

# MOSAIC

JANUARY – APRIL  
2026



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**RM**

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It's encouraging to read about the missional creativity across the RM Network. From popcorn to ukeleles, from nativity rocks to magicians, and from small gatherings to courageous experiments. Everywhere, people are offering their creative gifts for God's glory.

The Christian life is also shaped by quieter stories of loving care and persistent prayer, where light begins to push back the darkness. Charlie and Abby, who are patiently loving their community in Mevagissey Cornwall, put it beautifully:

'There is always a temptation to try and build a "thing," with a "name," but God hasn't called us to do that at the moment. He is asking us to be mustard seeds, a community of salt and light, without whom the community is darker, blander, and less likely to flourish.'

It's always tempting to point to something we've built or an event we run, and our activity in the Spirit is beautiful. But our saltiness is just as important, and perhaps even more so, because it comes from Jesus.

Our saltiness doesn't come from successful action, that's the result of being salty. We are salty because we are in communion with Jesus, walking in the Spirit and caring for those God has given us. It's the intimacy part of our faith, however we do it, the wonderfully ordinary part of our missional faith. In a meal, salt doesn't call attention to itself, but without it everything is a little less tasty, a little duller. I can't enjoy my chips from the local chippy without that sprinkling of salt! Much of rural mission is being the salt in our communities: presence, prayer, and patient love that slowly changes the atmosphere. It reminds us that the Spirit is already at work through the things we often dismiss as too small to matter.

**"You are the salt of the earth.  
But if the salt loses its saltiness,  
how can it be made salty again?"**

**Matthew 5:13**

This speaks into our January season, when we haven't got a big project or evangelistic event to showcase, but are simply living faithfully as Christians in our everyday places. When nothing seems new, when we keep showing up week after week, when we are pursuing God and caring for our neighbours. Be encouraged. The Spirit uses these small, steady acts of faithfulness to season our communities and illuminate the places we're called to serve.

January is a season for roots to grow down deep, to establish and strengthen at the core, where skies are dark for much of our days, and where nature stops producing for a while. Perhaps as we re-enter the world and our work in the world, we might free ourselves from the pressure to perform and produce and step into this rhythm and just be. The temptation is to run headlong into the next thing after the Christmas break, while Creation in the Northern hemisphere still lies in the stillness of deep winter, resting in the slow, steady, hidden work of God. Maybe God invites you to enter the new year in the same manner.

With love,

Jo

**Jo Allen**

Joint CEO, Rural Ministries

### BroadGrace, Coltishall

I was walking into the High School with my daughter. It was the open evening and I had taken her to have a look around and see what she thought of the school that her two older sisters attend each day. A deputy head teacher welcomed visitors in and a gaggle of students were on hand to answer questions and give tours. After the teacher had welcomed us, the students started singing 'Our God is a Great Big God'.

I have no idea how many times I have sung that in primary school assemblies! But what an encouragement. Remembering a song is not faith, but I think it is evidence of a seed sown. One of our priorities for this academic year (like many churches, we tend to think of life as running from September to August) is to join up our schools ministry. Lots of our church family are involved in our local

schools, as students, staff, governors, volunteers, parents and supporting with assemblies and RE lessons. Bringing this together to help us pray for our schools and join some of the dots is an exciting prospect.

The other exciting ministry we have recently launched is an evangelism team. Not to do it all! But to help us grow as a church, to connect our personal witness to Christ with events we might run and the regular week-by-week meetings of church, community groups, toddler group, children's and young people's groups. As I write, they are thinking about Christmas. We had to book a larger venue for our carol service in expectant hope of inviting more of our community along than previously. We are continuing to work on plans for church planting as well, and hopefully there will be more news on that next time. Thank you, as ever, for praying for us.

### Fenlands Church, Tydd Gote

At Fenlands Church, Tydd Gote, Christmas celebrations started at the end of November! Our ladies held their bi-monthly supper with carols and the sharing of gifts. This enjoyable celebration continues to bring many ladies from within and without the fellowship. There is always a welcome for new members to join in.

In early December, the church held a family film afternoon, which welcomed a number of families from around the area. Popcorn and soft drinks were heartily enjoyed, as the Pevensie siblings from CS Lewis's Narnia series went on their voyage aboard the Dawn Treader.

Following a very successful Barn Dance in October, mid-December saw the doors of the fellowship opened again to friends and neighbours to enjoy the mayhem of Barn Dancing to Fifties music! This time of relaxation allowed us

to meet those who may not normally come to church.

The annual Carol Service brought another opportunity for reaching out to the community. With the usual contributions from singers, poets and our youth, the event truly set the scene for the coming celebration of the birth of the Christ. The following Sunday, was the first Christmas Koinonia Meal we have held. This was a time of sharing a meal as a fellowship and then breaking bread, as encouraged in Acts. A moving and wonderful meal was followed by a celebration of carols and Christmas readings. The final Christmas event was our usual Christmas Day Service, when we could enjoy a family time thanking each other for gifts and thanking God for that most precious gift - the Lord Jesus.



## Great Moulton Chapel, Norfolk

'And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth...' (Luke 1:14).

Where does the time go? Suddenly, Christmas is over and we are at the beginning of a new year. For the children, and for the older generation, Christmas is a time of celebration with family and friends, but mainly it must be looked upon as the time of Jesus' birth and the joys that that will bring to us all. The Chapel held their annual carol service, which is always very well attended, following which, we had some refreshments, so that we were able to chat and get to know the new faces, also old ones, who seem to come for special events.

'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.' (Hebrews 13:2-3).

In addition, our local community hall arranged a Christmas lunch in November, bringing around a hundred local people together to have a meal and share life experiences and stories. Almost all the members of our Chapel attended this meal, which was great fun, a lovely two-course meal with entertainment, beautifully decorated tables, and joyous music as we ate our meals. This is an event they have held for the second time, and as a Chapel, we have supported it to help bring us together with those who may not attend Chapel or church. Getting together in this way to share food and fellowship means that we can talk about what we do and what God has done for us in the past and what we're praying for in the future.



## Mount Zion Church, Cliviger, Lancashire, Uke can do it!

Mount Zion Church, Cliviger is a very musical place and this Christmas was no exception. Their well-established ukulele band performed in rest homes, local groups and at the Musical Memories group which works with those suffering from Alzheimer's.

The group led by founder, Alan Scholes plays at least twice a month, fundraising for a local hospice and entertaining many. There are more than thirty performers of all ages, with beginners' groups sharing the art of playing this wonderful instrument with a whole new keen learners.

'It's a lovely instrument, fairly easy to learn, very practical to carry to performances, and we attract a wide range of age groups of men and women. Interestingly, some mothers bring their children along then decide to have a go themselves. My wife and I used to take school assemblies and lunchtime clubs in schools and nurseries all over the area. We love the idea of using music to help others.'

There's no stopping Alan. He celebrated his seventieth birthday at the church by embarking on a five-hour marathon of playing seventy hymns and songs on the ukulele and guitar, raising over £1000 for the church building project fund. The group play a wide range of music, including Twenties standards, rock 'n' roll and popular hymns. It's an inclusive group as those who don't feel able to play the ukulele accompany everyone on washboards and tambourines.

From Christmas carols to rocking around the clock, Alan and his ukulele band are bringing joy and fellowship through music.

# For Everything There is a Season



**'People can get together and worship, but it doesn't have to be within four walls.'**

**Everything that Rural Ministries does is underpinned by our wonderful Board of Trustees. At the end of last year, we said goodbye to our Chair, Stephen Spurgeon and to longstanding Trustee Elaine Fisher and welcomed Paul Susans to the position of Acting Chair. Editor Ruth Leigh caught up with them for a chat about the changes they've seen, the lessons they've learned and their vision for the future.**

Elaine's Rural Ministries story began twenty-five years ago when the then RM CEO visited her church. Two years later she joined the Board. She has seen a huge change in communications through advances in technology, watched as some churches

closed but rejoiced as others came on board and thrived.

'My happiest memories are of the Annual Conferences where many members worshipped together for the weekend, listened to speakers, played games, quizzed and went on walks. It gave us such good opportunities to develop relationships with the RM churches. Over the years, we have developed links with lots of Christian organisations and I pray that this will continue. The Board owes a great debt to Stephen who has guided us for two decades. As I step down, my prayer is for staff to continue the good work, churches to grow with God at the helm and trustees to stay close to God and seek His plan for RM.'

Stephen Spurgeon met RM's original founder in the nineteen sixties, when the charity was called the Datchet Evangelical Fellowship. In 2000, he was approached by the General Secretary and asked to join the Board of Trustees. Five years later, he became Chair.

'When I joined, RM was a collection of assets, but under Simon Mattholie's astute guidance, it has grown into a network of people, pastors, pioneers and missional listeners. I have extremely happy memories of the friendships I made and I will miss that. My prayer for the future is that other people will catch the vision of what RM is all about and feel led to come on to the Board. It is a responsibility, but a great privilege.'

As Stephen vacates the position of Chair, Trustee Paul Susans has agreed to step into the post until someone else volunteers to take it on.

'The previous RM CEO, Declan Flanagan, gave a presentation at my church in 2012. I made the mistake of looking interested and found myself chatting to my friend Chris Hughes, who at that time was on the Board. He encouraged me to think about becoming a trustee, which I duly did the next year. My first Board meeting was Simon's interview!'

Paul's main takeaway so far has been that RM supports a number of different churches, groups and denominations whose common feature is that they want to spread the Good News of Jesus.

'It's broadened my horizons,' he says. 'People can get together and worship, but it doesn't have to be within four walls. After all, Jesus went out to the people. He didn't stay in the temple and wait for them to come to Him. That's what I think is so great about RM. All the projects are taking the word to the people and following the guidance of Jesus.'



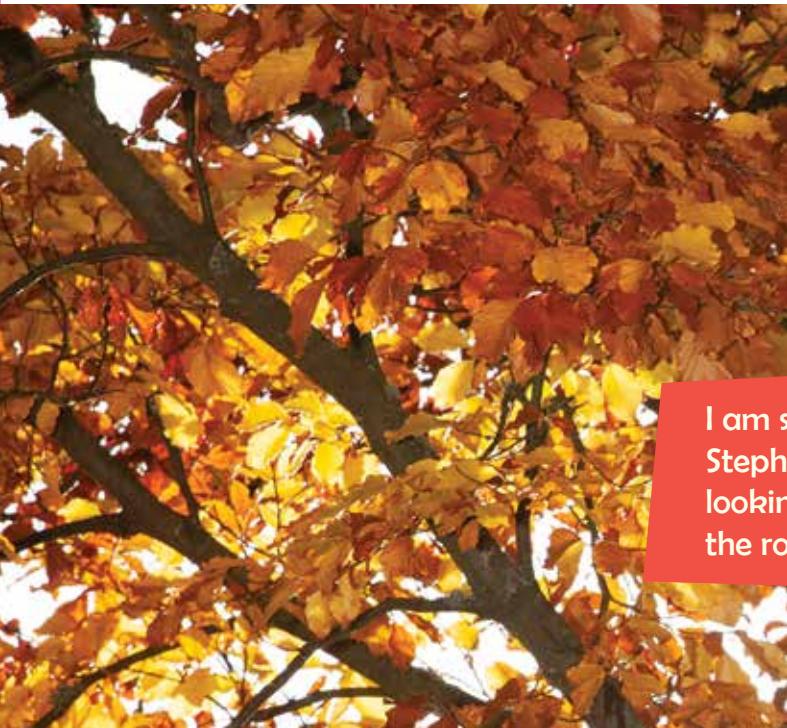
Stephen Spurgeon



Elaine Fisher



Paul Susans



I am sure readers will wish to join me in thanking Stephen and Elaine for their years of service and looking forward to working with Paul as he takes on the role of Acting Chair.



# Spring Book Review

## Beneath the Tamarisk Tree: Telling the Story of Dismas

by Rob Seabrook

Reviewed by Ruth Leigh



Rob Seabrook

I've read plenty of descriptions of heaven but this is one of the most realistic and engaging I've ever come across.

The Bible is full of what you might call supporting characters. There they are in the well-known stories, but we don't know how they got there, where they came from or where they ended up. I always very much enjoy it when someone takes such a person and imagines how their story might look.

This is what Rob Seabrook did with the penitent thief, a minor character who appears in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but whose voice is only heard in the latter. He repents of his crimes (we're not told what they were) and is promised by Jesus that he will join him in paradise.

This novel begins at the moment that promise is fulfilled. Dismas is an abused, neglected child, treated cruelly by his aunt and uncle until he runs away. Life on the streets is tough and he lives in the shadows, marginalised, hungry, cold and unloved. And yet, the unwanted child, the thief, the criminal, finds himself in a beautiful place of

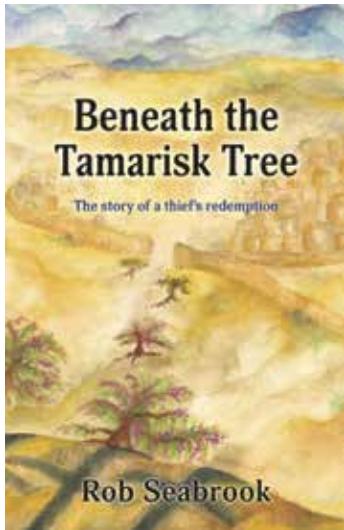
colour and promise when he dies. To his amazement, he meets the man who was beside him at Golgotha and finds that his promise had come true.

I've read plenty of descriptions of heaven but this is one of the most realistic and engaging I've ever come across. The author writes movingly of Dismas's transformation into a beloved adopted son named Habib, completely believable and authentic.

*'Jesus beckoned Habib to sit down next to him. No-one had ever taken any interest in Habib before. He sat down beside them, feeling like royalty sat on a throne.'*

Dismas's story is tragic. His mother died giving birth to him and when he is around eight, his uncle cruelly taunts him about it. He runs away and remembers that that was the last time he cried. His healing begins beside his Saviour, being encouraged to speak about his feelings, express emotion and be released from pain and trauma.

The story of a vulnerable child starving on the streets is deeply painful. For a while,



Dismas has a friend, a girl named Riha, but my heart sank as I suspected that something would happen to end their relationship, the first experience of love the boy had ever had. Sure enough, she dies of fever, ending the brief happiness and friendship which Dismas has known.

Burying his feelings, the boy carries on living on the streets, his heart harder than ever and all hope gone. He must be no more than a teenager when the temple guards pick him up and sentence him to death.

The story comes full circle, as the two thieves hang on either side of Jesus, one still full of rage, the other resigned to his fate and able to see the love and kindness in the eyes of the man next to him.

The author is able to weave a truly compelling and moving narrative, moving from the past to the present without ever losing the clarity of the greatest story ever told. Habib's healing, his new grasp of forgiveness and love and what it is like to truly know Jesus is beautifully written. This minor character certainly deserves his own story.

The book can be bought directly via Rob's website: [www.robseabrook.com](http://www.robseabrook.com), online at Eden and Amazon and from all good Christian bookshops.

**This novel begins at the moment that promise is fulfilled.**

**RM Zoom prayer**

**30 minutes to connect and pray with others in rural ministry**

**Monthly: 1st Tuesday: 10am**

**6<sup>th</sup> January**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> February**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> March**  
**7<sup>th</sup> April**



**Scan to join, or go to the link on the home page of our website.**

[www.ruralministries.org.uk](http://www.ruralministries.org.uk)

### Harbour Church, Dorset

We are so thankful for the faithful prayers and support we have received as we have and continue to listen here in Dorset. 2026 is where our funding comes to an end – so it's a helpful point to look back and see what God has been and is doing. We are thankful for the missional activity that constantly arises out of listening with no agenda – all activity done in partnership with those in the locality. God has done beyond our imagining in so many circumstances. We are amazed at the changed lives, celebrated through baptism and new life. We are in awe at the beautiful small churches we call boats arise in different parts of the county. We are constantly thankful for the network of other places doing boats and harbours across the UK and abroad. On a personal level, we are thankful for being able to listen since 2017 – it has been an absolute gift and honour.

2026 will be a significant year as funding ceases. We would appreciate your prayers for God to lead and help us in becoming self-sustaining and to continue all God has begun here in Dorset and to expand into the many areas of Dorset without a visible presence of church. But for now, we just want to say thank you to you all – for your prayers, financial support and partnership in the Gospel.

### The Light Still Shines, Bont Elim Community Church, Pontarddulais, Swansea

If you are anything like us, January brings mixed feelings. We have now gone through the busiest quarter of the year! We have settled in our new youth group, seeing an average of twenty-five out of a base of forty different children. It's been a journey around music mostly, as I show them my lack of karaoke ability. We have had our Light Party, recognising that the 31st October, for us, is the anniversary of the Welsh Revival. The shoe box campaign was embraced by the local primary school with our Samantha going in and explaining all about them. The celebrations that came from this were so heartwarming. I lost count of how many we sent but it was more than two hundred and fifty! At our extravaganza, Santa was played in by bagpipers, with the Lord Lieutenant, High Sheriff, Lord Mayor and local town councillors joining us in this event to celebrate the completion of this phase of our green project. I love the road to Christmas. I use every service to remind people that our tree at home has been up for eight years and for me, every day is a celebration of Christmas.

And so, this is my humble prayer request for us, and for those around us. We want everyone to understand that the Light still shines. The same joy experienced in all our events and in all the activity, is found in Jesus. Statistically, this is the season when people struggle. Let's pray that they will find hope in Jesus. Hope to face this new year. Hope to thrive rather than survive. To face this new year without fear but filled with His love. A transformation from being a world worrier to being prayer warriors! I'm reminded of the old Bill Gaither song 'Because He Lives'. Every love and blessing of the Lord!



## Pinchbeck Baptist Church, Lincolnshire

'Strange isn't it? Each person's life touches so many others...' Clarence from 'It's a Wonderful Life'.

New Year's blessings from Pinchbeck Baptist Church.

How truly uplifting Advent always is, culminating in the greatest gift ever given and available and free to everyone!

We have had a wonderful Advent with Pastor Sue bringing us God's good news through the medium of film – the Christmas classic 'It's a Wonderful Life'. A story of despair, yet more importantly a story of hope, friendship, caring and love. We can all experience God's good news through the hope and love of our Lord Jesus, the true conqueror of despair in the world.

Our Sunday Services and Community activities during this period included a special edition of our regular 'Saturday Cuppas'. Every last Saturday of the month, we bring our community together over a warm brew, an opportunity to

chat and meet up with friends, and cake of course! This time with a Christmas theme and stalls to browse with gift ideas.

This was followed by the First Sunday of Advent and a Christingle Café Church; laughter and fun, tea and coffee and the countdown had begun.

We mustn't forget our Carols by Candlelight, loved by all. Our church, heaving with people, the anticipation, singing carols in the warm glow, the candles (battery, of course) lighting up their smiling faces, celebrating together the wonderous gift of our Lord Jesus. It really is a time of hope and love, and delicious homemade mince pies enjoyed by all.

And finally, a holy birthday celebration for our Lord, with a Midnight Communion on Christmas Eve.

The wondrous gift is given.

## Millom Baptist Church, Cumbria

Millom Baptist Church have been enjoying the Warm Hub season again. It is a real team effort providing homemade soup for a number of people who never come into the church for other events, but who sit and enjoy friendship and conversation which can sometimes be really deep, helpful and full of God's presence. Visits to a local care home with a team also provide lots of encouragement and some wonderful conversations, as well as some rousing singing. These are very simple things, yet the joy of spending time with people is profound.

Community and team work continue to be central in much of what we do, and regular shared prayer is

essential. Being fortunate enough to have a group of children with us on a Sunday, there is always a chance for us to sing 'their' action songs – which the adults enjoy and sing with as much enthusiasm as the children have! They remind us that everyone is precious, and we all have a contribution to make in the family of God, whatever our age, stage or abilities.

Please pray that our minister's recent opportunity to lead a harvest assembly in a new school might lead to further chances to share God's story, that we sense where God is taking us next, and that we can continue to work together to bless our community.

# Parkview Chapel, Botesdale, Suffolk

I am delighted to say that Parkview has a really good reputation in our community. We are aware that one of the many reasons for this is that we know how to organise an event, always ensuring it's going to be good and done well.

This was certainly the case in November, when, in our efforts to start Christmas with a bang, we put the Christmas decorations up a little earlier than usual and booked, 'An Evening With Tom Elliott and Charlie Green.' Tom is a comedian and magician. Charlie is a swing and big band singer (of Britain's Got Talent fame no less!)

I love Christmas, so it doesn't take much for me to get in the festive mood. But for those for whom this isn't the case, this event couldn't fail to get you all Christmassy. It was a sell-out, everyone enjoying not just Tom and Charlie, but also mince pies, mulled wine ... you get the picture.

This was an opportunity to invite everyone back for what we had planned in December. Not least our Christmas Carol Service, which we always follow with a shared Christmas tea. And again, as every year, we were full.

However church is not about numbers. As a Pastor, I can get caught up in worrying about those. But I also can say that what we do at Parkview is about building relationships with people, loving them, and when we can, sharing the good news of Jesus with them.

I hope you'll join me in giving thanks to God for all that happened at Parkview over the festive period. And please also pray that, now 2026 has arrived, we get the opportunity to build on those relationships, both new ones made over Christmas, and those already in place.

And please pray that God will use those events, those relationships, to lead people in our community to knowing Him.

'To love God, love people, and make disciples.'



# Lightwave Community, St Edmundsbury & Ipswich, Suffolk

*'The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. (Lamentations 3:25-26).'*

As the winter progresses here in Suffolk, the air growing crisp and frost mantling the trees and ground in the early morning, we look for joy in these quiet transformations. It's a reminder that even the coldest moments bring new beauty, resilience and purpose. Just as frost glimmers under the morning sun, our lives too can shine brightest through change, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Playford Youth Group planted daffodil bulbs on a grey October day, doing something small to be a part of something bigger. A new splash of spring colour will come to the village next year. The Forest Heath team shone the light of Jesus by providing a place of protection, warmth, refreshments and rest at the Red Lodge Community. The Lightwave Youth Band host and lead worship at the Friday night worship night at Holy Trinity Bungay. The Soul Children Gospel Choir is an ongoing blessing to their community.

## Sam and Suzie Abramian, Missional Listeners, Norfolk

This time of year on the West Norfolk coast often feels quieter. Unlike the migratory birds that come here, the holiday makers are now few and far between and there are fewer local events beyond the usual Christmas gatherings. When we first moved to the area from the outskirts of London twelve years ago, winters were a challenge for us. But now we really look forward to the season. Although it's a time with fewer people, it's a time that often feels deeper and more intentional.

There's a great joy in genuinely doing life with others and joining in with the local community, which for us is primarily with our son's football team. Half of the team are also in his class at school and we all live near each other so we often share children around with lifts and to each other's homes. Many of us adults have developed close friendships with each other too, going through many life situations, from the everyday mundane to horrific tragedies. One dad who really struggles with his temper recently asked

to stand near Sam during a game because he said Sam 'keeps him calm'.

Ensuring that we keep space in our daily routines has helped us to see the Kingdom of God expressed in different ways. It's still quite strange to us not to be the ones initiating a programme, course or event, however as we've 'unclenched' control, we feel that we've been allowed closer to those outside of church and often have the privilege of being asked about our faith in return.

We feel incredibly blessed that God has rooted us here, in a place where neighbours have become friends, and some have become brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our only prayer request is that we would continue to stay sensitive to what God is doing—in each place, in every community, and with each person who comes our way.

## Derbyshire Rural Chaplaincy

At the time of writing, we are preparing for the Derbyshire Farmers' Carol Service which is held annually in the main store ring at Bakewell Livestock Market. It's a wonderful and joyous event as we prepare to welcome in the Christmas season with traditional Christmas carols accompanied by a local silver band, lessons read by farmers and a few other things thrown in, including a very comical farming-themed sketch which this year is being acted out by members of a local Young Farmers' Club, and is sure to be great fun!

The carol service signals the approach of the end of the year for the Derbyshire Rural Chaplaincy, and it has been a busy one for us. In addition to our ongoing pastoral support of the agricultural community, 2025 has seen us organise a very successful on-farm summer social event for around

two hundred and fifty farmers and we also held our Harvest Supper at The Cow Shed in Tideswell – a fantastic venue which is literally a converted cow shed (honestly, it's lovely!).

However, the main thing that everyone was talking about towards the end of 2025 was the departure of our lead chaplain, Revd Alan Griggs. Alan left the DRC after ten years of service to return to parish ministry and so we would ask everyone to pray for Alan and his family as they adjust to Alan's new role, and to pray for our DRC team as we adapt to life without Alan. But we do have some good news! By the time you read this our new lead chaplain, Revd Phil Michell, will be starting his new ministry with the DRC. So here's to the next ten years of ministry and mission in rural Derbyshire!





## Waiting on God's Wisdom

As an author, I love to speak to other writers about their books, vision and what differences they want to make to the world. I recently read and learned from, 'Tarry Awhile' and 'A Heavy Yoke' by the writer and academic Dr Selina Stone. It was a great privilege to catch up with her for a chat.

**Selina is a Lecturer in Theology and Ethics for the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. Her PhD was around womanist ethics being brought into dialogue with Pentecostal spirituality and theology, she has lectured on theology at an Anglican theological college, was the lead researcher for the Church of England's national project on race and clergy wellbeing and hosts her own podcast. She grew up in Handsworth, in inner city Birmingham and her family life shaped her writing.**

'We were always being read to and reading from a young age. The approach I take in exploring the difficult questions is informed by my dad who encouraged us to ask big questions and assured us that God could handle them. When I was younger, I had a lot of questions about divine power and its capacity to address poverty and inequality. That theological questioning shows in the books I write and the themes I explore.'

I asked what led her to write her first two books.

"Tarry Awhile" is the Lent book I've always wanted to read. I spent years searching for one which would help me to think about my faith and spirituality in the context of a Black inner city woman, but most of them were disconnected from my experiences of God and the world. So I found myself writing it for myself and others. 'A Heavy Yoke' came from my consideration of theological issues within the cases of spiritual abuse that were being investigated. I read many accounts from psychologists, journalists and church leaders stating that there were issues with theology

and I decided to take on the challenge of thinking about them in an organised way.'

Selina examines the issue of ableism in churches in, 'A Heavy Yoke.' I asked her what her experience of it was.

'Community requires patience, and we're not always cultivating this in church life. But I have seen space created for those with disabilities, and I think as Christians we should continue to strive for it, even if it seems inconvenient to us. It shouldn't be about timing and efficiency, but about being there for everyone. I've lived in urban areas all my life, but I can only guess that the rural environment could be even more demanding on those with disabilities. However, I imagine (although this might be the idealistic view of a city dweller) that where communities are strong and people move more slowly and know their neighbours, there can be some beautiful opportunities for care and community building, which includes those who are disabled or neurodivergent.'

Many of the churches and communities involved with Rural Ministries offer support groups and activities for those with dementia and their carers. It is a growing issue in the UK with almost one million people suffering from it at present. I was very moved by Selina's account of her grandmother's journey with dementia in, 'Tarry Awhile' and asked how it affected her writing.

'I was heartbroken as I started writing the book. Her dementia got steadily worse and in the months after diagnosis, I would read to her from Psalms. But as her memory deteriorated,



**I would like all of us to believe, and to teach others that God's love is not manifested in control and domination but in loving invitation.**



If God's word is the bread of life, we will not be left starved.

even that felt impossible. I wanted to make sure that we all know that God does not forget us, even if our minds forget God. Writing about her in the book helped me to process my feelings and I hope it helps those who read it.'

'Tarry Awhile' was written as a Lent book, with both Black people and the Church of England in mind, but Selina knew it would speak to people from any background. 'Some of my favourite comments from readers were from those who did not expect it to move them, but who found connections to their own stories. It reminded me of the shared experiences and concerns we have as a human family, regardless of our ethnicity or background. I've received emails from readers of 'A Heavy Yoke' telling me that it's helping them to think through their painful stories. I am so happy when my books support someone on their journey, especially those who have been overlooked and forgotten.'

I was particularly struck by Selina's description of those who try to speak out in church when something goes wrong. Particularly in the rural context, where there may be a small congregation with a few powerful people running the show, it can be very difficult to call out something that is awry. Selina refers to this as canaries being sent down mines.

'I've experienced this in my own church, and the canaries were not just members but also

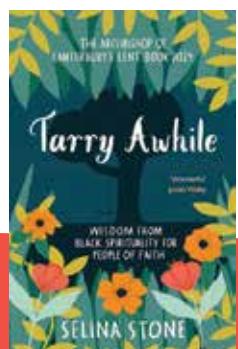
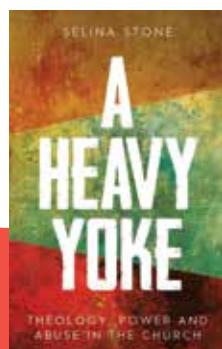
**Selina's books are available in Christian bookshops, on Eden and Amazon.**

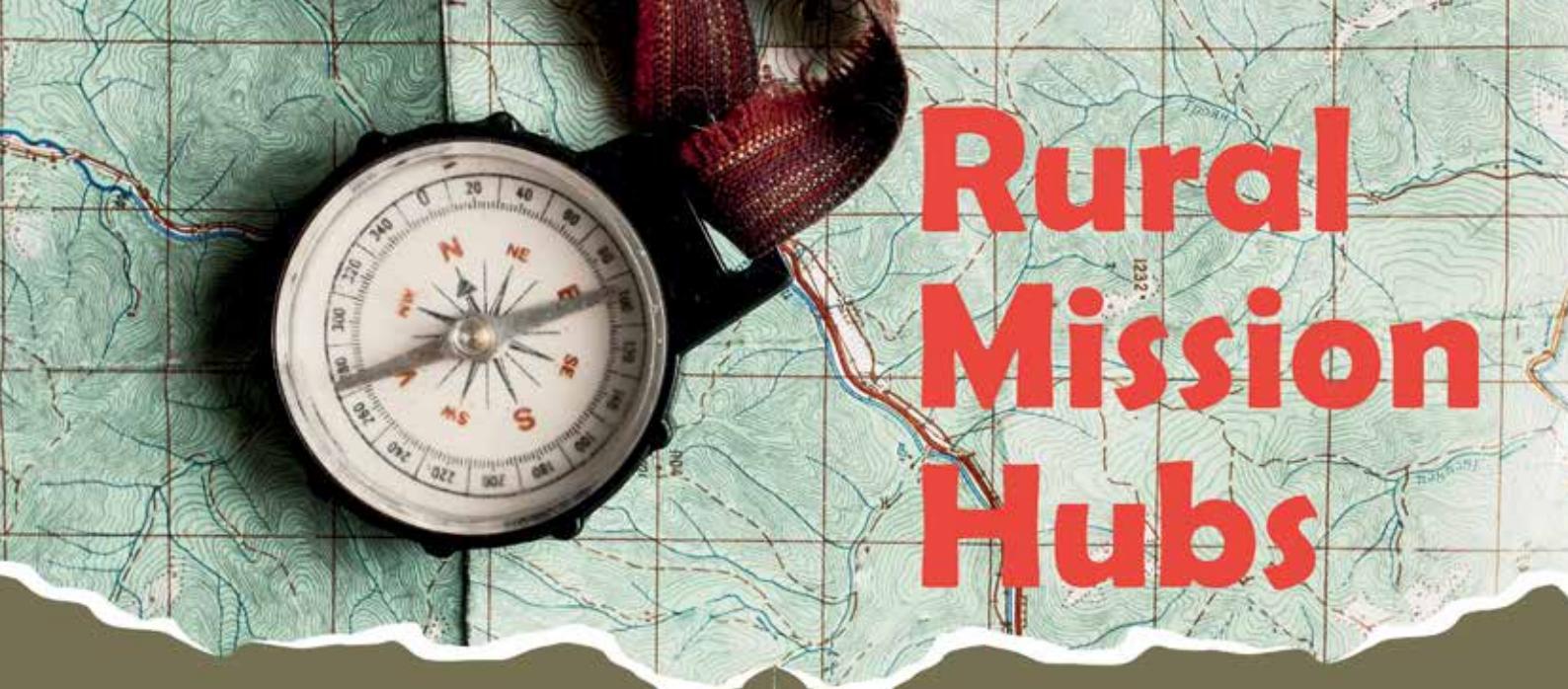
leaders! In a very toxic environment, even those perceived as powerful can end up suffocating in a space where the leader ignores, bullies and controls. I think the biggest act of courage can be to set boundaries which allow you to breathe, or to leave.'

Selina writes powerfully about discernment. I asked her what she would like to see in faith communities going forward.

'I would like all of us to believe, and to teach others that God's love is not manifested in control and domination but in loving invitation. I would like us to pray with more expansive images of God in mind, than those which suggest He is a disappointed parent looking for our faults, and never being satisfied no matter how much we sacrifice. And from there, that we would be able to more clearly see when a person or people are presenting a distorted idea in order to manipulate us. If God's word is the bread of life, we will not be left starved, hungry and wanting when we encounter God, but we will always feel fed, comforted, and nourished, when we encounter God's truth.'

**Ruth Leigh, Editor**





# Rural Mission Hubs

Rural Mission Hubs aim to support and encourage pioneers, practitioners, and permission givers, as well as those looking to explore pioneering rural ministry and mission. They are an opportunity to share stories and encouragements, pray together, explore ideas, and listen to God together. It is a gathering of like-minded explorers with an open door to anyone seeking a safe place to be, and as such, invites you to join us on the journey.

## Future Rural Mission Hub dates:

### January

28<sup>th</sup>: East Devon Rural Mission Hub Pippins Community Centre, Axminster, Devon

### February

5<sup>th</sup>: East Anglia Rural Mission Hub Clare Priory, Suffolk

19<sup>th</sup>: East Midlands Rural Mission Hub Launde Abbey, Leicestershire

23<sup>rd</sup>: North East & Borders Rural Mission Hub St Cuthbert's Centre, Holy Island

27<sup>th</sup>: Thames Valley Rural Mission Hub St Mary's Convent, Wantage, Oxfordshire

### March

2<sup>nd</sup>: Northern England Rural Mission Hub Scargill House, Nr Skipton, N. Yorkshire



For the latest details on all Hubs go to [www.ruralministries.org.uk/rural-mission-hubs](http://www.ruralministries.org.uk/rural-mission-hubs)

# Windmill Forest Church, Bottesford, Leicestershire

Our church, based in Bottesford, Leicestershire, meets every month in the forest to share fun and faith with our families. Over half of our congregation is neurodivergent, so we look on ourselves as a church without walls or borders and we try to be inclusive of everyone's needs. Many neurodivergent people don't like being touched, so at a recent meeting, we stood around the fire in a circle and shared the peace by lighting each other's sparklers, one by one. Watching the circle of light growing, I felt so humbled with what God does with the little we bring.

For our Christmas outreach, we put a hundred decorated Nativity Rocks around the village and used our social media to encourage families to go out and find them. We gave out prizes to those people who found our special 'Jesus' rocks. Christmas is often a hard time for those who don't have extended family or who feel isolated, so we held an open house for everyone, modelling Jesus's love to them.

With this new year, we want to grow our vision and go national. Working with Rural Ministries has already made a huge difference to us and we can't wait to find out what God has planned next. Wishing a joyful and nature-filled new year to every reader.

# Bawtry Community Church

**Building Faith and Fun – Our LEGO Competition at Bawtry Community Church**



I like LEGO, I like Jesus, and I like people! So when our leadership team of deacons and elders suggested doing something that would help us connect with our community in a relaxed way, we thought – why not combine all three?

During the October half-term, we hosted a LEGO Competition at Bawtry Community Church – a bit like a 'Bake Off', but with bricks! Inspired by the LEGO Masters\* TV show, we invited our entire community to join in.

Thanks to generous donations of LEGO and some brilliant volunteers, the event came together beautifully. Teams of two – often a child and an adult – were given surprise build themes such as 'Space' and 'Inventions'. The creativity on display was amazing, and the atmosphere was full of laughter, teamwork, and imagination.

At the end, prizes were awarded, and everyone enjoyed some refreshments together. Most importantly, we had a wonderful opportunity to meet people who don't normally come to church and to start building real friendships – one brick at a time.

Maybe it's something your church could try too!

## Charlie and Abby Clayton, Mevagissey, Cornwall

Over the last few months, our prayer community has been listening to God and each other in asking where God might be leading us next. We've reflected on Mevagissey being a 'well of refreshing,' and on the 'Seven Sacred Spaces' concept that George Lings has written about. As a group, we've realised that we are all well scattered in our community, but God's invitation to us in this moment is to gather together to pursue formation through Bible study and soul friendships. We are seeing more people move to the village because they sense God calling them here. We continue with prayer walks, prayer days, and serving our community in various ways. Many of us are in friendships with those who are seeking faith.

There is always a temptation to try and build a 'thing,' with a 'name,' but God hasn't called us to do that at the moment. He is asking us to be mustard seeds, a community of salt and light, without whom the community is darker, blander, and less likely to flourish. That requires us to take following Jesus seriously, and we have been reminded of that again in a significant way – both corporately and as individuals. We're hoping to begin a children's Bible study group in the new year; please do pray for that – for the right children to join in, and for young souls won to Christ. Please also pray for provision for us, in terms of finances, family time and wisdom.



## Bob and Mary Bain, Shilbottle Village Chaplains, Northumberland

We started Christmas early with a series of afternoon meetings we called Made for More. We explored what life was all about and looked at the gospel message through the Christmas story and some craft activities. This was followed by a Christmas carol service which we hope will have had a good impact. Please pray for those who came along who don't normally get near church settings but were happy to be at the Haven, a community hub in our village.

We also delivered Christmas gospel newspapers and prayer cards through the doors of every house in the village. There are over seven hundred and seventy five houses so it was quite a task, but gave us an opportunity to talk to some, and to pray for the families, couples and elderly here.

Please pray for a gathering we are having in early February with people local to our market town, Alnwick, when we will be seeking the Lord regarding the town and its surrounding villages.

We have just published a book called 'Praying along the North Tyne' (available on Amazon) following our prayer work this year walking through the villages in the North Tyne valley, and hosting some prayer gatherings there.

## NETWORK SPOTLIGHT

**Our inspiring feature shines a light on selected missional partners in each edition.**



### Alnwick Baptist Church, Northumberland

I've got a friend who talks about Big Hairy Audacious Goals, or BHAGs as he calls them. Lately, I've been reflecting on the fact that we need to be bold in our prayer lives. I think we should be bringing Big Hairy Audacious Prayers to God and believing in confidence that He wants to hear them and act on them.



With that in mind, I messaged the Head Teacher at our local school where Caroline and I are chaplains and told him that I would start praying for him each week on a Monday in term time.

Now, the 'old Chris' might have said 'pray for the Head if he asks for it' but the 'new Chris' feels strongly that we need to offer this with boldness, not in a way that beats people up with the gospel but rather opens a door to those we pray for, to reveal the God we trust can also be the God they can trust in too.

In our Rural Ministries contexts, relationships are key and trust is borne out of drawing alongside and being there where connections lead to openness and relationships are deepened. The Head Teacher texted saying how grateful he was for my prayers and thanked me.

Some years ago, I had a picture for our church which shows God's hand with light emanating from His fingertips reaching out to the far reaches of this Cradle of Christianity. I look at

**'...how bold and free we then become in his presence, freely asking according to his will, sure that he's listening. And if we're confident that he's listening, we know that what we've asked for is as good as ours.' 1 John 5:15**



that and it gives me both hope and boldness to believe 'God can' rather than 'I can't.' It continues to be a picture of encouragement.



## Waypoint Church, Berwick-upon-Tweed

It gives us joy to tell you that there's a sense of real momentum as God builds his church here. However, we would very much value your prayers we are considerably stretched and desperately need more mature Christians to join us, particularly to head up the prayer and pastoral ministries of the church, as well as the Youth team, IGNITE and Worship Academy. We're calling out to God and to know that our brothers and sisters are lifting us in prayer is so encouraging.

Last year, we led a Soul Care course and continue to offer deliverance prayer ministry. During the summer, we again ran beach church and had an IGNITE Service on the beach with pre-service volleyball and hotdogs. These were great opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus and three families started connecting with us as a result. Our priority continues to be in seeking God's guidance and we again had a twenty-four hour prayer breakthrough and prayer walk. Recently, a couple from nearby Seahouses joined us and our youth team, and through their ministry, two teenagers in the village became Christians. They and their families now come to our youth events. We're praying about running a summer holiday club next year for children and young people in



Berwick and Seahouses, and about the future of our toddler group, Little Lights. In these two areas we are exploring with another local church how we may be able to work together - please pray for God's wisdom and guidance.



The church ran an Alpha course in November and December and we were delighted to welcome new people along to hear the good news of Jesus.

We've been praying for some time about starting a Christian group in Berwick Middle School and Berwick Academy. Praise God, we had a meeting with the new Head Teacher at the Academy and have begun to build a relationship with him.

Here at Waypoint, we yearn to see faith spreading and blossoming in our neighbours. Your prayers for our endeavours are so very much appreciated. We are sowing seeds with the Lord and waiting for the fruit.



# Spurring One Another On Toward Love: The LoveRural Conference

'And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.'

Hebrews 10: 24-25.



**Here at Rural Ministries, our joy is in working with those serving in the rural context to encourage, uplift and equip them as they do God's will. Our brothers and sisters in the towns and cities may see the countryside as a beautiful and aspirational place, somewhere they escape to when they need to rest and refuel. And so it is. But for those who choose to serve the Lord here, it can be exhausting and sometimes discouraging. We are surrounded by the wonders of nature, but the bus route has been cut to the bone. Wildlife is everywhere, but families face poverty and isolation. Our churches sit in stunning locations, but we struggle to fill them.**

Rural clergy, missional listeners, support workers and volunteers often feel alone. They don't have the budgets or the resources for the projects that often get funded in the urban context. A sense of rural community is vitally important and it's something that we believe we were created for.

Early in 2025, Sally Gaze, Archdeacon for Rural Mission in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, was planning a local gathering to share learning in rural mission from a Suffolk project called, 'Growing in God in the Countryside.' It soon became apparent that there was potential to extend the get-together to a full-on conference. The inaugural LoveRural event took place in the beautiful surrounds of St Edmundsbury Cathedral in Bury St Edmunds in September.

'It felt important to put together a conference which wasn't owned by any one mission agency or

denomination,' Sally says. 'We were supported by a number of organisations including Rural Ministries, Agricultural Chaplains Association, Roots and Myriad. They are all people who understand the challenges and blessings of working in the rural context.'

One of the co-hosts was Sarah Hulme, Rural Ministry and Mission Officer for the Methodist Church.



'I was delighted to be approached by Sally and the team to help plan and co-host the event. To see different denominations working together and local practitioners really embedded in their context and willing to give new ideas a go made my heart sing! I was so encouraged to see everyone finding space for conversations and getting to hear stories of local hope and creativity in rural mission.'

As part of the two-day conference, Sarah offered a chaplaincy service with other rural mission agencies and represented the Methodist Church as one of LoveRural's ecumenical partners. Our former CEO Simon Mattholie was one of the keynote speakers and Sarah was pleased to meet new joint RM CEOs Jo Allen and Jon Timms.

'It was wonderful to explore how we might collaborate more in the national rural scene and to chat with Jo and Jon. What a privilege to be involved.'

The Quiet Revival has been a key talking point in the church for the last few years. Rachel Jordan-Wolf, Executive Director at Hope Together, spoke on the opportunities and challenges around this topic at the conference, and welcomed the chance to join over a

hundred and seventy delegates in Bury St Edmunds.

'I've known Sally for years. She's an amazing champion of rural ministry and I thought it was fantastic to run a conference focusing exclusively on the rural. I was delighted to be a part of it.'

Rachel's deep knowledge of the opportunities and challenges of rural ministry informed her session.

'Lots of people stopped going to church after the pandemic, but many now engage online. Far more people have joined than left since lockdown ended, around two million, in fact. The great thing about the quiet revival is that it's not happening in one location. You don't need to buy an aeroplane ticket to be part of it. People are coming to faith everywhere in the UK and it's filtering through, particularly in the countryside. Traditionally, revival movements start in one place then slowly spread out. The quiet revival is happening in many locations at the same time and none of it is because of one person's ministry. This means those in the countryside aren't excluded, but can be a huge part of it.'

Rachel shared a story which exemplifies how this revival works. Southwater Community Church, West Sussex decided to take part in the Great Gospel Giveaway. Two ladies from the church, Kath and Angie, had one hour free and decided to devote it to evangelism in the village.



They put up a table with a cardboard box full of gospels and hand-wrote a sign saying, 'Free Bibles.' It wasn't slick. It wasn't corporate. It was entirely achievable and it was for only one hour.

'Kath and Angie didn't hold out much hope,' explains Rachel. 'And yet ten gospels were given away very quickly and people began chatting. Two came back for another copy. Everyone was touched by the fact that Kath and Angie weren't asking for money.'

Kath popped into the local café for a coffee and prayed with a lady who told her she had never experienced such a sense of peace. Later, she came out to tell the ladies she could see light shining all around them. By the time the hour was up, twenty copies of Luke's gospel and twelve WWII commentative gospels of John had been given away. People in the countryside just want to read the good news – they're hungry for it. We need to go to where they are, rather than to wait for them to come to us. In the rural context, this can be as simple as putting a table and chairs up and being available to anyone who comes along. You don't need expensive resources, just a willingness to serve God.'

PHOTOS: MARK LEAVITT

**As we head into a new year, our prayer is that we continue to spur each other on through meetings, conferences and an outpouring of love.**

## Gosberton Baptist Church, Lincolnshire

'How terribly strange to be seventy.'

So sang Simon and Garfunkel in the haunting track, 'Old Friends,' from their concept album 'Bookends'. Released in 1968, it traces a life journey from childhood to old age. Paul and Artie, once again old friends after some acrimonious splits, passed that strange age fourteen years ago, and have probably never yet sat together as the song says, lost in their overcoats and waiting for the sunset.

Behind our eighteenth century chapel, a former tract of farmland is rapidly becoming a new estate of bungalows. 'They'll be filled with old people,' said a passer-by to me. And I thought 'Why not?' Because more and more older folk are no longer just 'waiting for the sunset' but are living life as fully as health permits; not sitting gloomily in 'God's waiting room,' but looking to grow in faith.

Decades ago I felt compelled, reluctantly, to take the stage at a Christian Leader's Conference and declare that God was building a new generation of older people 'who would not carry their years as a burden but wear them as a crown.' Nowadays, well past that park bench landmark, I'm hoping to wear a crown too. This Christmas saw us sharing in a United Advent Service, and holding our magical 'Carols by Candlelight' evening. Of course it would be great if we could win the attention of some younger people. But to love our new neighbours and encourage a few more crown wearers would be just as good.

## The Place by the Water, Shottisham, Suffolk

Those of you who know us here at The Place by the Water know our love of the season of Advent and Christmas. The house is decorated with trees, greenery, wreaths and decorations. Candles and fairy lights, plus a roaring fire, seasonal drinks and snacks, all add to a cosy, relaxed and joyful atmosphere. We love opening up our home to celebrate the birthday of Jesus.

Each year, there is an amazing message of hope to share within our communities. We arranged several retreats, services and events, so that during our precious time of Advent, we had a chance to be still and reflect, be creative, share fun and fellowship, eat, sing and pray together, plus of course admire Christmas jumpers and enjoy the twinkling fairy lights. On 30th December, the First Sunday of Advent, we hosted a Nativity event in The Rectory Garden which was wonderful.

We will also joined the Christmas Services at Shottisham Church, including a morning Nativity service, a Carol Service and the beautiful 'Christmas in Bethlehem' on Christmas Eve. Our Advent Retreat and the Wreath-Making Workshop were a great success.

We run individual and group retreats. If you would like to find out more, do ring us on 07884 373799.

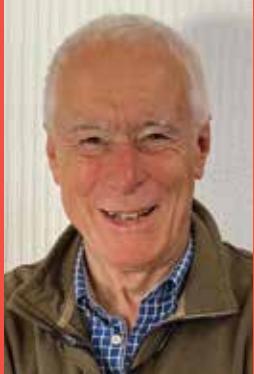


# Spring Book Review

## Taking My God For a Walk

by Tony Collins

Reviewed by Jon Timms



**Tony Collins**

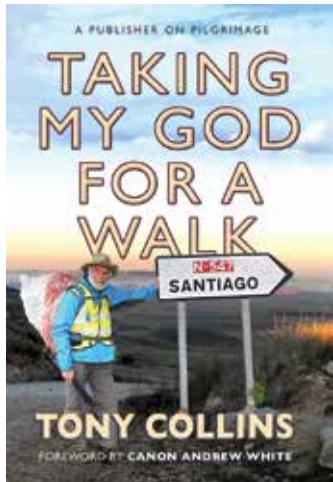
**Collins is truly a wonderful guide and storyteller, regaling his tale with refreshing honesty and vulnerability.**

Much has been written about the Camino de Santiago, the Way of St James. What began as a Roman trade route quickly transformed into one of the major Christian pilgrimage routes in Europe, welcoming pilgrims since the tenth century after the discovery of the relics of St James. Today the route plays host to approximately half a million *peregrinos* each year, all hoping to overcome blisters, tired limbs and aching joints to reach Santiago de Compostela in Northwest Spain and receive their certificate of completion.

One such pilgrim is Tony Collins. Tony is a doyen of Christian publishing and has no doubt been responsible for a good number of books currently on your bookshelf. *Taking My God For a Walk* is his account of the 490 mile journey, which begins in the Pyrenean foothills in the Basque town of St Jean Pied-de-Port. What unfolds is a tale of three journeys. Firstly, a journey of exploration, the outward journey through the landscapes of Northern Spain encountering a dizzying array of characters, sampling local

delicacies and customs, and navigating the joys and pitfalls of *albergue* life. Secondly, the historical journey guiding the armchair explorer through the politics and history of the regions he passes through, giving fascinating insights into the stories and memories held in the churches, landscapes and hearts of those connected to this land. Thirdly, Collins surrendering to the inward journey of the pilgrim, what happens in the inner landscapes of the willing sojourner as they are exposed to light and dark, the trial and the joys of life on the road. After all, we take ourselves everywhere we go in this life, and when you strip away all of the distraction and tasks of daily routines, there is little left but to confront whatever surfaces in your heart and mind.

Collins is truly a wonderful guide and storyteller, regaling us with a tale of refreshing honesty and vulnerability. He masterfully weaves these three journeys together without the narrative flow becoming too clumsy or disjointed. We're treated to the quirky idiosyncrasies of those he meets along the Way, before divulging some sacred moments of his experience with grace and



the occasional laugh-out-loud witty quip.

People embark on a pilgrimage for immensely personal reasons, and the outcomes and lessons learned will never be the same. Collins closes the book with a list of a few things he's learned along the way. Here are a few of my favourites:

- **The Road gets under your skin, and into your soul.**  
You are free, you can stop where you will, you may eat what you can find and afford, but no pilgrim stays still for long. The horizon calls.
- **You may meet the Almighty, or the Infinite; you will certainly meet yourself.** I had not expected my soul to be pinned out for examination like a flayed frog.
- **Once a pilgrim, always a pilgrim.**

Perhaps you have completed the Camino, followed the trusty shell along mountain passes and through ancient towns; or maybe you dream of doing so, getting your boots on and heading out with a head full of questions and heart full of possibility; or perhaps you're perfectly happy with a nice cup of tea and pair of slippers, reading about the adventurous exploits of others from the comforts of your favourite chair or coffee shop. Whoever you are, this book might just be a worthwhile addition for your own pilgrimage of discovery through the undulations of everyday life.

Buen Camino.

# RM presents: God in rural places: exploring rural mission in Bardney

## Film and discussion guide



**Watch and see how a small village community is living out mission in fresh ways.**  
**Then use our discussion guide with others to explore what this could mean for your own context.**

Go to [www.ruralministries.org.uk](http://www.ruralministries.org.uk)  
or scan here:



# Wychwood Baptist, Life Centre, Oxfordshire

Jesus said: 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.' (John 10: v10)

Looking back, we give thanks for gospel opportunities from October to December – from our 'Light Party' in October, to 'Stir Up Sunday' in November, and then a host of events in December, such as our 'Christmas Unwrapped' children's event, 'Christmas Cafe,' 'Paddocks Carols' (extra care housing) and our 'Carols by Candlelight.' These in addition to advent services and leading the village 'Carols Round the Tree' on Christmas Eve.

As well as the above, a particular highlight this year was our 'Christmas Calm: Aromatherapy Workshop' (including a Christmas Reflection). Our vision has been that the Life Centre would be a place where local Christians could use

their gifts and put on their own events, not just support events we put on. 'Christmas Calm' was the first such event, and more are being planned for the coming year.

Please pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work – for the seed sown to bear fruit.

Moving forward into 2026, please pray for us to grow in our knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus and for opportunities through our outreach and support to point people to Him.

Practically, as I write, we were preparing for interviews for a new Administrator to support the work here. We also, as we head into 2026, need wisdom to find ways and means to financially support the ministry here. Please pray for us in this.

# St. Andrews Community Church, Craven Arms, Shropshire

Praise be to the Lord!

If you have read my last report in June, you will have been aware that here at St. Andrews we had been praying earnestly to God for guidance to the question of having a Pastor again here after a break of six years.

God has answered our prayers!

Having approached a person known to us, he spent a great deal of time in prayer and discussions with us, before agreeing that he felt that God was definitely leading him here to join our family at St. Andrews.

At the beginning of September, Stephen was welcomed as our new Part-time Pastor, and along with his family, has

settled in to his new position to the delight of all our congregation.

We held a special Welcoming Service to which Stephen had invited about thirty friends and family, and it was a very joyous occasion with contributions from previous Church leaders that cemented the view that God had sent us the right person to lead us on our journey forward.

Already we are seeing a renewed depth of faith in our congregation, and an increase in our prayer life, as we begin on our new journey with God in our life at St. Andrews.

Praise be to the Lord!

## Abbeydore Deanery, Herefordshire

At Christmas, over five hundred children at primary schools across Abbeydore Deanery received a special 'Messy Church Bag'. This is an initiative which was started when it wasn't possible to run an in-person January Messy Church a couple of years ago and since then it has grown by about a hundred bags per year! Each bag

contains an activity, a treat and a Bible Story and costs about £1.20 to produce. This year we used the Bible Society's 'The amazing Advent-ure'. The bags are distributed to all pupils in three of our primary schools, at Crib services and to Messy Church members. It is something that we hope, in time, and with funding, we can deliver to all eight of our primary schools.

## ReBorne Community Church, Sherborne, Dorset, and Milborne Port, Somerset

We thank God that we have opened our new building on our Milborne Port site. Since September, we've introduced monthly Sunday evening services which have been well attended. This year's carol service was also held at Milborne Port and many accepted our invitation to join us in worship.

We have been able to establish an after-school children's club in our new building which has attracted a growing following with a team of loyal helpers contributing to sharing the essentials of our faith to the children. We were delighted to find that we were close to oversubscription at the end of the autumn term. A great problem to have! We are truly grateful to be confronted with such a challenge.

On weekdays, the Milborne Port building is used for ReBorne Café which seats around forty people and has already encouraged regulars to enjoy a relaxing space to while away an hour or two. We pray that firm friendships with church members will develop and that many will be encouraged to explore further the message of the Gospel behind the hospitality.

Just two miles across the county boundary in Dorset, our regular Sunday meetings in Sherborne continue to engage

and challenge. An autumn teaching series on the book of Ruth was particularly well received, as various speakers explored the significance of Bethlehem and the Kinsman Redeemer as a forerunner of Christ.

Your prayers please for the coffee shop to attract more people, that hiring out the building will help us serve our community and share the good news, that we see lives transformed and people giving their lives to Jesus and that we will be guided as Pastor Adrian and Yvonne move on in the next two years.



# A Church Without Borders

Do you ever stop to think what church might feel like if you're neurodivergent? Being encouraged to share the peace by touching people you don't know, feeling that you have to sit still in one place when your body is desperate to move and being asked to stand up and say words you don't necessarily fully understand or agree with are huge challenges for many neurodiverse people. However, in the village of Bottesford in the northeastern tip of Leicestershire, church has been reimagined and is reaching out to people on the margins.



**Our editor Ruth Leigh caught up with Laura Marsh, co-founder and Pioneer Minister at Windmill Forest Church to find out more.**

**Ruth:** How did it all start?

**Laura:** Back in 2012, my friend Glenda and I were attending our local parish church and had a vision of a more contemporary service to appeal to young people. For five years, it ran as an extra service on the rota, but over time, we started to gather a nucleus of people who wanted something more. A community was forming. We applied to become Pioneer Ministers in 2017, and our Bishop recommended that we became a separate church community by Bishop's Mission Order, which we did in 2019. We had just performed our first baptisms when the pandemic hit. During lockdown, I developed a Facebook Messenger ministry, building relationships with families who had children with additional needs who were having a tough time, and keeping in touch with them via Facebook. Once life began to return to normal, it became evident that we needed something different to invite these families to, as the children couldn't engage with church services on Zoom or sitting inside and colouring. What they did love was being outdoors and so I began to explore the concept of a monthly forest church. We began in November 2021 and it was a hit from day one.

**Ruth:** What does forest church look like?

**Laura:** It's a church without parameters, without walls – fun and faith in the forest for families! We partner with a local forest school provider and use their space which is already set up with hammocks, fire circles and tarpaulins. We can forage, craft, practice fire-lighting and bushcraft skills, learn how to

build shelters, cook, use plants and wildlife, and most importantly just be ourselves. This year, we're covering stories Jesus told, bringing parables to life with forest based activities suitable for different age groups. Recently, we explored Matthew 7:3-5 ('Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?') and used a different range of wood-based activities as visual reminders of the story. The preschoolers made patterns with sawdust and paint, the primary-aged children printed with wooden mallets and flowers, and our teenagers carved butter knives from birch wood. Our heart for autistic and neurodiverse people is strong and we want everyone to feel loved and included.

**Ruth:** How many people tend to come along?

**Laura:** We've got a membership of seventy, but our capacity in the forest is forty-five, largely because our autistic members don't feel comfortable with any more than that. We no longer advertise. All the forest church families tell their friends about it. We've grown through building relationships, not marketing.



**It's a church without parameters, without walls – fun and faith in the forest for families!**





two groups' content mirrors each other but they are very different.

**Ruth:** What effect is forest church having on your community?

**Laura:** One of the mums emailed me and said that it's a place where everyone can be themselves. She's going through a difficult time at the moment and she's so grateful to find a place where she is loved and accepted for who she is. 'I didn't know that church could be like this,' she told me. 'I can stop masking and be authentically me.' I'm passionate about including people who have food allergies in all we do, and we model God's love through being thoughtful about that. When we ran our community Easter trail, we made sure that we offered Free From Easter eggs, hot cross buns, marshmallows and s'mores so that everyone could enjoy themselves without having to worry. Our heart for inclusivity was rewarded when two families whose children had food allergies asked following the trail if they could join us in the forest.

**Ruth:** Do you have a favourite story?

**Laura:** The Archdeacon visited us one month. I pointed out two girls relaxing in a hammock and told him that one of them hadn't been in school for four months. Forest church is her

only opportunity to mix with people her own age. She happily comes to the forest and she is making connections in that way. It warms my heart and it's incredibly humbling. I spend a lot of time with our families individually, so they all know me. I walk into the forest and the children run up to me with their arms held up or asking to play. A mum will hand me her baby to feed, and it knows and trusts me. That's very special.

**Ruth:** What difference has the funding from Rural Ministries made to you?

**Laura:** A huge difference! It means I can carry on leading Windmill, as I've always been self-supporting and worked an extra job to fund it. RM has rescued us with the funding so that I can continue to serve the people I love. Going forward, we want to be able to run more of the forest activities ourselves and the funding means that myself and two other members of the Windmill team can take part in Forest School training. I want to set up a group for young people around self-esteem and neurodiversity, and who they are in God. I'd also love to set up a preschool meet up outside of the forest. We started with one preschooler, and now we've got ten! RM have helped us so much and given us the chance to keep going and really look to the future.

**Ruth:** And how about the future?

**Laura:** Next year we've got a full programme of sessions in the forest including three baptisms and four confirmations. We will be running our Easter community outreach again in April 2026, which this year brought the Easter story to 300 people. New families are joining us and they're learning about Jesus. I want to see more of that for everyone in our community.



We've grown through building relationships, not marketing.

# Coastal Roots, Coastal Roots, Perranporth, Cornwall



We've loved pressing in to pray as a community over the last term. We joined in with the Global week of 24/7 prayer by hosting our first 24/7 prayer room over a weekend. It was

great to have other local churches also visit and use the space and to see our community, especially our youth, taking part in this amazing prayer space at all hours of the day. Another wonderful activity was building and mapping out our community and key places on the beach then doing a prayer walk around the sandy map!

We continue to pray that God would use each member of our community where he has rooted us in this coastal town where we are planted to show the love of Jesus to those we live, work and play with!

Over the Christmas season we had the joy of being able to invite our wider community along to our advent trail and our fifth annual outdoor carol event. We are always looking for ways we can extend the table and offer hospitality, good news, prayer and fun in creative ways to bring Jesus to our friends.

As well as our wider gatherings, our daily and weekly rhythms together give space and reminders for us to encourage each other as we go, to pray, learn and keep Jesus at the centre of our families, work and everyday lives.



Please pray that each one in our community continues to journey further in and deeper still to being known, loved and sent by the one who first loved us... Jesus.



## Ember

Being real about the decline of your church

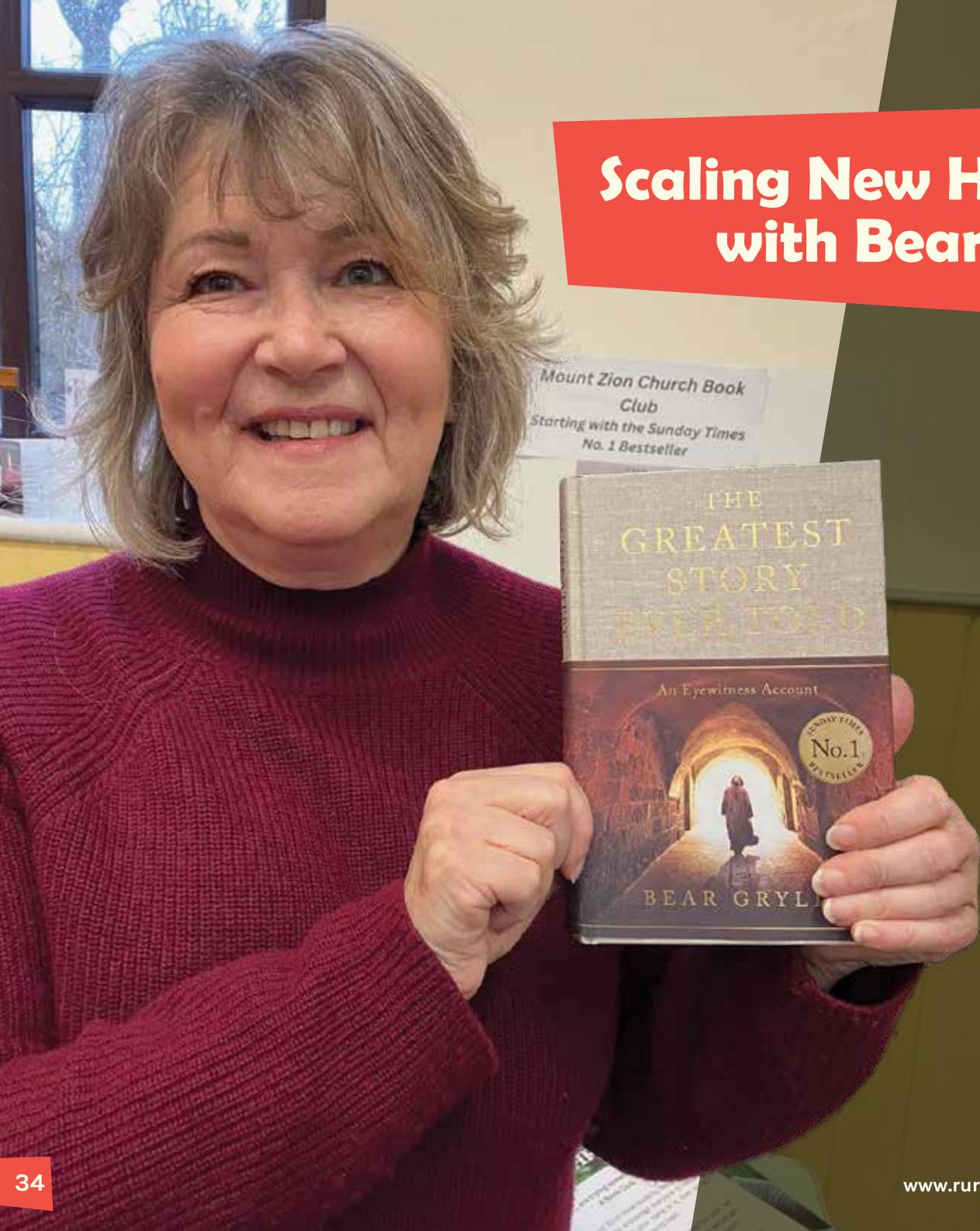
A one-day bespoke gathering to prayerfully walk through the weight of endings

Subsidised by Rural Ministries at the cost of £20 per person. For further info and to book your Ember day contact:

Lucy - [lbolster37@gmail.com](mailto:lbolster37@gmail.com)

Sally - [revsallytaylor@gmail.com](mailto:revsallytaylor@gmail.com)

# Scaling New Heights with Bear Grylls



**Towards the end of last year, Mount Zion Church, Cliviger, near Burnley in Lancashire, came up with an idea to reach out to their community and share the good news with them. One of the church leaders, Shirley Ashworth, explained: 'We decided to buy ten copies of Bear Grylls' book, 'The Greatest Story Ever Told'. We encouraged people to take a copy, read it and then return it for someone else to enjoy.**

'Our plan is to create a book club, invite everyone along for coffee and cake and discuss it. Some people may choose not to come, but it may help others to understand more about the Christian message in a relaxed and non-threatening way.'

Shirley, and Dave Hall, another member of the outreach team, introduced the idea of the book club to the church one Sunday morning. All ten books were immediately taken and another ten bought. All twenty are now out in the community changing hands regularly. The church plans to hold their first book club early in the New Year and is trusting in God to carry out His plan for their neighbourhood.

The book itself, written by man of faith and famous adventurer Bear Grylls, is a Sunday Times best seller, exploring the story of Jesus from five personal perspectives. Those five are Jesus' mother Mary, Thomas, Simon Peter, John and Mary Magdalene.

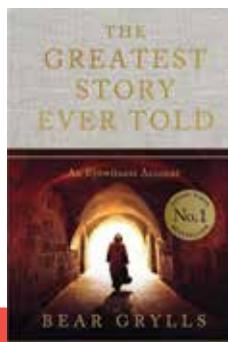
One reviewer said: 'Their first-hand encounters bring the story to life with intensity, warmth and deep reverence. At the heart of it all are Jesus' own words, taken

directly from the Bible, letting the greatest story ever told speak for itself.'

With many awards to his name for his exploits, including several world records in hostile environments, and his wilderness survival television series, in the UK and America, Bear was the second-longest-serving Chief Scout after Robert Baden-Powell until he retired from the post in 2024.

Speaking of his new book he said: 'This book is the hardest, scariest project I've ever done because it's about all of our hearts and futures. People ask me why I care more about this than any other book or summit or award, and the answer is that what I've done has led me to a place where I can share with authority the secret behind all the adventures.'

The team and congregation at Mount Zion have no idea how the book club will go



in 2026, but they are trusting in God as they find a new way to reach out to their friends and neighbours and to share the good news of Jesus.



**Their first-hand encounters bring the story to life with intensity, warmth and deep reverence.**

**The Greatest Story Ever Told by Bear Grylls is available in Christian bookshops, on Eden and Amazon.**



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