

BAPTISTS

Summer 2023

TOGETHER

GOD IS AT WORK

JOHN 5:17

MY FATHER IS ALWAYS
WORKING, AND SO AM I

News / Interviews / Prayer / Comment / Events
The magazine for the Baptist Union of Great Britain

 **BAPTISTS
TOGETHER**



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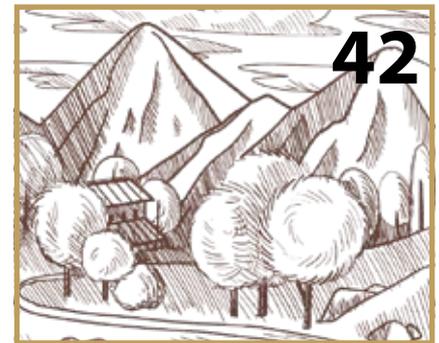
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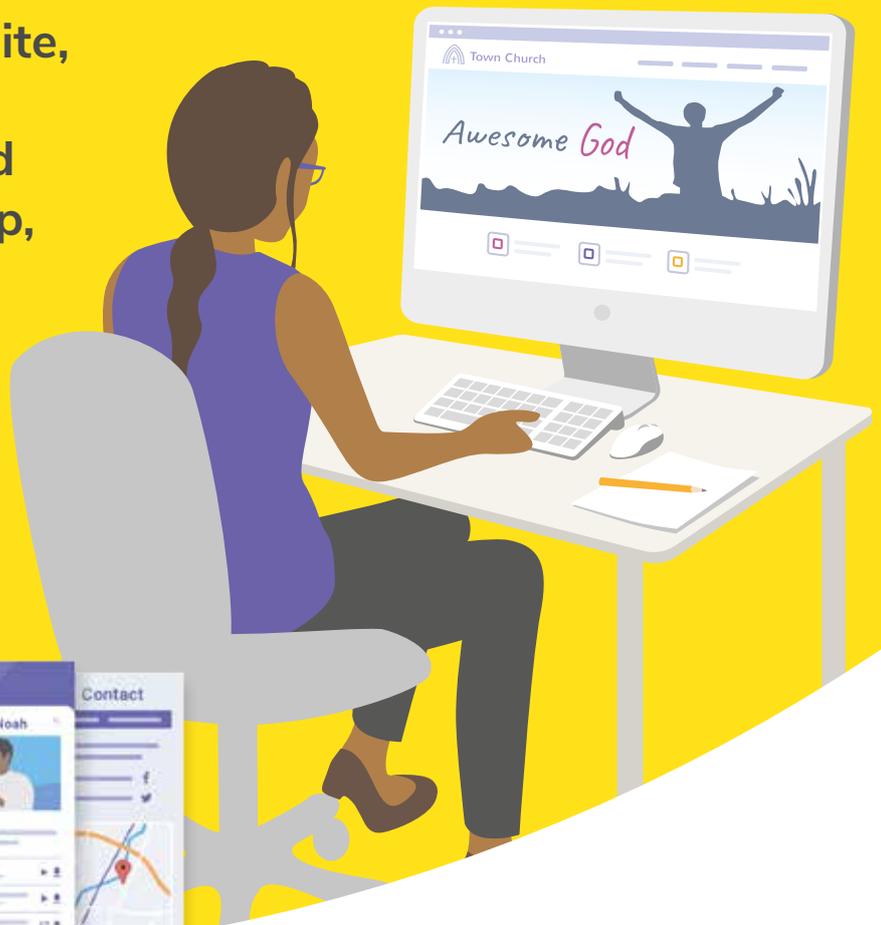
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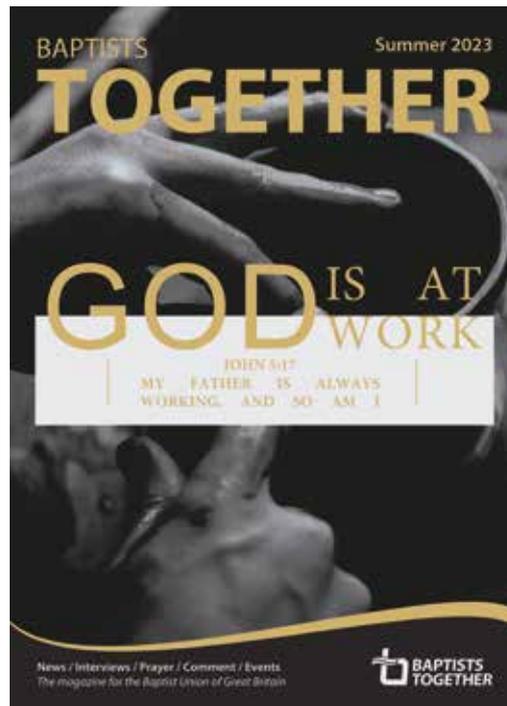
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It's easy to be pessimistic about the state of the Christian faith in the UK. The latest Census results point to fewer people describing themselves as Christian. As Baptists Together overall, our numbers are lower, our financial resources squeezed and we are closing churches faster than we are planting them. Our situation is replicated in many denominations. It can seem many simply aren't interested in or receptive to the life-changing message of Jesus.

And yet... that's not the whole story. As General Secretary Lynn Green writes, 'Death, struggle and suffering are present, but the life of Jesus is present too.' People are coming to faith in our churches, seeing their lives turned around when they encounter Jesus. God is shaping and inspiring us to do new and creative things, and we are seeing his kingdom come. There is hope. God is at work!



The current edition of *Baptists Together* magazine seeks to capture this. We are featuring more church stories than normal to give a snapshot of the different ways Baptists are responding to God's mission in their context (and there were so many more we could have

highlighted). Many have lived through hard, barren times - and in some cases, closure was seriously considered. Many tried things that didn't work. Many are small churches. And yet... here they are, sharing their stories because they want to encourage their wider Baptist family.

This doesn't mean we are not facing some testing challenges, and some of the articles highlight those difficulties. It is, however, evidence of another narrative - one in which God is moving, just like he always has. The verse we've highlighted on our front cover was spoken by Jesus in response to the constraints of the day. "My father is always working," he says in John 5:17, "and so am I".

What was true then remains so now. We pray that you'll be encouraged by the stories you read here and gain a fresh understanding of how God is at work where you are.

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THE HOPE OF the treasure WITHIN

BY LYNN GREEN

Sometimes I feel like I inhabit two worlds as a leader. In the world where I connect with local churches, regional and college colleagues, I am constantly encouraged by stories of hope. Stories of Christ-centred love, prayer, serving and mission. Stories of creativity, adaptability, passion, dedication and imagination. This edition of our magazine is testament to that: packed full of story after story of the amazing and inspiring things that God is doing in and through our movement. Our Baptist family at its beautiful and contextual best!

Yet I also inhabit another world at the same time. As a church leader in the UK in the 21st century I also have to face into the loss of Christendom and all that entails. It's pretty bleak. All the metrics

we have tracked so faithfully over the years as a Baptist family are headed in the wrong direction. And this is not just a blip, this is a consistent, slow and steady decline over many years. Overall, we are closing churches faster than we are planting them. The number of members in our churches is also decreasing steadily. The financial resources we share among the family to enable mission and ministry are declining too while demand for resources is increasing year-on-year in so many different ways. And even though we have the DNA of a flexible, responsive, grassroots movement at heart, it's also a reality that our complex structure makes it difficult for us to tackle these issues of decline. Most can agree that significant change is needed, but finding a consensus about a way forward is altogether different.

I AM CONSTANTLY ENCOURAGED BY STORIES OF HOPE... AGAINST A BACKDROP OF GROWING SECULARISATION ACROSS THE UK

But of course, it's not just us experiencing this. Even as we rejoice with those denominations and streams that are seeing growth, we do so realising this is against a backdrop of growing secularisation across the UK. The most recent census figures remind us that our experience of decline needs to be seen and understood in the context of much bigger cultural shifts. The census data reveals 'For the first time in a census of England and Wales, less than half of the population

(46.2 per cent, 27.5 million people) described themselves as 'Christian', a 13.1 percentage point decrease from 59.3 per cent (33.3 million) in 2011.¹ In a recent article, Baptist minister-in-training Amanda Higgin comments, 'For young people, however, this outcome was less than surprising. Christians born since 1980... have been raised in an increasingly post-Christian society.' (See page 44 and baptist.org.uk/higgin)

Two worlds. Both are true. What are we to make of that?

The passage I have been dwelling in recently is 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. It offers a picture which, I think, helps us to understand our present circumstance. Treasure held in jars of clay. How relevant and timely that feels.

DEATH, STRUGGLE AND
SUFFERING ARE PRESENT,
BUT THE LIFE OF JESUS IS
PRESENT TOO

Clay jars are ordinary, unremarkable, and functional. They are perhaps rough and chunky and unlikely to be beautifully decorated. They are affordable, breakable and disposable. As one commentator writes, there is no chance of anyone confusing the treasure with the container!

In the world where we experience decline and the impact of our post-Christian context, we feel the 'clayness' of it all. We are indeed hard pressed on every side, confused, disorientated and marginalised. We experience the 'clayness' of our discipleship, our churches, and the complex structures of our movement.

This can lead us to become preoccupied with our struggles and the reality of decline. In turn, this leads to a fixation with what we don't have and being driven by fear of scarcity and there not being enough. We long to get rid of the 'clayness' of our current situation and recapture a former golden era where we were adored and enjoyed pride of place.

But, of course, the point of the passage is that it's not all about the jars! The jar is simply a vessel to hold something. In themselves, they don't need to be great. They get broken, they can feel clunky and unsophisticated. But do you know what? They're not the main thing!

'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'

This idea is further developed through the imagery of death and life being inextricably bound together. Death, struggle and suffering are present, but the life of Jesus is present too. Death and decline are at work, but life is also at work in and through us. We haven't fallen out of God's purposes, neither are our struggles the last word. Our human weakness and 'clayness' are not going to thwart God's eternal purposes! The good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the treasure we hold.

So, it is really important to focus on the **treasure** and not on the jars of clay. This gives us hope.

While remaining aware of the reality of decline, I believe we really need to radically change our thinking and firmly focus on the treasure we hold. As individuals, churches and movement we need to keep our focus on this question:

'What is God doing and how can we get behind that with our prayer, action, people, resources and structures?'

The stories you will read in this magazine point to the treasure that we have and share. They are a snapshot of what God is doing and they are being shared because, while we are preoccupied with what we no longer have, there is a danger of missing the treasure among us.

TREASURE HELD IN JARS OF
CLAY - HOW RELEVANT AND
TIMELY THAT FEELS



When I was on retreat earlier this year, I was thinking about shifting the focus from the jar to the treasure and I created a mind map of all we actually have as a movement. By the time I had finished filling up a whole page I was so encouraged! We have...

- ⇒ An amazing DNA as a movement
- ⇒ A nationwide contextual network of local churches and missional expressions
- ⇒ A nationwide network of passionate and gifted leaders and volunteers
- ⇒ Loads of brilliant groups, networks and Round Tables collaborating around different themes
- ⇒ A nationwide network of gifted trans-local leaders
- ⇒ World-class ministerial formation and theological reflection

- ⇒ Significant financial resources
- ⇒ A wealth of specialist expertise and advice to support churches
- ⇒ Credibility in the public square and a reputation for quality community engagement

Such tremendous treasure!

Radically changing our thinking and firmly focusing on the treasure we hold means that we need to **deepen our faith and hold our nerve**. We are experiencing the end of an era and many things that have been precious to us are going to die. But we need to keep on trusting God is at work. We need to keep remembering that death and life are entwined together and trusting that while a lot is dying new things are also emerging. We need to honour all that has been while making it a priority to fan into flame all that God is doing and will do in the future. We need much prayer and divine imagination to create the conditions for what is yet to be.

'Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'

Two worlds. Both are true. But we choose to focus on the hope of treasure within.

WHILE REMAINING AWARE OF THE REALITY OF DECLINE, I BELIEVE WE REALLY NEED TO RADICALLY CHANGE OUR THINKING AND FIRMLY FOCUS ON THE TREASURE WE HOLD. AS INDIVIDUALS, CHURCHES AND MOVEMENT WE NEED TO KEEP OUR FOCUS ON THIS QUESTION:

'WHAT IS GOD DOING AND HOW CAN WE GET BEHIND THAT WITH OUR PRAYER, ACTION, PEOPLE, RESOURCES AND STRUCTURES?'



Lynn Green is General Secretary of our Baptist Union

ALL CALLED TO SHARE IN CHRIST'S GREAT AND CHALLENGING BANQUET



In outlining his theme, incoming President Tim Presswood is encouraging our churches to think about activities which are life-bringing reflections of the fullness of Christ.

In 1991, whilst still a student at Northern Baptist College, I was privileged to visit BMS missionaries, David and Rachel Quinney Mee in El Salvador. It was at the tail end of the civil war which saw over 80,000 killed and a million people – approximately one fifth of the population – made homeless.

We spent time with the sisters of the Small Community (Pequeña Comunidad) in San Roque, a suburb of the capital where almost a thousand people had been murdered by their own government. The Pequeña Comunidad had also known tragedy with Silvia Ariolla, one of the sisters, a secretary to the murdered archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, being tortured and murdered by death squads.

One evening, we huddled in their makeshift chapel to pray. Gathered

around a small log which acted as a communion table, we could hear the rattle of machine-gun fire coming from further up the volcano. As we prayed, the faces of Archbishop Romero and the recently murdered Jesuit priests looked down from the wall where they surround Christ's Cross. Next to them was a small photograph of Silvia and another of Miguel Tomás, a young student from the Baptist Seminary who had also been murdered by the death squads. Cut out of faded sugar paper, alongside the photographs and the Cross, were the words of Jesus in John 10:10.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Now, perhaps more than ever, our churches need to ask whether their activities are life-giving, life-bringing reflections of the fullness of Christ.

I WANT TO SEE CHURCHES, IN OUR POST-PANDEMIC WORLD, ASKING THEMSELVES: WHAT IS LIFE-GIVING IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

As we seek to move on from the pandemic and lockdown, our churches are finding that significant numbers of folk have not returned. I have a dear friend who has served the same church for over forty years in many different roles, often at the same time. No one else was willing or able to take on the work. My friend loves Jesus. My friend is still a believer, but no longer has the energy to turn out Sunday by Sunday to 'keep the show on the road.'

Is the church to which my friend belongs, but no longer attends, life-giving?

Some years ago, I was challenged by one of the co-ordinators of Urban Expression, the urban church planting network which we went on to join. Our church building had been compulsorily purchased forcing us to find new homes for all of our church activities. Sunday by Sunday, though, we met in our front room to pray, sing and hear the gospel. My colleague Clara Rushbrook and I were tired. We were rapidly approaching burnout, but every Sunday we put together a familiar and comfortable act of worship for the handful of our community who remained.

"You mean," the Co-ordinator challenged, "that every Sunday, you sit downstairs in your front room and pretend to be a 'proper' church?"

On reflection, the answer was yes. We realised that we needed to let go of much that was precious to us, but which was not honouring or relevant to God in our small, inner-city corner of God's reign.

What would be life-giving in our community? What is good news for the people of inner-city east Manchester?

Out of this reflection, we have now developed into Forest Church, Manchester – a loose collective of folk, who gather together to pray, to support one another and to engage with the ecological crisis. East Manchester was the home of the industrial revolution. Perhaps in some small way we can be part of the healing of the relationship between humanity and God's creation.

I do not wish to see every Baptist church immediately stop what it is already doing and transform itself into a Forest Church!

'The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

WE ARE DISSENTERS. WE ARE A PROPHETIC PEOPLE, CALLED TO CHALLENGE ALL THAT IS NOT LIFE-GIVING, ALL THAT IS NOT OF GOD

I want to see churches, in our post-pandemic world, asking themselves: what is *life-giving* in our communities?

Hayley has invited us to *Build a Bigger Table*. Luke 14: 16-24 records Jesus telling the Parable of the Great Banquet:

Jesus replied: 'A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready."

'But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me."

'Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me."

'Still another said, "I have just got married, so I can't come."

'The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into



the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

“Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.”

‘Then the master told his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”’

At our bigger table, we are invited to share Christ’s Great Banquet, not with the many who were invited, those we know and like, but rather with those whom Eugene Peterson in *The Message* calls ‘all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and down-and-outs you can lay your hands on.’

The point is that the host is inviting – and later rather troublingly compelling – those who do not fit, who don’t *look like us*, to come and share in his great banquet.

They are not being invited to come and wait at table – or do the washing up in exchange for leftovers. They are not being invited to sit, like dogs under the table, to gather up crumbs. Rather, the outcasts are the very people who are being invited to share in Christ’s Great Banquet.

Luke 14 invites us to look beyond our religious traditions. It begins with Jesus’ challenge to the Sabbath regulations, moves into the Parable of the Wedding Feast in which we are challenged not to seek positions of honour – and moves on to the Parable of the Great Banquet which benefits the outcasts, not the respectable.

Finally, of course, in Luke 14 we are invited to count the cost of following Jesus. Baptists are followers of Jesus. The same Jesus who... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. As Baptists, whilst respecting his earthly authority, we do not recognise king or pope as head of the Church. We are dissenters. A prophetic people, called to challenge all that is not life-giving, all that is not of God. **We are all called to share in Christ’s Great – and challenging – Banquet.**

**THE OUTCASTS ARE
THE VERY PEOPLE
WHO ARE BEING
INVITED TO SHARE
IN CHRIST’S GREAT
BANQUET**



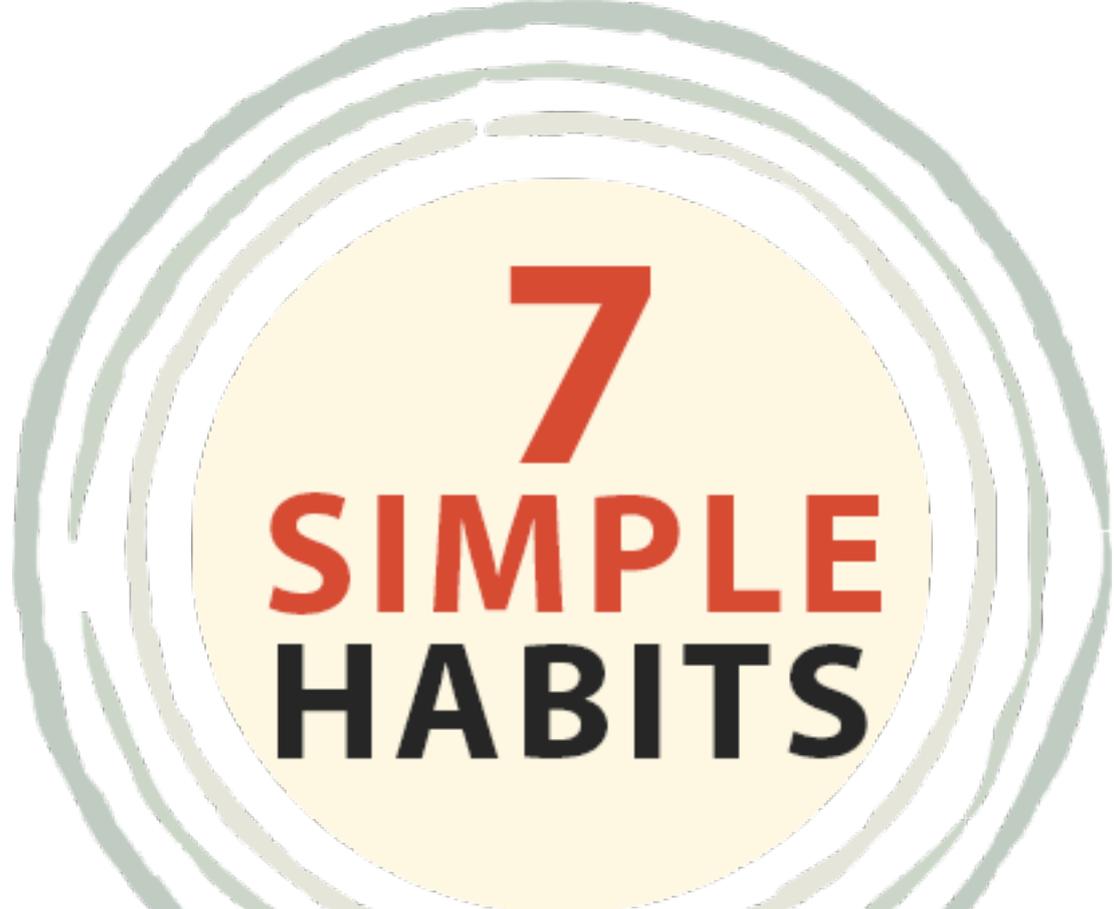
Tim will be inducted as Baptists Together President at the Baptist Assembly in June.

Tim has spent the last 30 years re-inventing the church in one of the most deprived inner-city communities in the country. Today he is team leader of the Urban Expression Team in Openshaw, East Manchester, and minister of Forest Church, Manchester.

In 2014 Tim was invited to join the staff of the North Western Baptist Association, where he led the team through a transition process. He is now enjoying leading the Church Life Team at NWBA half time, while acting as College Manager for Northern Baptist College and continuing in ministry in Openshaw.

Tim has held a number of community roles in East Manchester, including senior roles in the NHS. For 20 years he was on the board of Manchester Credit Union as either treasurer or chair, building it from 85 members to more than 20,000. He has an interest in alternative economic solutions.





PRACTISED BY GROWING BAPTIST CHURCHES

At the Firestarters Network we have discovered Baptist churches that seem to experience significant growth do so by practising a few simple habits, writes Chrissy Remsberg. These seven traits are found over and over again in the stories we have heard of growing Baptist churches. What makes these traits so profound is their utter simplicity. These are habits that literally any church can put into practice.

Here is a quick look at six of these traits with a deeper look at the seventh below.

Churches that grow have experienced an **Intensity of Prayer and Fasting** that is leader-led. 'For the leader, missing that daily dose of prayer should be as noticeable as a diabetic missing an insulin shot.' (P16, *On This Rock*)

These churches have committed to being ones where the **Gospel is Simply Told**. 'The simple gospel message is not the only thing that is preached, but it is always preached.' (P31, *On This Rock*)

Growing churches have a high level of **Clarity and Agreement** about their vision and values. 'Churches that grow quickly are ones that know what they're about and everybody is about it.' (P58, *On This Rock*)

These churches have a clear recognition that **The People You Have Are Enough**. 'Ultimately, it's a belief that God is too wise to make a mistake and too loving to wish us harm and if he has genuinely called us to step out and do something, then he's already given the church - or

he will give them - the people, leaders or resources they need to achieve that.' (P68, *On This Rock*)

'Like the church in Acts 4, these growing churches learned to trust an unknown future to a known God.' (P79, *On This Rock*) Because of this, they had the courage to **Take Real Risks**.

A sixth principle in our quick list is churches that have seen significant growth have found that you have to **Reorganise More Often Than You Think**. 'Churches that are able to continue to grow recognise the need to reinvent the trellis to both cater for and catalyse growth. If the trellis isn't big enough or strong enough then the vine cannot be fruitful.' (P96, *On This Rock*)



The seventh and final trait of these growing Baptist churches perhaps bears a deeper look. Combined with an *Intensity of Prayer and Fasting* and the *Gospel is Simply Told*, these three traits seem to carry the most weight in why some churches experience significant growth. In this instance there's an ability to **Let Your Evangelists Be Heard**. 'Ephesians 4 describes a vital team approach to church leadership. It's worth noting, in the Bible the church was never led by one person, but rather by a plurality of leaders. We also see in the Bible a plurality of gifting.' (P43, *On This Rock*) Ephesians 4 describes five different gifts found in those who made up the leadership of the church - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

This plurality of voices and gifting in our leadership is very much reflective of our Baptist way of thinking and being the church. And yet over time we have become very skilled at calling, training and empowering our pastor/teachers. We have learned to empower and release those with pastoral and administrative gifts in leadership. But we have, perhaps, lost the 'voice of our evangelists, even while in some parts of the UK, less than 1% of people know Jesus... They need an evangelist!' (P44, *On This Rock*)

What we have seen in these growing Baptist churches is an ability to recapture and empower the evangelist. Often these churches are led by an evangelistic leader. But even when the person leading the church is not a natural evangelist they practise Paul's advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:5, 'But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your

ministry.' These leaders have the heart of an evangelist and recognise this is part of the faithful fulfilment of the call to lead the church.

This commitment to hearing the evangelist's voice leads these churches to make simple changes to the way they make decisions or appoint leaders. They take opportunities to recognise who the evangelists are in their church, taking special note of those who always bring a friend to church events. When possible, they give these evangelists positions of leadership and when character or maturity make that difficult, then they invite these people to come and share with the diaconate or other leaders, so that decisions can be made with the evangelists' voice having influence. However, even when no evangelists can be found within the church, they work hard to either 'borrow an evangelist', by asking a regional minister who they could invite to sit in on an important discussion or they play the 'what-would-the-evangelist-say' game, taking time to consider how they would answer that question in light of significant decisions.

These simple but intentional decisions have a significant impact on the way a church engages with their community and practises its values. And, over time, we have seen that churches experiencing significant growth always listen for the evangelist's voice.

This quick look at the seven traits of growing Baptist churches just scratches the surface of these simple habits. At every Firestarters Conversation we dig deeper into each habit by hearing stories from two or three churches who have lived these habits and experienced growth. We discuss them at length, ask questions and learn together. If you want to learn more about an upcoming Firestarters Conversation or get a copy of the book that unpacks these principles, you can find information at www.firestartersuk.com

You can also hear more stories and learning about the traits on The Firestarters Network Podcast, which can be found on our website or wherever you listen to great podcasts.



Chrissy Remsberg is the co-leader and pastor of Beacon Church, a Baptist church in Stafford.

She co-leads the Firestarters Network with Alex Harris, with whom she has also co-authored, *On This Rock: Simple lessons and achievable habits for church growth.*



Across our Baptists Together family there is an increasing number of rapidly growing churches. The Firestarters Network exists to share the stories and simple lessons from these churches to help other churches grow.

Firestarters released its first book earlier this year. *On This Rock: Simple lessons and achievable habits for church growth* by Alex Harris and Chrissy Remsberg shares principles of growing Baptist churches, as well as their stories.

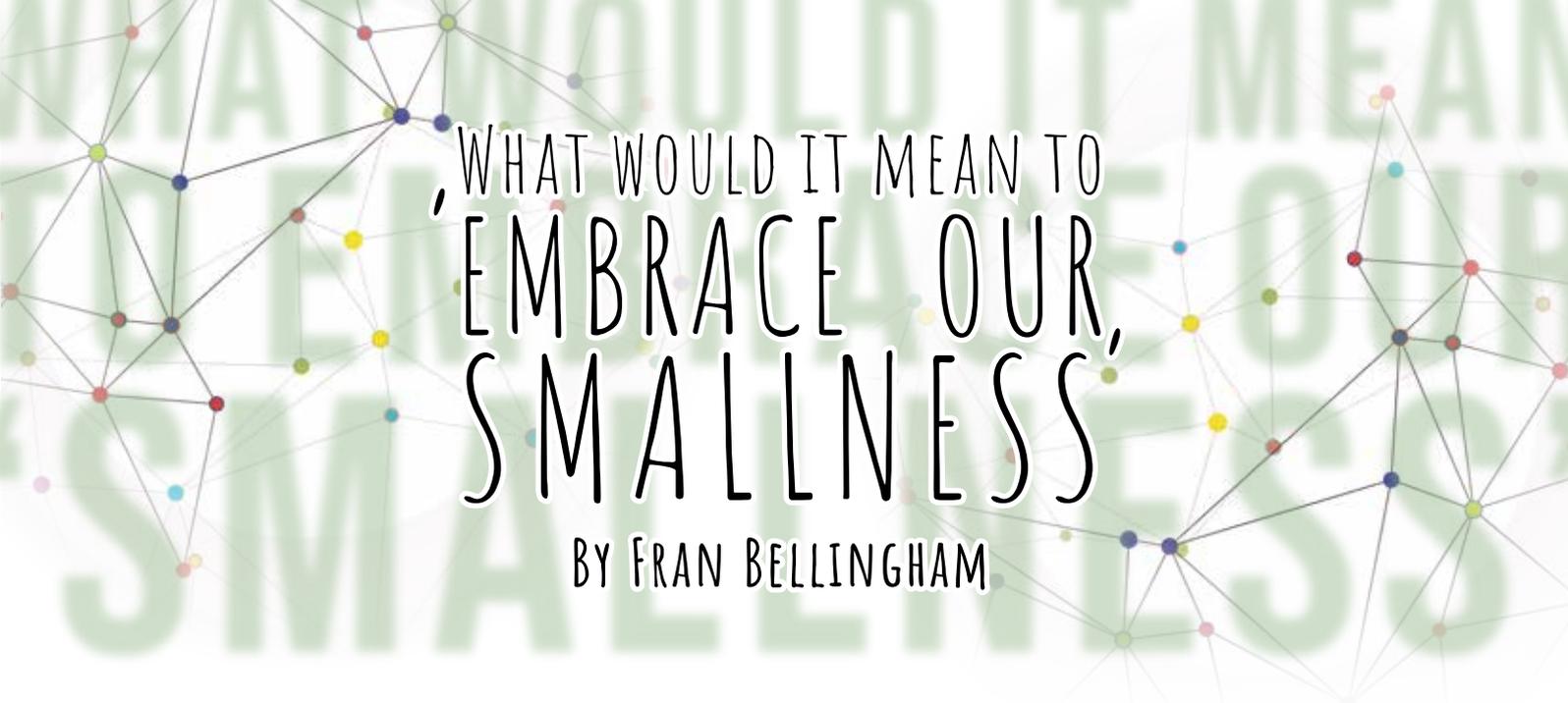
The next Firestarters Conversations take place at **Exeter (22-23 May)** and **Blaby (25-26 September)**.

Firestarters is part funded by our national body, working in partnership with Associations, to have a tangible gospel impact on our local churches.

The Firestarters Network has also launched its own podcast. Each episode is packed with real stories of churches that have seen the power of the gospel at work. The podcast can be listened to pretty much anywhere you listen to podcasts.

Find out more: firestartersuk.com





'WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO EMBRACE OUR SMALLNESS'

BY FRAN BELLINGHAM

More than half our Union's churches are now classed as small (40 members and below). What if we are being challenged to be church in a different way?

Following the news that over 50 per cent of our Baptist churches are now in the small church category, many comments I heard were about how disappointing and sad that was. But, what if we were never meant to be big in the first place? What if this is a move of the Spirit, calling us back to our foundations? What if we are being challenged to be church in a different way?

Looking at these figures we might feel despondent. However at the height of the 19th century chapel building era, where one chapel was being built every eight days in Wales, only 52 per cent of the population attended either church or chapel. In *A New Mission to Wales (2016)*, David Ollerton notes that by the 1970s this number had halved, and between 1982 and 2010 the number of Baptist churches dropped from 833 to 429. Despite these figures,

our memory is often coloured by imagination. We remember when our churches appeared full, we remember the many meetings and missionary endeavours of our churches, but our memory can be deceptive. It can also be coloured by grief, longing for what we wished for in the past, when the culture and social climate in which we lived was very different. We no longer live with the privilege of Christendom.

Covid and subsequent lockdowns, with the attendant rise of online services, has highlighted the consumerist attitudes that pervade the Church. These can perhaps be traced to the late 19th century where people would travel to hear such speakers as Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, and Evan Roberts during the Welsh revival. But our Baptist forebears did not choose to worship according to the professionalism of the worship band, the provision of youth services and big-name preachers. Instead, they covenanted together to walk as saints, often travelling large distances to a small gathering held in the nearest house of fellow Baptists. Corporate worship often included extensive Bible

readings, several sermons, and no singing! (For further reading see *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism (2013)* by Mark Clavier.)

The pre-Constantine churches were of necessity small, only as large as the home in which they met. Once that home had been outgrown, they would plant another small church in the neighbourhood, creating a network of small churches. In his book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church (2016)*, church historian Alan Kreider shows how the early church focussed on habitus - living out their faith in the struggles of daily life, without evangelism as we would know it. Christians were known by their faithful discipleship. It is the matter of discipleship that Dallas Willard laments, regarding it as 'The Divine Omission.' While much effort has been spent on evangelism, has spiritual formation and discipleship attracted as much attention?

WE SIMPLY NEED TO SEE WHERE
GOD IS WORKING IN THE
WORLD AND JOIN IN

Jesus regularly referred to the small and seemingly insignificant as being markers of the kingdom: the mustard seed, the grains of salt, or molecules of yeast. The kingdom of God is not marked by numbers but seen through the actions of disciples, the poor and the insignificant. It is suggested that in 315CE Christians only accounted for 10 per cent of the population in the Roman Empire.² Equally, throughout the Old Testament, Israel is a small nation sitting amid the large, expansionist and violent empires of the ages: Babylonia, Assyria, Greece and Rome. Despite Israel's size, God's call on the nation was to be as a light to the nations around, to have influence greater than her size.

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What would it mean to 'embrace our smallness'? Firstly, we need to resist the myth of perpetual growth. This is the ugly truth of empire when taken to its zenith. Empire is not interested in individual expression, locality, or indigenous culture. Empire is unmoved by grief, loss and human pain. The constant goal of empire is to expand and control, no matter what the cost. We might not think that this view of empire has anything to do with church, and yet scaled down, it has everything to do with how we organise not only the Church, but our local churches. We have adopted business practices that our forebears would have found incongruent with simply being God's gathered people in a particular location.

There is a difference between trying to grow our own empire and wanting to see the Kingdom of God and the universal Church grow. Embracing our smallness might mean focussing more on our mutual associations as churches, recognising we need each other in the wider Baptist family. It might mean recognising that we cannot do everything, but each church can do perhaps one thing well, relying on the gifts within our fellowships and not trying to be as professional or slick in our presentation as the next church. It might mean sharing ordained ministry and leadership roles, re-evaluating the purpose of ordained ministry according to Ephesians 4:11-12 and seeking to train the church to be able to continue without a regular minister. It might mean learning to plod, regaining the notion of pilgrimage, of dispersed community and adopting some of practices of the early Celtic and Anabaptist church. It will mean larger churches not regarding the small church with condescension or pity.

Ultimately, embracing our smallness will cause us to be reliant on the Holy Spirit and allow ourselves to be surprised by new things. Although church membership may be declining, research shows that the number of non-church goers claiming to be disciples of Jesus is increasing, God is not confined to our churches. We simply need to see where God is working in the world and join in. This might mean challenging our long-held views of church, but the future for small churches could be very exciting.

ULTIMATELY, EMBRACING OUR
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Fran Bellingham leads the London Baptists (LB) Small Church Connexion. The purpose of the Connexion is to provide a unique and supportive network within LB for churches with 40 people or less. The team has a heart and a passion for the health, well-being and growth of the smaller churches across London.

Fran has been a lay-preacher for many years, serving in very small churches in Wales, and has recently been ordained. She studied at Cardiff Baptist College and is now the assistant minister of Crofton Park Baptist Church in London.

WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

The first Baptist Small Church Hubs have taken place in the last six months. The idea of a 'Hub' is to be a centre for smaller churches to meet for training, resourcing, celebrations and discussion, Small Church Enabler Hilary Taylor explains.

Across Baptists Together there are approximately 1000 smaller churches (with less than 40 members) and many are doing amazing things to make Jesus known in their community.

However, some smaller churches would love to reach out but are needing encouragement, especially after Covid. That's where Small Church Hubs can help.

The first two Hubs launched last autumn at King's Church, Stotfold, Bedfordshire (CBA) and Eastern Avenue Baptist Church, Chadwell Heath, Essex (LB). A further three were set up in early 2023 at Totteridge Baptist Church, High Wycombe (CBA), Waltham Abbey Baptist Church (LB) and Blaby Baptist Church (EMBA).

The idea of a 'Hub' is to:

- Be a centre for smaller churches to meet for training, resourcing, celebrations and discussion, held in a building (of a small or large church) which has a car park (and/or is near a station) and good facilities which are open-hearted and welcoming.
- Meet, talk, pray, listen and dream about how God wants his church to reach out to those who are lost.
- Work together on projects and to share expertise - we are stronger together.
- Ask 'What is in your hand? Who have you got? How are they gifted? What are they passionate about?'

We need to be having these conversations and embracing adventure in this new and uncertain post-Covid world.

Hubs can be anywhere in the country, to act as a centre for the local churches who can reach the hub building in about 30-45 minutes.

"The first hubs have been really appreciated", says Hilary, "with everyone keen to meet again." They have included a gifting workshop based on the five-fold ministry in Ephesians 4.

Here are some comments from the attendees:

- Good to begin to get to know others on the same wavelength with a similar heart – thank you.
- Great event and initiative
- Excellent time together for teaching and nourishment
- Our sincere thanks to the organisers of this event
- Great to make a start as a hub
- Thought-provoking and encouraging

Interested? Find out more about Hubs via the Smaller Churches area of our website: baptist.org.uk/smallerchurches



STORIES FROM THE GROUND





It's simply a real focus on Jesus

Baptisms, healings, growing discipleship - Hillfields Church in Bristol has witnessed many hugely encouraging developments since emerging from lockdown. Interview with with lead pastor Rich Rycroft.

"Seeing salvation, new life, growth and transformation have become part of our culture and our life," says lead pastor Rich Rycroft.

"And we have a real heart to encourage other churches - not because we think we're better, just because we believe it's possible. We want anyone else that feels like we once did - when they're asking if there is any hope - to know the answer is 'yes'"

The church, which opened in 1929, had a dwindling and ageing congregation by 2016. So much so that Rich was seriously considering leaving for the sake of his two young children.

But Rich, a youth worker, sensed God had other plans. "I felt God kind of rebuke me, telling me that I can't just be critical - I have to become part of the solution." There was a leadership vacuum at the time due to ill health, and Rich subsequently felt called to offer his services, not as a pastor but someone who could implement and oversee some changes.

The membership agreed to him serving in this role for one year.

"I said: 'I'll do it with God. And if it's not God, if I'm not the guy, then you've wasted one year, and you can go back to whatever you had. I wasn't qualified for this, but I had a passion for the place

and the passion for what God wanted to do here."

Changes were gradual and encouraging. Between August 2018 and early 2019 a new person walked through the doors every week. "Not everyone stayed, but we started to believe there are people out there and there is potential for people to walk in. There is hope."

The church started recording its sermons around this time, which meant it adapted quickly to the lockdown restrictions.

"We were ready to minister to the church, and it kept the church alive," says Rich, "And it meant we were really ready to get back." When Hillfields returned, the congregation numbered around 30-40.

But Rich felt something in people had shifted as a result of the pandemic - a brush with death giving rise to an increased interest in faith. The church was visible, as the congregation worshipped outside due to restrictions on singing.

"And we just started growing," he says. "We started seeing amazing things happening. People walking through the doors, people giving their lives to



Jesus, people getting baptised, healings. There are tons of stories."

Hillfields has baptised more than 60 people since the first lockdown, and its congregation is more than 200. Rich is now the lead pastor and serves alongside four others. There are growing pains, but he feels it's just the beginning.

Rich reiterates Hillfields' desire to encourage others. It has connected with several churches, both locally and further afield.

"I'm a leader. So I do understand how hard it is for leaders. I know how difficult it is - what we suffer, what we go through. I'm someone who's been in the church nearly 30 years. I saw miracles, then two decades of it being really dry and difficult.

"When I was doing youth work, it was just tough ground and I didn't understand it. I asked God: is there any hope anymore?"



Does anyone even want to know about Jesus?

“This has got us believing again - and encouraging people, putting hope into situations, it can’t be bad.

“It’s not about anything we’ve done, there’s no glory in it for any human here,” he continues. “If you look at the story, it’s too perfect - God has done this. We’re

just vessels every now and then that God uses.

“If there is a formula, it’s simply a real focus on Jesus. He has done it, it is finished. Everything we need is him. Jesus is the answer, and Jesus is always the answer. For some reason, I think we put other things ahead of that - we’re just as guilty as a church as anyone else, I’m not pointing fingers. It does sound a bit too,

I don’t know, too easy, but it’s the answer and he is the answer.

“He saved my life and many, many other people.”

Facebook: [Hillfields Church](#)
Instagram: [@hillfieldschurch](#)

Photos | Joab Magara





It was very hard – but we felt God was at work

For years, South Ossett Baptist Church in Yorkshire struggled to reach its community. There were many times, according to minister Tracy Shields, when she would put on services and activities ‘and literally nobody came’.

“It’s really, really hard in situations like that,” Tracy explains. “You think you’re not listening to God right, or you’re doing something wrong. I had visions of hands on the plough, going up and down the fields, one by one removing the rocks, the stones and the weeds. Of it just being a real slog.”

Tracy joined the church eight years ago as a children’s and families worker when there were 14 members – and no children. “It was an absolutely huge step of faith and vision of the then minister,” she notes.

Following her arrival, the church set up a community café that was only supposed to last for six months to gauge what the community wanted. But within two weeks the local Sure Start Centre had closed, and organisers wanted somewhere for baby weighing.

Tracy had a connection and offered the café each week.

“And that was the start of God just bringing families,” says Tracy. She’s always had a big heart for young families, and through the café was able to build strong and trusted relationships. Indeed, it remains open to this day, having extended both its hours and space.

But this didn’t initially translate into people directly connecting with the church. Her children’s worker contract finished, the minister was due to retire and the church faced a decision about whether to close. “But the previous minister, the treasurer and I all felt God was at work, and we needed to partner with him and to honour the people that had worshipped there for decades,” Tracy says. “So we persisted.”

During the pandemic she met with people in ones and twos.

She was also introduced to Peter Dunn and the Discipleship Making Movement (DMM)/Biglife ministry. Peter is the former Director of Mission at BMS World Mission, who became Biglife European Director in 2019.

His role is shared between Biglife and the Yorkshire Baptist Association (YBA).

The teaching style made sense to Tracy, and she began to introduce it.

It meant when the restrictions lifted she was able to gather together in bigger numbers. Two Bible discovery groups were created and have thrived, providing a space for people to explore God, sometimes for the first time, with others re-connecting with faith. Run predominantly for mums of young children, one takes place in the afternoon (where the children are present) and another in the evening, which explore God through the DMM material.

“It’s all about genuine relationships, genuine love, and a genuine walk alongside people,” says Tracy.

“When that happens and something crops up, you’re able to say, “Oh, well actually it says something in the Bible about that. Did you want to look at it?”

“So there’s definitely an element of stepping out of the boat and asking people. But it’s letting people discover God’s word for themselves – you’re facilitating not teaching.”



There has been an impact both on the lives of those attending, and the life of the church.

Tracy set up a Messy Church which has proved so popular it's been full ever since it started a year ago last September. There has been a growing interest in Sundays.

"We thought that everything was going to go to these new things – Big Life, Messy Church – and we would be entering a transition period of phasing out Sunday. But we've seen Sunday congregations double and they're bringing their children and families."

The church held its first new believer's baptism 'in decades' in November. There are others on the fringes who are 'deeply seeking, really trying to live their lives as disciples of Jesus'.

Tracy adds: "The Spirit is just at work among them. I've seen reconciliations with family members and partners.

"How do you describe that sense when you know there's a peace within somebody?"

If you want to learn more about Biglife, contact:

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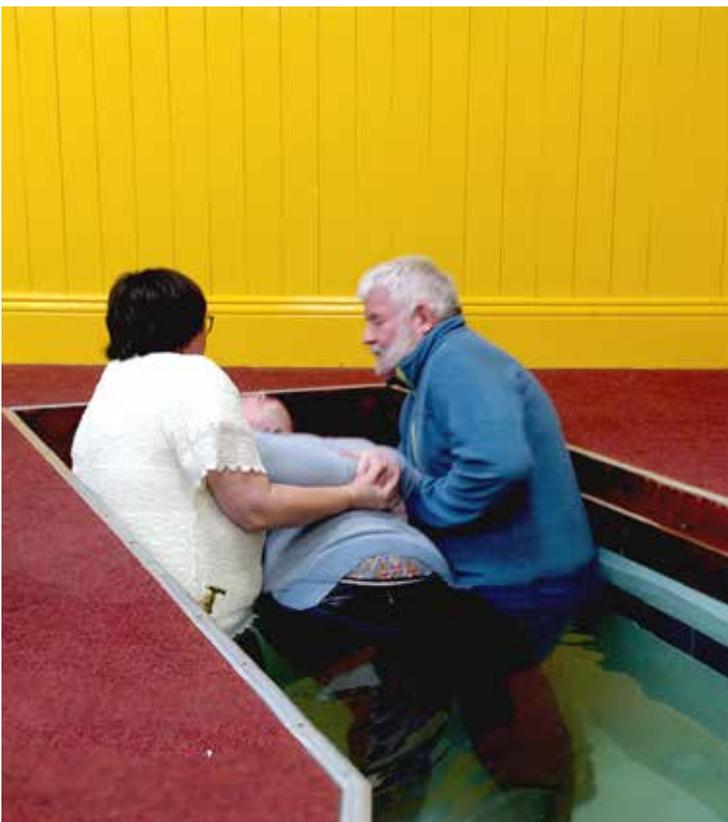
BigLife: <https://big.life>

Photos | South Ossett Baptist Church

Biglife® /

Big Life groups adopt a Three-Thirds format when they meet:

- 1 Look back:** expressing your love for God, picking up on how folk have been able to put into practice learnings from the previous meeting.
- 2 Look up:** a Discovery Bible Study where you look up to God and listen to him speak through his word as you reflect on four simple questions.
- 3 Look forward:** ask God what we need to do as a result of reading his word and listening to him.





The Baptist church CAN continue to flourish in a thriving part of London

Minister Darren Powell shares some of the ways Northcote Road Baptist Church in Battersea is beginning to reconnect with its community.

“I was called to Northcote Road Baptist Church (NRBC) in September 2021 to ‘re-launch’ the church and it’s been such an interesting journey,” says minister Darren Powell.

“The church had been in decline for some years, was close to closing – but now we’re seeing exciting glimpses of growth as we’ve stepped out into new pioneering opportunities and been partnering with local organisations to serve our community.”

NRBC is situated in the heart of Northcote Road (close to Clapham Junction and Clapham Common) - a vibrant road packed with shops, restaurants, cafés and bars.



It has existed since Victorian times but in recent years the membership had declined, dropping to just a small group of people. Talks took place with the Association to explore its future, but the Leadership Team sensed God hadn’t finished with them yet.

They called Darren, then Co-Leader at Morden Baptist Church, and his young family. Since arriving, Darren explains how all the church’s activity is underpinned by a desire for as many people as possible to experience God’s love.

“We want to love as many people as possible and we want to be known for loving people where they’re at. This is a church for all – that’s the main thing we felt God saying. This place is to be a refuge for everyone. I say the

same thing to the church that I say to my young sons - ‘here at Northcote Road we’re kind, and encouraging, and we look for lonely people! This is what we want our church to be known for across our community.

“The thing we are keeping central is that Jesus was about relationships. Jesus was about loving people, and everyone could be a part of that crowd.

“God has poured himself in love to each of us and it doesn’t just stop there. We are passionate for those in our community to experience that as well.

“I believe in the small things. I think the small things are big things to those who have been brave enough to walk into our church building for the first time. A kind welcome and a decent cup of coffee can go a long way!”

In order to do this Darren was keen both to make partnerships and find things that were right for the context.

He soon realised people weren’t aware the church still existed and began to seek opportunities to make it known. This involved updating the signage, building an online presence and networking (“not massively my thing but I really pushed myself getting to know as many local people as I could; establishing relationships with our MP, local councillors, business owners and police officers”).

An unusual opening came in the form of selling coffee. In the pandemic era, Northcote Road was pedestrianised for six months in the spring and

summer as a way of supporting the local eateries.

“All of the businesses and restaurants and bars would spill out right across the street. We came one summer and there were thousands of people out there.

“We walked through them, walked into the church and there were five people in here. So we thought, obviously that’s an opportunity.”

He teamed up with a friend who runs a social enterprise called the Feel Good Bakery to set up a coffee van outside the church.

“I didn’t expect to be selling coffee when I was called into ministry, but doing this was such a good connection point in so many ways.

“It was a really good way to know the businesses, who were supportive as they felt it added to the footfall. It was absolutely brilliant for reminding people that we’re here, that the church is here, and there’s life here. This brought a vibrancy to our part of Northcote Road and demonstrated that the church wants to play our part outside of the walls.

“We were actually out there in the middle of this community in a really natural and authentic way, rather than just on the edge of it.”

Sensing loneliness and isolation was an issue, he set up a running club. “Really simple - we just meet outside the church and go for a 5k run around Clapham Common. Every week. We get people who’ve moved to London, and are finding the experience of being here isolating, who’ve found it really helpful.

“It’s been another great way of just getting to know people and showing an interest in their lives.”

He’s also discovered that having an appropriate social media presence, particularly on Instagram, has been important.

“I’m not necessarily the biggest lover of social media, for many reasons. But whenever we’ve had a bit of a push on social media, you actually see the fruit of that across the next couple of weeks. It’s interesting. Instagram is a really, really important resource for the community stuff that happens in and around this road and again we want to play our part in that. It’s been a really great way to communicate our message to local people.”

Life has brought life: a couple of professional musicians have joined the church, an opportunity arose to employ a children’s worker, and everything has contributed to the church slowly but surely becoming a place where people are choosing to worship.

“Every single person is welcomed here and valued here – that’s been our message to the community. And that means we have a varied group of people who now come into the church.

“We have some young families, lots of internationals including a small group of Portuguese-speaking people, a few families

from the United States too, alongside the brilliant, lovely group of people who were here when I arrived.

“We’ve just tried to make Sundays relevant for the people in our community. We certainly do aim high, and this is a quality to our worship and depth to our teaching. Yet, it’s informal. It’s messy. There are kids running around. But it’s authentic and it feels like family.”

Darren adds that, “things have happened quicker than I expected, but everything has been ‘so natural’. I think it’s about finding those things you can just get involved in easily.

“There are plans to build on the social enterprise opportunities in partnership with my work in the local prison and our probation service (see over page) and open as a music venue in collaboration with our local pub.

“There is certainly a long way to go, but I feel that our story could provide an encouragement that the Baptist church CAN continue to flourish in a thriving part of London.”



Running the coffee cart enterprise enables the church to provide employment opportunities to those who have experienced barriers to it.

This means that although the pedestrianisation of Northcote Road is no longer happening, the church is now in a fruitful conversation with the Council to convert a couple of the parking spaces in front of its building into a permanent trading pitch.

It wants to create an enterprise to complement the other businesses, and provide training to those in HMP Brixton and jobs to ex-offenders. There's also a long-term dream to develop the building's loft space into a large social enterprise and emergency accommodation.

"We have plans to do so much more on the social justice side," says Darren. "We are continuing to dream and discern more ways to work on loving our neighbour."

A decision taken 30 years ago by the Northcote Road Baptist Church congregation is enabling its life and mission today. Back then the church converted its basement and adjoining building

into a Christian school. With more than 100 pupils on its books, this has given the church a regular income, as well as investing in property.

Both these decisions were taken when the area was less affluent and not as vibrant as now.

"It's incredible really; I was called as a 'Pioneering Pastor' but some decisions made over the last 30-40 years have been courageously pioneering!"

I think how those decisions in our recent history have given us so much opportunity for today. There's been the most amazing foundations already here, and we are beginning to reap the rewards of those decisions and all that prayer that went in over the years."

Facebook: Northcote Road Baptist Church
Instagram: @nrbcbattersea

Photos | Lauren Powell



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We have continued to ask God to 'Grow us, not to what was, but instead towards what we can become'

Developments at The Baptist Church, St Peter's in Broadstairs, with minister Rhodri Walters and Kate Grant, who heads the Westover Beacon mission work.



Through the pandemic we prayed: Lord, transform our thinking, reform our practice, fill us with your presence. We're now trying to live that out... taking Ephesians 3:20 to remind us that God can do immeasurably more than we might dare to imagine even in our wildest dreams, through his mighty power working in and through us!

As much as we may have preferred the easier option of going back to how things were pre-pandemic, we have continued to ask God to 'Grow us, not to what was, but instead towards what we can become'.

There is much to thank God for. The church family, though small (about 30), has been faith-filled and courageous. Over the past few years we have launched a Schoolswork charity, a Renew



Wellbeing group (which recently celebrated its fourth anniversary), a foodbank outlet, a toddler group, a youth group and have been supporting an organic mission work (Westover Beacon) on a local estate, which is being fruitful as they work out what church on the estate can look like.

This 'organic mission work' has grown from one family to a community of 40 over the past four years, with the majority being new to faith. One lady, who came via the foodbank during lockdown, came to faith last year, was baptised in December, and went as part of a mission team to Macedonia in March to tell others about Jesus.

All of this has been in partnership with other church congregations: Baptist and beyond. This has helped to transform our thinking about what church looks like. We are currently in the process of reforming our practice, and all through God filling us with his presence. Prayer is the foundation (we've been praying together with the other churches in St Peter's for the past eight years), and it's all about Jesus.

Give thanks for:

- The God-given courage of a faith-filled congregation
- The increasing willingness of church congregations to work together

- Those who have come to faith and those who are exploring faith - particularly through Westover Beacon

Pray for:

- ACTS (Active Christianity in Thanet Schools) - our local schools-work which needs Christians and churches in Thanet to catch the vision to reach out to children and young people who are increasingly not found in our church communities. ACTS needs an increase in income through churches and individuals financially supporting it (as well as success with grant applications). It supports many local primary schools and would like to expand its work into secondary schools as well.
- Our new leadership team, as we explore transitioning alongside Westover Beacon towards a network of missional communities, rather than just a Sunday congregation.
- Us to be shaped as God wants us, so we can see his Kingdom grow here in St Peter's and beyond.

Facebook: The Baptist Church, St Peter's

Photo | The Baptist Church, St Peter's





A place of sanctuary and hope, where people have come to faith

Oakham Baptist Church, Rutland marked its 250th birthday in 2022 with a renewed focus and commitment to the community, and as a result has 'grown and reached deeper than ever before,' says minister Tom Bowring.

Tom is keen to share the East Midlands church's positive story with the wider Baptist family. Oakham has developed a threefold focus on social care, evangelism and prophecy over the past year, all underpinned by its overall vision to 'Reconcile Rutland to the Kingdom of God.'

"We emerged from Covid with the intention of becoming a place of sanctuary and hope in the local community," Tom explains, "and Jesus has been doing amazing things through the church."

"We've acted as a vibrant community hub for our county, supporting weekly drug rehab and alcoholics' groups; we're a base for CAP (Christians Against Poverty) and host the council's youth work initiatives."

"We are also pleased to have around a dozen Ukrainian families worshipping with us regularly, as a follow on from our Ukrainian social space that the

Council highlights as its primary focus for Ukrainian guest welfare.

"This has all led to us seeing an explosion of evangelism and we've baptised 12 people in the past year. We have seen lots come to faith, including those from marginalised backgrounds."

"Our Sunday services are 'standing room only' and the church is full of anticipation and excitement over the future, with us looking to begin an extension project in 2023 to enable us to do more for the Kingdom."

For the full story, visit: baptist.org.uk/oakham

Facebook: [@OakhamBaptistChurch](https://www.facebook.com/OakhamBaptistChurch)

Photos | Oakham Baptist Church



We attract those who don't easily fit in other contexts of church

In West Wales a small but enthusiastic Narberth Baptist Fellowship continues to meet in a renovated car port which is now a chapel, writes minister Linda Edwards.



We meet every Sunday evening with enthusiasm and hope, thanks to the abiding power of the Holy Spirit.

We attract those who don't easily fit in other contexts of church. When we first started in the year 2000, one of our earliest members had a picture or vision of a huge field which had just been harvested so that the bales of wheat had been stacked - but there on the perimeters of the field were the gleanings. Of course, in history the gleanings had been left for the poor to collect.

We all felt at the time that we were here for the gleanings, for those Christians who, for whatever reason, felt they could not join the main harvest of mainstream Church. Although we are only 12 to 15 in number, throughout the years more than 150 people have had fellowship with us, including people who live on their own, those who need a lift, those who prefer smaller groups and are cautious of bigger ones.

We meet for worship, prayer and for the study and commentary on the scriptures. Every week I print off a large print copy of the Bible passage being studied, for each person. We study whole books of the Bible making sure that we have the context of the text and taking note of the Jewish roots, and the culture of Jesus' day.

At the time of writing, March 2023, we are on chapter 26 of Matthew which has taken us over two years to complete! I prepare a short reflection/commentary of 15 minutes then it is open to the whole fellowship to make their comment or to ask questions. So often one of our fellowship has insight or is inspired by God to add to what I have prepared. This is the ministry of the body of Christ.

We all eat together afterwards. It's a small but close community. We've seen physical healings, improvement in wellbeing - and the theological grasp of these folk is growing. They increasingly minister to each other and were able to carry on and lead when I was seriously ill last year.

I'm sure we're not unique – and I think there will always be gleanings.

Glean - Verb
'Gleaning' was the practice of going into a recently-harvested field and picking up whatever grain remained. God commanded Israel in Leviticus 19:9-10 to deliberately leave some behind for the poor and needy of the land to get food. God blessed Ruth and people were generous to her.

Ruth the Moabite said 'Let me go to the fields and glean grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.'

Naomi said to her, 'Go ahead, my daughter.' So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters.

Ruth 2: 2-3



Ruth Gleaning | James Jacques Joseph Tissot | thejewishmuseum.org





From three members to engaging with 15 families

Many villagers had never set foot inside Norton Baptist Church in Suffolk - but “they’re definitely noticing things are going on here now,” says community minister Caroline Vallance.

“Last Harvest, three of my seven-year-olds literally took the service, because they wanted to do it,” says Caroline Vallance. “They stood at the front and led the whole thing.

“For me, once children are feeling comfortable and part of things, I think that attracts the adults. So, we’re working very much from the bottom up!”

Caroline is the community minister of a revitalised Norton Baptist Church, a small church founded nearly 200 years ago, in the village of Norton near Bury St Edmunds. By 2019 it had just three members, five people regularly attending on a Sunday, and an empty manse.

Caroline was invited to become their leader after a series of events which convinced her this was God’s call. Not least, the

testimony of secretary Helen Allum, who had been a part of the church since her childhood. “She’s an amazing lady,” says Caroline. “When I met her, she said she didn’t want the church to close – she knew there was something else God wanted to do here.”

Caroline has a long history of children’s and youth work, and this was a natural place to start.

She connected with the local school, a thriving Church of England School, and altered what happens on a Sunday by instigating a monthly Messy Church and a Café Church, alongside two mornings of worship. The pulpit was removed, and the congregation now gathers around tables, not benches - moves which she says has made the environment more welcoming.

“Those two services in particular - Messy Church and Café Church - are particularly attracting our families. If you are a traditional person, you may struggle with them - they’re loud and noisy. But our children feel very comfortable.

“And what’s really exciting is a number of the families are those who came as children to Sunday school, but hadn’t been in the church since.” Norton is now engaging regularly with around 15 families.

Hosting activities the village can connect with and showing the church is a safe presence has been key. For instance, Caroline set up a nativity scene and invited the school choir. The event was packed. “For me it was fascinating, as a number of people said they’d lived in the village all their life but had never been inside the doors of the church.”

Another factor is the creation of Churches Together in Norton. Caroline is now working closely with the local Anglican church and Salvation Army, and working together has helped set up an after-school club. Norton has also resurrected its youth club on Friday evenings, and both this and the after-school club attract around 20 people.

“People are definitely noticing things are going on here now,” says Caroline. “It’s slowly getting there, and we are building those relationships. People from the village will now stop and come and talk to me. God has been blessing what we’re doing.

“It’s growing ways of getting people to see that we’re safe and it’s a good place to be,” she adds, “and then praying they meet Jesus when they’re here.”

Facebook:
[Norton Baptist Church](#)

Photo | Norton Baptist Church



This place helps us so much

Renew Wellbeing has provided a valuable framework for Hong Kongers to settle and integrate here in England. Sharon Shek explains more.



Last July we opened our Renew Wellbeing Café in Derby, and it's really helped Hong Kongers have a safe place and know the love of God.

It takes place each Thursday from 12 – 4pm at YADA, a non-alcoholic bar that wants to connect with the local community. Seven hosts – all Hong Kongers – were trained by Sarah Fegredo, a Baptist minister and the Renew Wellbeing area co-ordinator here. We wanted to provide a safe space for Hong Kongers to meet each other and get to know the community.

Each time there are jigsaws, paintings and board games. We also teach zentangle (art created by a collection of patterns) for focus and relaxation. There is a space for prayer, and we follow the same prayer format each week so people are used to it. We eat together.

In this way it is more than just a café – it is underpinned by mental health concerns, and the five concepts of wellbeing. All the hosts have had good training – it's not just chit chat.

It provides a place to speak Cantonese with each other, share information and experiences, share emotions and find solutions. It's a very good opportunity to talk. Many Hong Kongers don't know anyone when they arrive in the UK.

It's a huge upheaval for us all, and this is a treasured time to talk in our own language and increase our network. Some of our regulars even travel from Nottingham.

But there's English too – some locals from Trinity Baptist Church come each week. (To begin with we were supported by Trinity Baptist Church, and now we have a fund from the Council to help buy the drinks.) This all helps the process of integration – the Hong Kongers can see people are interested in them and want to support them. It's very special that they come and want to connect and communicate - it shows us England is a welcoming place. Ellen Price, the minister at Trinity, drops in regularly, and talks and listens to the Hong Kongers. It all helps.

We've found the people who come, come regularly, and these are all ages – from University students to elderly people. This place helps us so much – there is a very supportive atmosphere. Many who come are not

Christians, but it is interesting that they appreciate the prayer space.

Our aim is not to solve all problems, but to help those who come to have the strength to face their difficulties in daily life. Hong Kongers are generally very busy, looking after families and working, and this has provided a time to relax and de-stress. It's a release of pressure.

I think it's a good example of showing the love of Jesus, of the church moving out of the building and into the community. Hong Kongers don't like a 'hard sell' of the gospel. Here they are experiencing the love of Jesus.



Renew Wellbeing



Renew Wellbeing is the name of the overarching organisation that is helping churches around the country to replicate the Renew Wellbeing café concept.

Founded by Baptist pastor Ruth Rice, its vision is to encourage as many churches as possible to open up a space in which to be present, be prayerful and be in partnership with their local council for as little as two hours a week to improve the wellbeing of those living around them.

The charity is now in partnership with around 240 Renew spaces, including Children, Youth and Family (CYF) spaces. Another Cantonese-speaking Renew Wellbeing café is due to open in Birmingham.

The charity's growth was supported by Baptists Together Mission Forum funding in 2020.

Sharon Shek is the Baptists Together Hong Kong Response Co-ordinator.

Facebook: Hkrenew Trinity
Instagram: @hkrenewcafe

photos | Sharon Shek



A new children's group

How God blessed Attleborough Baptist Church with a children's group, having previously had no children in the congregation. Interview with minister Loriane Roberts.



When Loriane Roberts became the minister of Attleborough Baptist Church, Nuneaton, in 2016, there were no children in the congregation. She wondered if this was about to change. At the outset, she had a vision which she believed to be from God of people walking off the street and into the church. It was a vision she shared with her small congregation, and they began to pray regularly for this to become a reality.

There was a particular focus on children. Each year Loriane would organise a children's service. Some would come, mainly grandchildren from the existing congregation, but as they didn't live in the area no one stayed. She engaged with the local school and other leaders in the area, but 'nothing'.

Last year she began to organise a cinema afternoon, a free event with food to bless the community. The first week around 10 came, and Loriane was encouraged. The plan was to do

it fortnightly, but in subsequent weeks, no one turned up.

"Eventually I thought, 'well, it's not working', so I stopped it in July or August," she says. "It was clear it wasn't of God."

However, she kept faith that God would grow his church, and kept encouraging members that they would see the fruit of their labour - and change was around the corner. Come September, she organised the usual annual children's service, and saw around 20 children through the doors. Several months on, they're still here.

It's a mixed group, with several from a Christian background, but the rest unchurched. The church was blessed to have a couple of Sunday School teachers join the congregation around the same time ("another answer to prayer," notes Loriane) and now they run two groups each Sunday. The lowest number they've had is seven, but more often it's much more.

"I'm really encouraged," says Loriane. "For six years we've been praying and asking the Lord for children. We've been persistent, and for six years nothing.

"We've put leaflets in the area, but I think it's mostly because we have been consistent in prayer, speaking the word over the church, and trusting what God says will happen."

"And others are encouraged too. I've had people ring me up on Sunday and say, 'Loriane, I just can't believe we've now got children in the church!'"

"They love it. The impact is so great."

She says several months on, the group is thriving – and believes there's more to come.

"At Christmas, they did a beautiful presentation in our carol service. And you wouldn't have believed this was a Sunday School that only started in September. What they presented was just amazing. They are being taught core biblical material, and are full of questions about God."

"This is a vision of God's little army, an army that started from small beginnings. And this is just the beginning of what God will do. I sense in my spirit it's going to grow into a school, or a nursery."

"This is all God's work."

Facebook:
[Attleborough Baptist Church](#)

Photo | David Norrington





Big church/little church

Watchet Baptist Church has been on a journey discovering new ways of being missional disciples of Jesus - and this has included an overhaul of Sundays. Minister Mike Sherburn is joined by several members in reflecting on what's happened so far.

“We're not the only ones trying something new. It's come with its challenges but it's exciting, too.”

So says Mike Sherburn, minister of Watchet Baptist Church on the West Somerset coast. Sometime in 2019, Mike stood behind the hatch in The Sanctuary, the church's town centre home, wondering again about the space between getting to know people and introducing them to Jesus.

Working out how to invest in this took time. Then, after months of meeting online and outdoors through the Covid pandemic, came a decision to avoid sliding back into old patterns by default and choose a way forward that matched the church's priorities of mission and discipleship growth. What followed was a season of weighing up priorities and challenging conversations among deacons.

After much deliberation, input and prayer, where different points of view were shared, the church embarked on a radical proposal in early 2022: a 12-month trial of meeting all together twice a month, a renewing of small groups and releasing those groups to use the other Sunday mornings either for mission or for discipleship. That pattern is sometimes called big church/little church and includes weekly teaching sessions on

YouTube, which go live at 6pm each Sunday (with much of that material available as podcasts).

PE teacher Charles said: “It's totally radical and from the inside, maybe we don't always appreciate that. I've never encountered this before. However, the structure isn't the most important thing. What matters is that it has Jesus on the tin.”

So, from late January 2022, a year of exploring and experimenting began. One of the small groups has got a little smaller while others have grown. Still, some felt the lost chances to gather all together were too big a step.

Mike said: “For many of us, weekly Sunday morning gathering is an expression of faithfulness and obedience. This trial period asked a lot; it was an emotional experience.”

As the year reached its conclusion, there was an online survey as well as opportunities for prayer and discussion.

“The humility of the deacons was amazing,” said Mike. “When it came down to it, there was a shared commitment

to make sure everyone at the church had what they needed to grow and thrive as disciples.”

Finally, on 13 February, Partners got together to consider where Jesus was leading. There was overwhelming support to carry on with the new pattern for the foreseeable future.

Lynne, an archivist and historian, said: “We cannot go back – we have to go forward. A big factor was seeing the statistics about decline in church numbers. We have got to do something. There are ways in which my small group works together for mission. And there are ways in which we support each other as we do mission on our own frontlines.”

Sharon, the church's administrator, said: “I'm disappointed that we're not all meeting every Sunday. But going forward, I am getting my head around it. Now there is a definite way forward, I want to rethink on how I engage in this.”



One group is already talking about becoming two groups, having reached 20 people. And mission activities have all been owned by these groups – food events around pancakes, a fire pit or a barbecue and the provision of a warm space through the winter, where Community Meal regulars have become volunteers.

Ian Roberts, a photographer and musician whose communication is limited following a stroke, welcomed the 'more ambitious' approach to mission and added that he 'feels heard' better in his small group than in most other church settings he has experienced.

Amanda, an occupational therapist, said: "It still feels like we are in quite early stages. It's a really brave thing to be doing as a church and it's the right thing. The small church/big church model means there's an opportunity to access in different ways."

And Erica, cleaner at The Sanctuary, said: "This group helps you to do mission and discipleship and learning. It's good to be able to talk and know people are listening to you."

"Our smaller gatherings are places of learning and mission, hospitality and accountability," said Mike. "Without that accountability, growth doesn't happen in the same way. Vulnerability and honesty are key."

Ruth, artist and environment activist, said: "Things to do with our spiritual growth are worth more when we talk about it to someone. Making a note in a sermon is good but when it's part of the conversation, it means more and it goes further."

Crucially, from Mike's point of view, there is growth. A survey from the end of the trial period showed that 84 per cent had felt spiritually challenged while 65 per cent had felt more involved in mission through their group and more than 60 per cent said that Sunday morning small

groups gave them opportunities for mission or growth that they would not otherwise have had. On top of that, the church has celebrated two baptisms and seen a 15 per cent increase in Partners - and what's more, no congregation members have drifted away.

"It can be tricky for us, sometimes, to consider different ways to use Sundays," adds Mike. "Gathered fellowship and sung worship, unity and communion are non-negotiables. At the same time, I would always prioritise growing deeper in our spiritual lives and our effectiveness in mission. For me, it's about investing time and energy in those things we believe are most important."

For a fuller story on how the church reached this proposal, see: baptist.org.uk/bigchurchlittlechurch

Facebook: [Watchet Baptist Church & friends](#)

Photos | [Watchet Baptist Church](#)





With God's help we are being used to meet local need

Tom McGibbon is minister at Cleveleys Baptist Church, in the Blackpool area of the Fylde coast (and not far from the Norbreck Castle Hotel of Baptist Assembly fame!). He shares the story of the church becoming more outward-looking and reaching new people in creative ways.

Prior to 2018, the church had low expectations. It was providing for the needs of the congregation, but wasn't outward-looking. Confidence and vision were low.

We are an adult Sunday congregation with a few children and young people. Back in 2019, God led us to put a 'Children's Soft Play' area in the main sanctuary. This seemed to some a pointless exercise, with so few children. I am pleased to say that we now have more children and the 'Soft Play' area is being put to good use.

God has continued to widen our horizons and our main good news story is about our Transformed Lives for Good (TLG) 'Make Lunch Club' and 'Boxes of Hope.' TLG is a national charity providing services to families in need.

The Make Lunch Club and the associated Boxes of Hope (food parcels and gifts) are about providing a friendly atmosphere for social interaction, games, and craft for families in need, whilst providing a meal for everyone, one day a week, throughout all school holidays. We also offer a Foodbank at each of our sessions.

When this idea was first brought to the church, some were sceptical, saying things like 'There are no families in need in Cleveleys' and 'We don't have the

people or the funds to do this.' How wrong all that was! We now have a thriving Make Lunch Club, fully staffed with volunteers, funding that has been provided by ring-fenced giving within the church family - and grants have also been received.

Families have been coming regularly and relationships are being built. Many of the children are now regulars at our weekday activities and our 'Little Angels' Baby and Toddler Group.

It was perceived that there wasn't a need, and if there was, we could not provide for it. But we have seen the need and with God's help we are being used to meet it. This has been a huge catalyst for us as we continue to reach out and see what God will do. We are so looking forward to what comes next.

Who are the people who aren't part of your church, and what steps could you take to engage with them and make your space more inviting?



Cleveleys Baptist Church is supported by Home Mission funding

baptist.org.uk/Homemission

Facebook: Cleveleys Baptist Church

Photo | Cleveleys Baptist Church



Seer Green Baptist Church: exploring a more missional life

“Like many rural churches, our congregation is quite small and elderly,” says Louise Gilbertson. “The church was beginning to realise that, unless it did something differently and thought about being more missional, there was the risk it might die in a generation”.



Louise is the missional leader at Seer Green Baptist Church, in Buckinghamshire. The church has been established since around the 1820s and has a long history of witness in the village. It has many community activities like a toddlers' group and lunch club, but few choose to come to the church gatherings and even fewer have become followers of Jesus. Hence the church's decision to 'try a new thing' - a brave and significant decision that has included being and doing church differently.

When its previous pastor moved on, the church decided to call a missional minister - someone who would have a real focus on mission as their key role. Louise, a former therapy manager with the NHS, had not long finished her ministerial training at Spurgeon's College, and during her training been part of the missional journey at Chichester Baptist Church.

She's been in the part-time post in Seer Green around 18 months.

“It's something in between pioneering and being a traditional pastor minister,” she explains. “I do some of the pastoral side, but much of the care is provided by other members in the church. They've really released me into leading them into mission.”

After a time of listening to God, one another and the village, Louise says the church realised it needed to prioritise friendship building. So it started to experiment, and this has included introducing a new monthly rhythm to Sunday gatherings. It now meets as a gathered church twice a month for prayer, worship, celebration and teaching. One Sunday a month it meets in small groups for fellowship and discipleship. And once a month the church holds a Community Sunday where different small groups engage with the village community, seeking to bless and serve their neighbours. The fifth Sunday, when it occurs, generally coincides with a special celebration.

The missional Community Sundays have been the most exploratory and members have tried out various 'connect' groups including a craft group, walking group, welcome team (plenty of cakes and coffee) and children's creative fund-raising group. They've also launched a Forest Church jointly with the village Parish Church which meets every other month - a family orientated gathering up in the woods.

“There's an element of sharing faith discussion in all of them, and many have a moment where we pray,” explains Louise. “But it's all about building relationships

and inviting people in that wouldn't normally be with us on a Sunday. We're experimenting, trying to find ways of building bridges, seeing it as relational based, which encourages people to explore faith. The vision for the next three years is to become a church that is a blessing and spiritual home for many in our village by sharing through action and words the life-changing good news of Jesus with all.”

Alongside this the teaching has focused on what it means to be whole-life disciples (using material from the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity licc.org.uk) and what it means to share faith.

“It's still early days,” Louise adds. “There's still a need to keep listening, because we're not there yet. But we're willing to give it a try, and there's been a big mindset shift by the congregation: they've been great, as it's been a sacrificial journey for them as we form new ways of doing church together.”

“We are excited to see God at work in new ways as we connect with our neighbours.”

Facebook: Seer Green Baptist Church





God is at work anywhere

Haywards Heath Baptist Church experienced fruit and encouragement from moving Alpha online, initially during the lockdown. Deacon Penny Jenkins explains more.

We ran an online *Alpha* in June 2020. As a church we were technically able, and many of us were using Zoom, so we just decided to give it a go. *Alpha* were saying lots of people were holding courses online.

It worked really well. We were surprised at how much people shared and interacted, even in the confines of the Zoom window.

We had people who never would have had joined an onsite *Alpha*. They found it easier because it was in their front room – there's something about being in an environment that's well known to them.

People came to know Christ in a definite way! One of them was Trace, a lady on the edges of our church. Her daughter is part of our church, and Trace would stay outside when she picked her up. She had previously been invited to *Alpha* but had never come.

But online worked for her, and it was our privilege to see God working in her life. She has continued to meet online, she's so hungry for Christ.

We tried another online *Alpha* in spring 2021, and then another in February 2022. Trace was encouraged to lead a little, and she felt safer doing this on Zoom.

She also invited someone who described herself as Buddhist. We had strange and good conversations! People were sharing experiences, talking about prayer. There were some great discussions. We saw God at work.

The Buddhist lady kept coming and went away with a much deeper understanding of the Christian faith. I don't think she would have come to an onsite *Alpha* - just getting there would have been difficult.

Looking back, there was something about the whole pandemic experience that gave people a hunger. And online worked for a variety of reasons – it's more manageable, in a contained time, you don't have to travel. Those who come retain a degree of independence and some control.

It reached parents, carers, people who would have struggled to go out otherwise. We had people who had moved from the area but still wanted to link to the church. They invited colleagues too.

For some people, having a meal with strangers is terrifying. It also takes a lot to just walk into a strange place. Some people don't feel good enough to walk into a church. People's health and anxiety levels were also a factor.

Last autumn we ran a *Discipleship Explored* course, and this was online again. People who came were of all ages and different experiences in church. We had lively and Spirit-led discussions.

God will work where he will work. If you create an opportunity for people to hear about God, he will speak to their hearts. God is at work anywhere.

Penny Jenkins is a deacon at Haywards Heath Baptist Church in Sussex, and helped to lead the church's online *Alpha* Courses.

Facebook:
Haywards Heath Baptist Church

Youth Instagram:
@hhbcyouthh



alpha.org.uk

They are such a blessing

Three former asylum seekers are now part of the leadership team at Stockton Baptist Church – and their impact on the life and witness of the church has been ‘such a blessing’, says minister Craig Downes.



Stockton Baptist Church in Teesside has developed a significant ministry to refugees and asylum seekers over the last decade. It set up a weekly asylum drop-in in late 2014 after it began to receive large numbers of asylum seekers on its *Alpha* course. In the ensuing years it has conducted dozens of baptisms and seen its congregation become much more multicultural: when the Baptists Together website first carried a story on Stockton in 2016, the church had responded to the needs of hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers from 34 different nations and was regularly seeing 50-70 people from an international background for its Sunday services.

Since then it has further developed its RAS (Refugee and Asylum Seeker) ministry and has an amazing team. It now employs a part time RAS administrator; has

accommodation for newly recognised refugees and destitute asylum seekers; has developed networks across the area to enable access to specialist support for, and has given space in its building to, the Red Cross, and developed its own rigorous baptismal course in Farsi - material which increasingly is being drawn on by other churches in similar situations.

A key marker in the church's development was reached last summer, when two men and one woman, all former asylum seekers, were elected to the church leadership team (two as elders; one a deacon). All three had displayed leadership qualities, but had also initially shown reluctance at assuming these positions out of humility and cultural deference. Nevertheless minister Craig Downes helped them see this was God's call on their lives and, after much prayer and discussion, they felt able to make the step.

“We knew that this was what God was calling us to,” says Craig, who joined the church around 18 months ago.

“It was obvious they were already doing the job. So over four months, I spent time talking to all three, praying with them, helping them to recognise the roles that they were already playing. Anyone in my position would have done the same.

“It was just such a joy when they finally saw that this was God's way forward for them and the church. The trio offer the church insight into the real needs of people coming from the Middle East and insight into the impact of the decisions we make. They bring cultural language identity to meetings, as well as an enormous amount of wisdom. Elders' meetings will be paused to directly ask them: ‘how is that going to impact the people coming in here?’



Their responses have directly shaped the church's RAS ministry", Craig says.

All three have been an enormous help in clarifying issues and providing support needed in difficult cases involving the Home Office. Two of them make themselves available for the drop-ins when they can. "That has been really helpful because we can cut through a lot of misunderstanding," says Craig.

Sermons are translated into Farsi and sometimes Sorani (a Kurdish language). The trio have helped the church prepare what Craig describes as 'a robust baptismal preparation', to help ensure people taking the classes do not see them as 'a ticket to asylum'. They join Craig in leading the baptism courses, as well as leading *Alpha* and *Freedom in Christ* courses.

"They've helped this church really dig into the difference between 'I'm going to do this because I want to stay in the country', as opposed to 'I'm going to do this because I truly believe that Jesus is going to change my life.' It's what we all look for, but these people have helped us make that into something we can really work with."

Craig says he is receiving enquiries each week now for these Farsi-translated baptism materials.

As well as the practical elements, there are strong spiritual gifts. They have a hunger for Jesus and understanding of the Holy Spirit.

"We forget the impact sometimes that Jesus really has, and these three can hear those stories and encourage the understanding that it's not church, it's not a priest - it's the work of the Holy Spirit. So many people are so

inoculated against Christianity in this country that we forget what it's like to be desperately hungry for Jesus."

They've also been involved in the church's growing deliverance ministry – their culture means they are acutely aware of the supernatural. "They have taken spiritual authority," says Craig.

Craig believes Stockton's experience is giving exciting pointers to the future.

"We are purposefully pushing into multi-ethnic church. People coming to our shores are bringing in energy and a passion for Jesus. A lot of that energy isn't just African, South American, the usual places - it's also coming now from the people washing up on our shores. They are ready now to take their place as leaders of our churches, not single language churches, but in mainstream Baptist churches.

"Our RAS administrator said to me the growth we've seen in this last 18 months probably wouldn't have happened if these three had not accepted their calling. My job as pastor is so much richer for the whole fellowship because I have them on speed dial and it's such a blessing. God has empowered them, so when they speak, the whole community listens. When they speak from the platform on Sunday morning, the church listens. They're held in such respect by all here.

"They are part of our elders and our deacons and we love them. Their wisdom, the baptism process, the fact they encourage hunger for Jesus: they are truly and remarkably living out the life that we believe God is calling them to as elders.

"It's just a great little snapshot of what the kingdom of God looks like."

**The names of the three cannot be revealed for security reasons*

Facebook:
Stockton Baptist Church

Photos | Stockton Baptist Church



STORIES AND QUESTIONS

Two things that Jesus was well known for was telling stories and asking questions. It seems to be his preferred teaching style – and it’s easy to see why: a well told story can write its way into your memory banks, reshaping not just what you know, but who you become. As the story becomes part of you, you feel that you’ve become part of the story too!

Similarly, asking (or being asked) the *right* question is an invitation that holds the power to change the course of our lives.

With this in mind, what questions arise for you from the good news stories on these pages?

What might God be wanting to say to us?

The challenge to see God at work

I want to see churches, in our Post-pandemic world, asking themselves: what is life-giving in their communities?

The challenge to start from where people are

Am I really willing to deeply engage with the questions and fears of those seeking faith?

The challenge to step out in faith

Am I being critical, or am I being part of the solution?

The challenge to change our structures for the sake of the gospel

How much of what we do can find its roots in the Great Commission?

The challenge to serve others in love

What are we, as a church, known for? How can we be known for loving people?

The challenge to sacrifice for the call of the Kingdom

What do I need to let go of in order to create space for the work of the Spirit?

The challenge to seek the lonely and hurting

What parts of our community are missing from our church?

The challenge to serve together in the mission of Jesus

How can we get involved and let others get involved in what God is doing among us?

Having read the stories in this edition, Baptist minister Jonathan Vaughan-Davies offered these questions to aid our reflection, along with the prayer poems overleaf.

PRAYERS

Two prayerful reflections based on the stories in this edition.

By Jonathan Vaughan-Davies

The Tree that we see is not one giant seed...

A mustard tree is not one giant mustard seed
Its beginning barely resembles all it becomes
Hidden deep in the ground - without sight,
without sound
Life bursting out of where it all began

At first, barely discernible to the naked eye
From the least likely start - it longs for the light
Reaching down its new roots; stretching out its green
shoots
Breaking up to the surface - its story to write

See, to grow it must change, and to change it must
grow
Stay the same and it's dead in the ground
But planted in promise, and nurtured and nourished
It will reach a potential lying unseen right now

From seeded to sprouting, from seedling to sapling
Once so small soon soaring up to sky
The process so organic, the progress so dramatic
It could not have imagined its future new heights

To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?
What picture can paint its provision and power?
It's like a small mustard seed – like a germ of a dream
Growing beneath and around us, and over all other
towers

It's here *and it's coming*, it's now *and it's not yet*
It's near to us now but not nearly complete
Hardwired to grow, long limbs fashioning a home
The tree that you see is not one giant seed

And yet when I pray to the Lord of the Harvest
This hunger within me cries out for that day
I pray: Revive and Restore, Pour out more and more
But the 'more' that I mean is often '*more of the same*'

More of what I know, God; more of what I like, Lord
More that affirms what I already believe
But though it feels strange, to grow is to change
For the tree that we see is not one giant seed

Life-giving God, unsettle my stagnation
And teach me what it is to love others like you
Till I stretch out my arms, to embrace and embark
On this dangerous lifestyle of grace and of truth

When I'm tempted to shrink back; and retreat to the
known
Remind me, O Jesus, of the journey you made
Like a small grain of wheat, you were cast under our
feet
And buried in darkness, taking shame to the grave

But what no-one had granted – you weren't buried,
you were planted
And there in that tomb your heartbeat starts again!
This infectious new rhythm, and now we're dancing
with him
To the Anthem of Resurrection Power unrestrained

Holy Spirit, you're inviting yet more to the party
It's time to get ready – it won't be more of the same
Bringing life to the full, far from business as usual
God, break up the hard soil in my life and my faith

For we are *your* people, made for *your* glory
And we are *your* church; it is *your* hope we preach
And your love builds a home where grace overflows
For the tree that we see is not one giant seed

A video of Jon reading this poem is available at
<https://youtu.be/PSu-0d6XWxM>



At First...

At first it was strange
At first it was small
At first sight it just seemed like nothing at all

At first it was tight
At first it was tough
At first glance I just knew that it wasn't enough

But God who is first and God who is last
And God who is right here with us now
At your very first word life unfolds and unfurls
You breathe into being your purpose and power

At first it was hard
At first it was heavy
The first time we tried it felt like one time too many

At first it was fragile
At first it felt futile
At first light so fearful of running out of our fuel

But God who is first and God who is last
And God who is right here with us now
Whose first instinct is love, whose grace is enough
You fill us to abundance when we let go and allow

In the end it's your plan
In the end it's your purpose
At the end of our rope you're there waiting to lift us

In the end it's all yours God
In the end it's your glory
To the ends of the earth you're completing your story

You're the God who is first and the God who is last
You're the God who came down to us at our very
worst
As we shine out your light, the dark has to take flight
For no darkness can dim the Word you spoke at first



Jon Vaughan-Davies is the minister at Bethel Baptist Church in Whitchurch, Cardiff, and is also seconded to the Association Team in South Wales to explore Digital Communication and Digital Mission.

He has a particular passion for all things creative in mission and ministry, and blogs regularly at bethelcardiff.org.uk/blog



Being a Young Christian post-Christendom

Earlier this year *The Baptist Times* shared perspectives of three young Christians about being young Christians. The authors hope to encourage

older generations in our churches to understand the challenges and embrace the opportunities of welcoming young adults into community.

We've reproduced shortened versions of the articles here, with links to the full versions online.

'We long to be listened to, equipped and advocated for'

By Amanda Higgin

The thing that surprised me most about the Census results was not the results themselves (less than half the population of the United Kingdom identified as Christian – 46.2 per cent, down from 59.3 per cent of respondents in the 2011 census), but how people reacted. My experience of being Christian is being a minority in a secular world, but in the wake of the results I read expressions of concern and shock, declarations of persecution, resolutions to change, a call to arms. Some people seemed to fear that the sky was falling down. I was surprised that the percentage was as high as 46.2 per cent.

I am 25 years old, which makes me an elder GenZ, and the youngest student currently training for ordained ministry at

Regent's Park College. Because I've been on the discernment track for a while, my faith has always come up quite quickly in conversation. I am not sure I have ever had somebody respond "Oh, I'm a Christian too!". Usually, people respond with benign confusion: "Huh, why did you choose that?", "What does that actually mean?"

In the face of disinterest, confusion and hostility, young Christians have to choose to follow Jesus counterculturally. Knowing that we are not encouraged in our beliefs by the society that we keep, how much more important does the church community become? Our Christian families offer a beautiful place to recharge.

But it is particularly painful if we are marginalised. It might take a bit more effort, but know that we long to be listened to, equipped and advocated for. We are desperate to be resourced and supported in our faith by our church families, because our secular, post-Christendom lives are doing the opposite.

Amanda Higgin is 25 years old and currently training for ministry at Regent's Park College, Oxford
Access the longer piece here:



We need to talk about housing

By Nathan McGuire

In thinking about the decline of young adult engagement in Baptist churches, I wonder if 18–35 year olds feel safe to contribute significantly to the Baptist movement. Or are Baptist communities cultivating disenfranchisement?

I often think of the dynamic between King Saul and the future heir apparent, David, in 1 Samuel 16. The relational dynamic was a toxic one. It is no wonder, then, that David had to expend energy to avoid the king's wrath to survive. Today, young adults are not playing the harp to avoid physical spears, but certainly must avoid **spears of indifference** if they wish to belong to the Christian community.

Paul and Timothy, however, present us with a different model: a non-toxic one. Paul invested in Timothy because he valued what God was doing in his life. He saw the gift and took

the risk to equip Timothy so that he could significantly contribute to God's work.

What might this mean practically?

One of the major issues facing young adults is housing. In my context of Southwest London, the average housing price is £840,000 and the average rent for a one-bedroom house-share is £600. Young adults can barely afford the rent, never mind purchasing.

If we are serious about young adults being at the centre of the Baptist movement, we need to talk about housing, especially in urban contexts.

Where is the vision for missional houses / New Monastic communities? Over the last 10 years, there has been a steady increase in Community Housing Cooperatives which are developed by a group of

individuals committed to a local area. They purchase a house (often in disrepair), building, or plot of land and restore and/or develop it together.

While on the surface this is motivated by the need for affordable housing, something more dramatic is going on. Individuals are expressing a commitment to a local area, investing time and energy to see it prosper and flourish equitably among its stakeholders.

What an amazing opportunity for the Baptist movement to add salt to this.

Nathan McGuire is 31 years old and is serving as Associate Minister at Streatham Baptist Church. He blogs at thegodlyirritant.com
Access the longer piece here:



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Video games and mission

By Alice Cheeseman

As a certified nerd and habitual gamer, I am always pleasantly surprised to see the interest the world has over video games.

Each year the fascination grows at a rapid pace. It could possibly be due to the chance of escapism from the world, or the opportunity to belong to a community without having to leave the safety of a desk or couch, but the world is quickly paying attention. In 2022, the global video game industry was estimated to be worth \$196.8 billion. More interestingly, the most common age for those gaming in the UK?

16–24 years old.

If you compare the general growth of live-streaming platforms and the rise of video games to the statistics of church attendance, we find a challenging correlation.

During the Baptist Union Council (October 2022), the Young Adults Round Table (YART) noted that the Baptist Union is 'losing young adults from Baptist churches three times faster than older members.'

Video games and streaming platforms may contain the key to reaching a new corner of the world, and an age bracket that the Church has desperately been wishing to connect to.

For the Church has a message that the gaming world echoes - of justice and mercy, of compassion and sacrifice. And people in that space are the loneliest, most desperate for love, and for someone to tell them the good news.

The world is less and less reliant on the tangible - getting online to do 'mission' and fulfil the Great Commission is more pivotal than ever.

Alice Cheeseman is 25 years old, and a qualified youth worker
Access the longer piece here:



For more on young adults, including resources, stories and internships, visit baptist.org.uk/youngadults



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INSPIRATIONAL CHURCH MINISTRY FROM UGANDA THERE IS LOVE HERE

Jimmy and Phionah Okello's student ministry in Gulu, Uganda, is a clear example of abundant life, blessed by God. BMS World Mission's Writer, Laura Durrant, caught up with them on a recent trip to Gulu, where she got to experience this wonderful ministry first-hand.

There is love here. That's what I think as we're welcomed into University Community Church (UCC) in Gulu, by the congregation and church leaders, Jimmy and Phionah Okello. Jimmy and Phionah knew from their own university days in Kampala, Uganda's capital, that

God was calling them to minister to students – and for Phionah in particular, it's a beautiful completion of her own journey to faith, having become a Christian at university herself. Phionah and Jimmy met at church, and remained involved in the campus ministry for a number of years. That's until they felt the Lord calling them to move up north and plant a church at Gulu University.

Eight years later, they've built a warm, strong community at UCC – but ministering to students isn't without its challenges. "It's so transient and it can be discouraging," explains Phionah.

"Because every three years almost half of the church is gone and you have different people." But despite the impermanence of the context they're in, they're able to offer a safe space for these young people experiencing a huge change in their lives. "What we've seen is that because of our stability, we've become a light in that community," says Jimmy. And that light doesn't just touch Gulu. The university isn't just a mission field, it's also a mission base. Jimmy and Phionah are able to disciple the students they meet to become disciple-makers, so they can continue to share the gospel once they leave university.



Many churches in the UK struggle to engage with young people, but Jimmy and Phionah don't have a secret formula when it comes to their student ministry. They simply spend their time building strong relationships, and are available to help them whenever they can. "If you build a relationship of trust, they [the students] can listen to you and bring their issues to you," Jimmy explains.

It's a principle Jimmy and Phionah also take to their work outside of UCC with BMS' partner Justice Livelihoods Health (JLH), where Phionah helps with administration and finance, and Jimmy runs outreach and training for local church leaders. "I get the opportunity to share some of my skills and abilities in leadership, which I use at UCC,

to equip other pastors in different churches," says Jimmy. "Being able to share with them from what I have so they're able to lead more effectively and be equipped is really a beautiful thing."

There is love here. Not just at UCC, but in this community, in this city. It's my main take-away from our visit to Gulu: that with God's unfailing love abounding, any life can be lived with abundance.

Want to hear more about BMS World Mission's work in Gulu? Check out their 2023 harvest appeal, Days of Plenty, by visiting: bmsworldmission.org/daysofplenty



Laura Durrant is a Writer at BMS World Mission and Editor of *Engage*, the BMS World Mission magazine



Images | Alex Baker photography | BMS World Mission

DID YOU PACK THIS BAG YOURSELF?



Departures



Life as an airport chaplain, by Chris Goswami

If someone had told me a year ago I would be meeting a flight bringing children from a war zone, or assisting a young lady escaping a forced marriage, or counselling a South American fleeing a terrorist organisation, I would have marvelled that such a job existed. And yet it does.

More commonly, I've been helping people denied travel by their airline, assisting with our homeless community and, quite often, working out what to do with the steady trickle of waifs and strays who appear in the Chaplaincy offices here at Manchester Airport.

I've never had a job like this, where you constantly expect the unexpected. Quite often, you don't do what you came in to do – and that's OK!

Our inflight service

Of course, there is some regularity, at least in theory - a 'day job'. Our Lead Chaplain, George Lane (CofE) calls it 'wandering aimlessly' – referring to that old-fashioned service of simply making time for others. So we wend our way through the airport's staff offices, duty free, VIP lounges, check-in desks, engineering departments and break rooms. Our concern is the welfare of the 25,000 staff who work here. Each one has their own ups and downs, bereavements and birthdays, griefs and joys. They do tough jobs, there can be long hours starting as early as 3am, and passengers who may be less than tolerant – and they often appreciate someone with time to simply stop and chat.

One thing I do every week is visit the Short Term Holding Centre.

This is where the Home Office detains individuals accused of breaching their visa conditions. This too is a place filled with stories - some eye-popping, some heart-breaking:

Legislation gone bonkers

I met a young Indian student, Samir, in the Holding Centre. He was under threat of deportation for working more hours than allowed. His job was a carer in a residential care home. "Wow!" I said, "that's a tough job". "No no" he replied, beaming, "I enjoy it!". Samir has a deep respect for the elderly and is experienced looking after his own parents in India. In fact, he told me how the previous night he had accompanied an elderly lady into hospital, and remained with her until 3am, long after his end of shift at 6pm.

It makes you wonder. The UK desperately needs carers. Here's a guy who's a fantastic carer, he even enjoys it... and we want to deport him.

Our cabin crew today are...

Manchester Airport Chaplaincy was founded by a Baptist minister, Arthur Grimshaw, in 1980. Today the majority of our chaplains remain Christian, and our day begins with morning prayer in one of the airport's five prayer rooms. We use Anglican or Catholic daily worship liturgies.

But of course, an airport is incredibly diverse – one of the most cosmopolitan workplaces anywhere. For example, many of our security staff and taxi drivers are Muslim, and we have multiple other faiths and ethnicities. This is reflected in our chaplaincy team which includes five Muslim, three Jewish, and one Sikh Chaplain. We're constantly learning about each other's cultures and beliefs, and, in these potentially dangerous times, that can only be a good thing.

Baptists have a long tradition of defending the right of individuals to hold any faith, including no faith (that's what the Reformation was about after all) and that resonates strongly with me. So it's a privilege to work in such an eclectic team. It also lends itself well to humour: Recently, three of our chaplains - Christian, Muslim and Jewish - in religious dress, were walking together when they were stopped by a passer-by. "Is this the start of a joke?", he quipped! (If ONLY they had walked into a bar!)

Frightened and abused Hamsa, a young man brought to us on arrival, had suffered persecution and beatings in Iran for being gay. For some hours he found it hard to speak to us at all. After much telephoning we managed to get him started on an asylum claim, and found him accommodation and support from a local LGBT-friendly church.

Generally, we don't know what happens to the people we assist but, unusually, a few weeks later we heard from Hamsa. "... I'm gonna participate at an LGBT event on Monday and it's gonna be great. Life is better than before, I have a place and food, and feel better about my future. Thanks for everything, you helped me a lot!". He is even volunteering at a local Baptist church – how heartening is that!

Ensure your seatbelt is fastened!

I would be lying if I didn't admit to a large dose of adrenaline attached to this role.

Dropping into the Police Control Room or Air Traffic Control Tower to see how folks are doing is always a pleasure and often captivating. The airport fire station is another favourite. I'm always struck by the friendly banter and intensely warm atmosphere these teams have created.



It's palpable and positive. The fire station even has a team member who used to be a chef – trust me, they eat seriously well!

A highlight for me was leading one of our several Remembrance events. Mine was at the Fire Station. Many of our airport staff are ex-Services, so it's an important day and we need to ensure it is done well.

Added to all that, whenever we get an email from the Foreign Office or Red Cross, or a call from Border Force, you can be sure there is a story of human interest unfolding somewhere in this town we call an airport.

Sometimes we fail

Lucy, an elderly lady from Seattle, had her savings stolen by a con-man online, over several months. Eventually, the con-man suggested she meet him at Manchester Airport where her money 'would be returned in full'. In desperation, Lucy arrived at T1, found a seat, and waited... and waited. In fact, she remained there for seven days and nights, hanging on to a thread of hope that all might not be lost.

Eventually, she phoned the US Embassy, who contacted the chaplaincy. We got her into a hotel, and then a flight home.

It's hard to spot one face among many. Still, we felt saddened that none of us - security, customer services, cleaners or chaplains - spotted her sooner.

Touchdown?

I've thoroughly enjoyed my first year in this role, despite it being only part-time.

But isn't it funny how things turn out? When I first saw the ad for 'Airport Chaplain' I literally laughed out loud. You see this airport has an intense familiarity for me. I worked in the tech industry for more than 30 years and passed through this airport many (many) times - sometimes visiting our offices abroad, other times a customer tour, or to speak at some conference. And in this place, where I spent so many days over so many years, I have ended up in ministry. If you then throw in a love of fire engines, planes, and police cars... yes, I feel I packed this bag myself.



Chris Goswami is Associate Minister at Lymm Baptist Church, and a chaplain at Manchester Airport. He blogs regularly at 7minutes.net

Incidents related are all true but names and details have been altered to ensure anonymity.



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The Baptist Colleges are open and active, preparing men and women to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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- Receive counselling
- Continue in their current role, which may otherwise not be possible
- Take a retreat or holiday to recharge after a difficult period

The Pastoral Fund normally gives one-off grants to those working in a Baptist organisation.

To find out if you qualify, and for more information, visit
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or e-mail
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PRAYERS: JESUS COMMISSIONS



Lectio 365

Pray the Bible, every day.

This devotional is taken from Lectio 365, the daily devotional app from 24-7 Prayer. Set aside 15 minutes in a quiet space as you follow a simple PRAY rhythm:

P:ause to be still

R:ejoice with a Psalm and R:eflect on Scripture

A:sk for God's help

Y:ield to his will in your life

Pause

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and Pray

Prayer of approach

Jesus in this new season, I invite you to shape my life and set the direction of my year. I listen to your word; I long to imitate your works and I welcome your Spirit as I fix my eyes on you.

Rejoice and Reflect

I choose to rejoice in God's presence with me today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 121...

*I look up to the mountains —
does my help come from there?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth!*
Psalm 121: 1-2 (NLT)

Pause and Pray

Today, I am reflecting on the final occasion that the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples before returning to be with his Father...

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
Matthew 28: 16-20 (ESVUK)

Throughout the Bible, mountains are places of encounter and commissioning. After his ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, Noah's family were commissioned by God to be fruitful and fill the whole earth (Genesis 8). It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the Ten Commandments, and it was on Mount Horab that the prophet Elijah received his recommissioning from God after fleeing in fear from Jezebel (1 Kings 19).

And it was on another mountainside that the Devil himself made Jesus an offer – the kingdoms of the earth in return for his devotion (Matthew 4).

Jesus refused, choosing a different, more difficult path, which ultimately led to the moment he stood on the mountainside and commissioned his disciples, declaring that all authority had been given to him by his Father.



Ask

How am I responding to Jesus' commission to 'Go and make disciples'? Who am I reaching out to with the good news of Jesus in some way?

I take a few moments to pray specifically for those who come to mind.

Pause and Pray

Who do I know that is serving Jesus in a nation other than their own.

Lord Jesus, I pray for them now. Comfort them whenever they feel far from home and those they love. Give them the strength and resources that they need to keep going. And open doors of opportunity for them to tell others about you, and to make disciples.

Pause and Pray

Yield

As I return to the passage, I open my ears to hear your word, and my heart to yield to your will once again.

Read Matthew 28:16-20 again

I imagine myself on the mountainside with the disciples, watching Jesus and listening to what he has to say. Am I one of those feeling doubt? Am I still afraid? How do I feel when Jesus calls me to go and make disciples?

Pause and Pray

Yielding Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are alive!
Thank you for calling me, even though I sometimes have doubts, and I'm afraid at other times too.
Thank you for promising to be with me, to the very end of the age. I yield – I say yes – once again to your calling, your commissioning.

Yielding Promise

And now, as I prepare to take this time of prayer into the coming day, the Lord who loves me says in Isaiah 41:

*Don't be afraid, for I am with you.
Don't be discouraged, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you.*

Isaiah 41:10a (NLT)

Closing Prayer

Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to you, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen

Lectio 365 is a free daily devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day.

Inspired by Lectio Divina, a way of meditating on the Bible that's been used by Christians for centuries, Lectio 365 shares daily Bible readings, thoughts and prayers that follow the simple P R A Y rhythm

This is adapted from an offering earlier in 2023, and is republished with permission.

**Lectio 365 is available to download on the app store and Google Play.
Learn to pray the Bible every day:**

24-7prayer.com/lectio365



EVENTS

The Baptist Assembly 2023 *Telford 16-18 June*

This year's Baptist Assembly is taking place in Telford and everyone across Baptists Together is invited!

Come to connect, commission, pray, learn and be inspired. We will be exploring the breadth of mission through our theme 'Mission is...'

"The mission theme of this year's Assembly has emerged directly as a result of the feedback and the conversations we had when we gathered in Bournemouth last year," says our General Secretary Lynn Green.

"We pray that our being together will shape, encourage and inform our mission and discipleship as we seek to follow Jesus in the places he has called us.

"So please consider joining us in Telford – it's important we hear your stories, perspectives and reflections.

"Above all, we simply value your presence! It's so good to meet up, whether in the official programme or the informal spaces that make the Baptist Assembly what it is. You never know what impact you will have or how God will speak to you as we gather together."

Book your place at baptistassembly.org.uk



Refugee Week *19-25 June*

A UK-wide programme of arts, cultural and educational events that celebrate the contribution of refugees to the UK, and encourages a better understanding between communities
refugeeweek.org.uk

Baptist World Alliance Annual Gathering

2-5 July
baptistworld.org/annualgathering

SENT 2023 Mission Summit *5-9 July*

Reimagine the future of global Baptist mission. Hosted by European Baptist Federation in Stavanger, Norway
ebf.org/sent2023

Satellites *4-8 August*

Bath and West Showground, Shepton Mallet
youthscape.co.uk/satellites

Education Sunday *10 September* cte.org.uk/education-sunday

Peacemaking Sunday
24 September
jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/peacemaking

Sam Sharpe Lecture *18 October*

Delivered by Anthony Reddie at Whitelands College, University of Roehampton
baptist.org.uk/samsharpe

For more visit:
baptist.org.uk/events



Baptist Union Council - March 2023



The second phase of our Financial Model Review, an update to the consultation process to help Council respond to a request to change the Ministerial Recognition Rules (MR), and the approval of a new national recognition category for local (or lay) Baptist leaders were among the key items at the latest Baptist Union Council.

More than 70 people gathered at the Hayes Conference Centre in Swanwick, Derbyshire for the gathering between 21-22 March, which also included the usual finance, pensions, new and closed churches and Key Roles Nominations updates.

Council members heard a presentation from John Taylor of Tricordant, the independent consultants commissioned to undertake a Financial Model Review of Baptists Together. The review was initiated by Council due to our declining income along with continued tensions as to whether the current system is fair.

In a briefing paper John explained we face some serious financial challenges:

- Membership and attendance are declining
- Home Mission giving is declining
- Funds cover of expenditure is dangerously low for some Associations
- Income generation and equity across Associations are the real challenges.

He presented five proposals developed by the Tricordant working group. He made clear no calculations had yet been done: these were initial ideas. He was asking for general feedback on them, and permission to carry out the detailed work and calculations required to make an informed decision on whether we take the proposals further. Council gave feedback and approved the request.

Members were told Sandra Cobbin and Associates have now been appointed to undertake the consultation to help Council know how to respond to a request to change the Ministerial Recognition Rules (MR) to make it possible for ministers to be in a legal Same Sex Marriage and be accredited.

Following concerns about a tight timeline, Council members voted to extend the consultation. The results will now be brought to Council in March 2024. There is a dedicated area on the Baptists Together website to keep you informed:

baptist.org.uk/consultation

A new national recognition category for local (or lay) Baptist leaders - that of Recognised Local Minister (RLM) - was approved by Council members.

It is anticipated this category will provide a framework for the training and recognition of a broader range of ministries than the current national recognition, such as church pastors, pioneers,

volunteer or community chaplains, evangelists or children's, youth and families' workers.

It will therefore replace the existing categories of Nationally Recognised Pastor, Pioneer, and Preacher.

For the full Council report, visit baptist.org.uk/council23 Or scan this QR code



Collaborative leadership for SCBA

The Southern Counties Baptist Association has called Clare Hooper and Hayley Young as its Regional Ministers Co Team Leaders.

Following a thorough discernment process, the proposal to call Clare and Hayley and embrace a different way of leading was passed with a clear majority at an Extraordinary General Meeting on 8 March.

Clare is the Association's regional minister with a particular remit to support churches and pioneers in their mission with children, young people and families (CYF).



Hayley is the Baptists Together president 2022-23, and has been serving the Northern Baptist Association as Transitional Strategic Leader (Regional Minister) since 2021.

They will co-lead the team with Clare taking responsibility for the children, youth and families, and Hayley taking on the support of 50 churches. "Together they will collaborate on all the aspects, duties and joys of being the Team Lead," said Judith Wheatley, interim moderator for SCBA.

"This is a most exciting appointment and one that will help us as an Association move



forward together as we share the good news of the gospel," she said.

"The interview panel were unanimous in their decision to propose Clare and Hayley for the role. They recognised the energy, the passion, their wide and varied experience, their self-awareness and the exciting possibilities for this new style of leadership for future ministry."

In a joint statement shared for discernment at the EGM, Clare and Hayley emphasised how they are both committed to collaborative working:

"We believe that it is this type of leadership that will enable both the team leader, the team they're leading and SCBA to flourish. We believe that together as co-leaders we are stronger.

"Our differences are a strength that complement rather than compete."

For more, visit baptist.org.uk/scbaleader

'Historic moment' for JBU as Merlyn Hyde-Riley appointed General Secretary

The Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU) has elected and appointed the Revd Merlyn Hyde-Riley as its new General Secretary - the first woman to be appointed to this post.

Merlyn comes to the position with 'a wealth of leadership experience locally and internationally' in both secular and faith-based organisations, said a JBU statement. She has a strong academic background, experience as an accredited pastor and moderator of several

churches, as well as a grounding in the teaching profession. Merlyn has served as the JBU's Associate General Secretary for 15 years and has been acting as the General Secretary since October 2021.

Succeeding the Revd Karl Johnson, Merlyn is expected to provide administrative, strategic and spiritual leadership to the nearly 40,000 strong denomination with 340 churches. She said: "I have a vision for the Union to take the lead in

recapturing the imagination and passion of our forebears that will find expression in our work for justice, peace and the empowerment of our Jamaican people so that they can fully realise a life befitting people created in the image of God."



RESOURCES

A selection of resources recently created by Baptists and partner organisations.

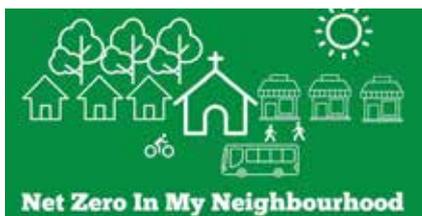


This year's **Whitley Lecture** is entitled *Learning from Young People's Experiences of Communion: Re-envisioning the Meal as a Space for Nurturing Faith*.

It is being delivered by Baptist minister Linda Hopkins who invites us to reimagine communion as a sacred space in which all are welcomed.

Linda is presenting the lecture at Cardiff Baptist College on Friday 2 June and online on Monday 25 September at 19:00. The text of this year's Whitley Lecture has also been published as a book.

For more details visit baptist.org.uk/whitley23



Do you want to be a climate champion in your community? Would you like to help make where you live greener, safer and more pleasant? Are you looking for local ways to act on your environmental concerns? Then **Net Zero in My Neighbourhood** is just what you're looking for!

These resources from the Joint Public Issues Team will help churches to support their communities in holding councils accountable over their climate action plans. The campaign encourages us to build relationships with our councils and facilitate meeting spaces for our communities to come together and discuss how we can achieve a just transition from fossil fuels where we are.

Visit: jpit.uk/net-zero-in-my-neighbourhood



First Friday

This monthly Zoom-based gathering aims to help anyone involved in communications across Baptists Together. Led by local and regional communications expert Hannah Fleming-Hill and national Communications Manager Mike Lowe, along with occasional special guests, they will talk about a variety of communication related topics - such as social media; inclusive communication; digital mission and evangelism.

The format is simple - a one-hour Zoom gathering chatting about one topic with the first 30 minutes focusing on equipping and the second half an open conversation. Each month the 'equipping' element of the Zoom will be recorded and shared afterwards.

For more, and to access this year's recordings, visit: baptist.org.uk/firstfriday

Visions of **Colour**

An online resource designed for Baptist ministers and Baptist ministers-in-training to develop an awareness of, sensitivity to, and action towards issues of racial, ethnic and cultural discrimination in Baptist churches in Britain.

Based around six short videos (four of which are available already), the ultimate goal is to help Baptist ministers develop action plans suited to their local church and community.

Access the free course here baptist.org.uk/voc

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