large number for a small church. On the surface it was due to me moving the piano to make room for the sound equipment - all of about two metres - but underneath it was about a power struggle. There was a group that wanted things their way, and not the way the church was going.

My leadership came under threat, I was bullied and verbally abused. At one point I even felt physically threatened as my front door was battered. It was the nearest that I have ever come to a nervous breakdown. My deacons were very supportive but they too suffered huge stress. And there was no support for us.

We had to rely totally on the Lord, the best place to be but so hard. But I never felt God say give up. The church had already caused the breakdown of three pastors in the past and there was a sense that if I did not stand firm it will happen again and it would never grow.

The situation ended with a special meeting in which we received a vote of total confidence to continue. The 10 then left - and although the hassle still continued until about 18 months ago we survived! Through all of this I felt God saying that He had to prune the vine before we could grow.

And it was after that that the church really started to blossom both numerically and spiritually.

In times of difficulty we learnt to stand firm and rely on God and know that God honours that.

Blaby has also seen significant spiritual growth as God has poured out His Holy Spirit in power, even on the older generation! We have seen healings and miracles, people growing in their faith and operating in the prophetic, all of which have been essential for growing the kingdom of God.

We cannot undertake God's work without the power of His Holy Spirit.

We are currently developing a strategic leadership team to fully implement God's vision. We will always be a "work in progress" and will face many changes but those changes will be under God's guidance. We continue to pray and seek His will. The importance of listening to God in prayer is still the most significant activity we can undertake here.

Pauline Wills is the pastor of Blaby Baptist Church in Leicestershire.

Pauline was a participant in a recent Firestarter event - these events explore church growth in Baptist churches.

Uniformed groups and social integration

The role uniformed youth groups play in social integration has been highlighted in a new study

Social integration study Highlights from the study, by ComRes and commissioned by the Youth United Foundation, include:

Uniformed youth groups are an effective way of encouraging young people to mix socially with those who are different from them – 84 per cent of uniformed youth report that at least some of the members of their group are different from them in some way (i.e. they're part of a diverse group)

Uniformed young people are more likely than non-uniformed youth to say that the contact they have had with people that are different to them was positive

Uniformed youth groups help to foster a sense of social responsibility and connection to British society and British values – members are twice as likely as their non-uniformed counterparts to say they take part in social action at least once a week (58 per cent vs 30 per cent)

Uniformed and non-uniformed young people are similarly likely to be from a non-Christian faith (8 per cent vs 6 per cent), although uniformed young people are more likely to say their religion is Christian (50 per cent vs 30 per cent), and are less likely to say they're atheist (13 per cent vs 24 per cent)

Girls' Brigade England & Wales (GB) has been involved in the study, with GB group 1st Huncote, near Leicester, was chosen as a location for some of the 52 qualitative interviews conducted among uniformed youth, their parents/guardians, and volunteer group leaders.

One GB parent said 'The girls need to learn to interact with different people of different ages from different backgrounds and that's what the group provides; that's invaluable.'

GB's Director Jules Murdy said, 'These findings are good news for all uniformed youth groups, not just GB, in showing some of the positive impacts we have on young people.'

'GB groups are very diverse and this social mixing shows how relevant we are as we celebrate our 125th anniversary year, and on the back of our recent appearance on BBC1's Songs of Praise.'

The report's executive summary stated, 'Uniformed youth groups have a significant role to play in encouraging social mixing and integration amongst young people from different backgrounds, as evidenced by this research.'

'With continued investment in their capacity to actively encourage a diverse, inclusive environment, these groups have the potential to extend their impact even further.'

GB Ministries is home to four key initiatives that specialise in enabling this generation of (primarily) girls and women to openly explore and engage with real life and Christian faith in a fun, informative and hopeful way. They are The Girls' Brigade England & Wales, koko, The Esther Collective, and UK Girl.

The full ComRes report, which launched on 18 July, can be read at <http://yuf.org.uk/impact-reports/>

A women's conference, for men

Are you a man who wants to address gender inequality? A new women's conference, for men and organised by a Baptist minister, could be for you

Just Voices has been organised by Baptist minister Rich Blake-Lobb to provide an opportunity for men to hear and engage with issues of sexism, prejudice and unconscious bias experienced daily by the women in our lives.

Six women will share their stories, experiences and life lessons at the conference, which takes place at Yiewsley Baptist Church in West London – the church Rich pastors – on 11 October.

Rich explained the conference does not seek to criticise or condemn, but to 'enable reflection with a view to contributing to positive and effective change in our lives, work places, and places of worship.'

'We've all heard about the experiences of women thanks to #MeToo and revelations about gender pay (such as that at the BBC), but many men feel helpless or unable to get involved,' he said. 'Just Voices 2018 is concerned with empowering both women and men.'

'Women and men need to work together to create a culture of equality and Just Voices Conference 2018 aims to move the conversation forward.'

Contributors include: Hayley Barnard (Managing Partner, MIX Diversity Developers - Depending on English Channel Swim), Wendy Bray (Associate Priest, All Saints Clifton), Lindsay Caplen (Church Consultant, LICC), Gemma Dunning (Baptist Minister, Leytonstone United Free Church), Natalie King (Writer and Activist) and Kirsi Cobb (Lecturer, Cliff College).

In the press release about the conference, Rich shares his belief the church should be leading the way with regards to issues of justice and equality; 'yet sadly, it often lags behind. This is a chance to turn that around.'

In a blog post, he explained more, describing the anger he felt in writing an essay in early 2017 about the role of women in Baptist history.

'I was expecting a disappointing picture of history but a hopeful outlook for the future,' he wrote. But some of the issues faced by women 'started to make my blood boil.' He cited examples of churches sending someone for ministerial training will offering financial support to a man but not a woman; churches offering a lower stipend to women 'because their husband will support them financially'; and how churches who call women as ministers are typically smaller.

'I thought I knew about gender equity but until I stopped to listen I realised I had no idea,' Rich (pictured) continued. Wondering about what he could do with this anger, he realised there are 'limited spaces for men to listen to women and to allow ourselves to be transformed by the stories we hear.'

Just Voices is therefore 'one step towards making a difference'.

'If my ideas change, my actions change and maybe the world around me changes one small step at a time,' Rich wrote. 'If others do likewise we can make a difference and maybe the future could be hopeful.'

'They may just be voices but just voices can have far reaching consequences if we listen and respond.'

Prime Minister award for Martin

Baptist church member who founded a website that connects homeless people with food and shelter has been honoured

On Monday this week (20 August) Martin Stone of Muswell Hill Baptist Church received the daily Points of Light award, which the Prime Minister's Office uses to recognise outstanding individual volunteers.

Martin received the award for his work on Next Meal, an innovative website that uses GPS technology to help direct homeless people to places where they can access food and support on a 24-hour basis.

Martin was inspired by seeing technology at bus-stops showing when to expect the next service to develop a similar service that could benefit homeless people. The Next Meal website is designed to use GPS to help people find their nearest place of support and is easily accessible on mobile phones.

Since its launch, Next Meal is now helping more than 40 rough sleepers a day in London and has connected with over 120 community support centres. It also recently launched in Plymouth.

Another feature of Next Meal is Next Meal cards, which can be given instead of money to homeless people who are begging.

Martin is the director of Muswell Hill Soup Kitchen, which is based at the Baptist church, and said he was 'very surprised, thrilled and humbled by this award'.

'I just had a simple idea and, with the help of others, turned it into a reality,' he explained. 'I encourage everyone wherever they are, and what circumstances they are in, to just go out and enjoy doing the same.'

'There are so many kind people in so many organisations offering so much help to the most vulnerable homeless people. I have been fortunate to work with many of them through the Muswell Hill Churches Soup Kitchen.'

'Next Meal has grown out of that, and tries to use technology in the most efficient way possible to link people in need with the wonderful local provision available all round the country. I am delighted that so early in its development, my work in 'Next Meal, which is in fact the work of many, has been recognised as a Point of Light.'

'This award has inspired us all in our efforts to help our disadvantaged homeless to access the support that might enable them to turn their lives around.'

In a personal letter to Martin, Prime Minister Theresa May said, 'Your work to connect people sleeping rough with nearby support is helping some of the most vulnerable members of our society access the help they need to get back on their feet.'

Catherine West, MP for Hornsey & Wood Green said, 'I'm delighted that Martin Stone is receiving this award for his innovative Next Meal website. The rise in rough sleepers is a stain on our society and too many vulnerable people are slipping through the cracks, struggling to access the support they need.'

'Next Meal is a practical response to the human stories behind the statistics and, thanks to Martin's work, it's helping homeless people across London every day.'

Next Meal is currently available in London and Plymouth. Martin is working to extend its reach in other towns and cities. Visit nextmeal.co.uk.