

MOSAIC

JAN - APR 2024

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RM

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Welcome to the most recent edition of MOSAIC. As I write this, it is hard to believe that another year has already passed and that so much has transpired around the globe; nevertheless, there are a lot of things for which we should be grateful to God, and I hope that within the following few pages, you will find both encouragement and inspiration.

Together with the Fenlands Church in Cambridgeshire and the Acoustic84 communities in Dorset, we rejoice in the recent baptisms in their communities. The congregation of Mount Zion church was astounded by God's provision in the form of a Lego café, which brought in more than ninety individuals, both adults and children. We continue to hold Open Blue in prayer with the recent launch of work in Wellington Place, a small MOD estate in Wiltshire, but we are expecting great things because God is clearly in charge.

There are some encouraging updates from the Cotswolds; the church building in Stow-on-the-Wold [Page 8] is increasingly used by the community and hosts a dementia café, food bank and a Community Hub. Prince Andrew's Chapel in Norfolk has offered their grounds to the local green spaces group, who have planted them with a wildflower bed to which the church has added a bench and a birdbath.

We have another article from Steve Aisthorpe, who works for RM in Kilmalieu, Scotland one day a week to assist in establishing another Rural Hub. This time, Steve discusses the day of small things [Page 16]. We take heart from what the Holy Spirit is accomplishing North of the border, and we would be grateful for your continued prayers as we seek to respond to the developments and opportunities.

On page 10, Jo has an engaging piece that focuses on the prophetic. We review Michael Marshall's latest book, *Lent with the Beloved Disciple*, on page 15, which is an excellent six-week resource for personal study or group use.

The edition of MOSAIC is also an excellent opportunity to introduce you to a new team member, North of the Borders, as Jon Timms joins us. You can learn more about Jon and his family on page 4.

Finally, may I share a thought that God has been placing on my heart over the past few months, that is, for us as a network to become more intentional about prayer. We will be developing some resources over the coming months, which you might want to keep an eye out for.

Revd Simon Mattholie
CEO Rural Ministries

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT)



Introducing Jon Timms

Jon Timms, who will be working with us for the next year while Ali Birkett takes some time off after the passing of his wife, has joined the RM team, and we would like to extend a warm welcome to him.

As someone who is already a part of the RM network, Jon brings a wealth of experience to the table, having planted a Discover Church in Dunbar. Along with his creativity, I have no doubt that his passion for prayer and participation in the 24/7 prayer network will be a source of blessing and motivation for a great number of people. Jo, Nick, and I are looking forward to working with him, and we are excited about what the Holy Spirit will accomplish through him and through us in the coming months!
Simon

My name is Jon Timms. I live in Dunbar, East Lothian, right in the middle of Edinburgh and Berwick-Upon-Tweed. Dunbar is a small coastal community with a rich history and heritage. I moved here with my wife Emma and our four kids in July 2016, from Newquay in Cornwall – one Celtic land to another.

We lead a Christian community here called Discovery Church (www.discoverychurchdunbar.co.uk). We are part of 24-7 Prayer, a global movement of prayer, mission and justice, where I also have a place on the Scotland National Team.

Along with some dear friends, we began this church adventure with a desire to pioneer something creative, fresh and life-giving in this beautiful corner of the world. We're inspired to creatively live out simple community rhythms through our values and practices – Be True, Be Kind, and Go!!! And like Dunbar's most famous son, John Muir, said of his home town, "...there's no lack of wildness here." And Rural Ministries has been part of this journey from the beginning. We connected in with many other individuals and churches through learning communities and mission hubs, which was hugely encouraging and formative for us.

One element of the ministry life that sets a fire in me, is to come alongside others in their journey, whether it be an individual, a community or a couple of friends with a wild idea; to accompany them and encourage them as they follow the call of the Wild Goose into further adventures along ancient paths. I seek to approach this pilgrimage with creativity and with a willingness to ebb and flow between what I consider the two essentials of the

Christian life – prayer/contemplation/formation, and activism/mission/justice.

Aside from what I 'do', I love to get out into natural beauty and wildness, and thankfully Scotland and Northumberland has no shortage. I'm happiest up a hiking up a mountain or snowboarding down one; surfing in the sea; playing music on my guitar; sitting around a roaring campfire with friends, family and a strong coffee (or a wee dram); and scribbling down thoughts, ideas, musings, experiences and the odd poem in my journal.

I'm looking forward to getting to know many of you in the RM Network better over the coming year.

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One element of the ministry life that sets a fire in me, is to come alongside others in their journey.

Albert Road Evangelical, Oswestry, Shropshire

We are a small church and have been without a pastor since July. Our church managing trustees are guiding us as we look for a new pastor trusting to God's leading, and your prayers for this would be valued. People have pulled together to keep the various ministries of the church going, contributing in a number of ways.

Our weekly Little Gems group for mothers and toddlers continues, with a very competent new leader and a small team of faithful supporters. This has been a blessing to the helpers and those who attend. It is not always easy to organise outreach to the community because of the availability of volunteers; nevertheless we are planning to hold our yearly Pancake Party outreach in February and would welcome your prayers.

Open Blue, Calne, Wiltshire

It is early days with Open Blue's work at Wellington Place, a small MOD housing estate cut off from the rest of the MOD facility at Buckley Barracks by barbed wire on one side, and Hullavington village by farmer's fields on the other (see our article in the last issue of MOSAIC). Since being supported by Rural Ministries towards the end of 2023 we have visited the community twice. Our after-school club has been very well received by children and parents, and we look forward to building on this encouraging start. The children have enjoyed the craft and cooking activities. One parent has accompanied her children when they have visited both times and I get a sense she is feeling lonely and isolated having recently moved to the estate. We look forward to getting to know her and her children so we can support and encourage her as she settles in the community.

Fenlands Church, Tydd Gote, Cambridgeshire

"...pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18 NIV

There is always plenty to be thankful for. God has blessed us with new people, and some will be baptised. We are grateful for blessings in our youth work and good fellowship on a Sunday morning. Also, our Tea Room initiative has brought us new contacts and is a great meeting place for the church. Our women had a great day together at Little Gidding in October.

As we begin 2024, we are seeking wisdom from the Lord about what we should do. We are considering an Alpha Course and some youth outreach with our sister church in Thorney. Also, we are praying about links with other local churches. This already happens in fellowship evenings that we have called 'Village Praise'. Our women will continue their excellent efforts at wider fellowship and prayer support. We are planning to improve our fellowship opportunities for men, and we are also looking at offering a regular 'Bible teaching and discussion day' where we can help one another in the many challenges facing Christians today.



BroadGrace, Coltishall, Norfolk

There has been a strange work of God among us at BroadGrace recently. Strange in the sense that the world around us would not know what to make of it rather than strange to us. It has been a season of blessing in the middle of suffering. This is Christ's way and yet it is wonderful, though hard, to experience it. Among our church family there has been more ill-health, loss, grief, sorrow, and strain than usual. As elders we are, for one reason or another, more stretched than we have been previously. The temptation is to hunker down (especially given the darkness of winter) and lick our wounds.

But that is not what we have seen. The Holy Spirit has moved us to faith in Christ and love for one another. There has been a lot of practical care for each other although it has come with encouragement in the gospel, talking openly about fears, sorrows and even doubts. We long all the more for the coming of the Lord Jesus on that day when he will wipe away our last tears, and all darkness will be obliterated by his warm and glorious light. But we also see him working among us. Please pray that we continue to walk in step with the Spirit, full of love and faith. And pray that this season would be one of fruitful witness as well as fruitful growth in Christ. The world around us suffers without hope - may we be given opportunity to share the reason for the hope that we have despite the pain.



Durrington Community Church, Durrington, Wiltshire

We have had a busy six months serving our community in sharing the Gospel.

Our holiday club was very successful, with over twenty children building a cardboard box version of Jericho. We were blessed with the weather and after the city was demolished, the children had fun playing with the boxes. Who needs a Nintendo Switch when you have a box?

Our Harvest Supper was very well attended and some of those who attended have already asked whether we are going to do one next year!

We are blessed to be allowed into all three of our village schools in various roles, from chaplaincy and mentoring to Open the Book assemblies. At the end of October, our annual Light Party was attended by several families, some of whom are not regular attendees to our weekly events such as the After School Club or Tea & Toast.

Christmas and the New Year often provides many opportunities. Everyone who attends our events over this period will get an invitation to an Alpha Course, which we plan to run early in 2024.

Joy Dimond, Missional Listener, Stow, Gloucestershire

I'm so encouraged at how often the Stow Baptist Church premises are being used each week for Community Services.

We have a fortnightly Dementia Cafe, our weekly Community Cafe, a weekly foodbank, regular WI meetings, our latest group is The Community Hub, hosted by Social Prescribers, Digital Help Team and providing access to employment advisers. The Community Hub approached me to ask if they could base the team at the Baptist Church Hall as "we know that is where the community activities in Stow are happening." I feel so encouraged that God is using the premises to serve the community and provide much needed support in Stow to the marginalised and lonely.

Another very promising opportunity is the appointment of a Priest in Charge at the Anglican church. We are meeting weekly to share, support and pray together. We are excited at the opportunity to work together, sharing our resources and ideas.

We are expecting a decision from the Listed Buildings Committee following our request to reimagine the sanctuary area of the Baptist Church, an area of the building currently not in use, we feel that the permission to reimagine the area will provide more space to offer hospitality and build community with our population in Stow.



Prince Andrew's Chapel, Aldborough, Norfolk

As we enter 2024 the 'Covid lockdown' seems like history, but we still remember a few of us meeting the first Sunday after normality and wondering if there were enough of us to carry on, but the Lord has other ideas. 2023 saw growth in all groups, partly in terms of numbers, but more importantly in the warmth of relationships with people in the village.

The Macmillan coffee morning made £600 and attracted a large number of people even spilling outside on the lawn. It was thrilling to see many people around eager to participate, which again we thank the Lord.

We were approached by the local green spaces group asking if they could plant a wildflower bed at the back of the chapel and it has been a joy to see. Some of our members have added a bird bath and got a group together to paint stones with the 23rd Psalm which now sit on the flower bed next to the public footpath.

Finally, please pray for:

- The Holy Spirit's touch on our contacts' lives and their difficulties
- Our future leadership, as we're not getting any younger.



Epping Green Chapel, Epping Green Essex

Our regular activities continue, and we have a weekly coffee morning on Wednesdays, and then on Thursday and Friday the church is open for people to drop in and talk to our Pastor (and his many cats!) over a cup of tea. Once a month there is a popular bring and share meal, after the service, which is open to all.

Most Wednesdays we have Bible lessons in the chapel focussing on how to study the Bible and actually understand it. This is followed by a time of prayer. Zoom continues to be useful for our Thursday evening group and once a month a small team of us take 'Songs of Praise' into the local hospital.

Please pray for the Alpha Course we are planning in the new year and the new outreach being planned for the nearby town of Epping. We are still in need of a treasurer and a church secretary so please pray that someone suitable will feel prompted to come forward for these roles.

Bootle Evangelical Church, Bootle, Cumbria

As we continue our Sunday services, weekly activities and outreach opportunities, we pray for the Gospel impact on the people of the village and surrounding area. We pray particularly for our awareness of any new areas in which God is at work. We will look forward to celebrating Easter with special services for Good Friday and Easter Sunday and the opportunity to share the joy of a risen Christ!

Pinchbeck Baptist Church, Pinchbeck, Lincolnshire

As we go into another new year, we pray that we will continue to follow the Holy Spirit's leading. Last autumn, we welcomed seven new members to the fellowship and baptisms are planned for Easter Sunday 2024.

Sue has been pastor for two years now and continues with the foundational work of the Church including looking at the way we are structured. New people into the church have brought in new skills, the worship group has grown and with that is a deepening of the worship of the fellowship. There has been specific prayer over the years for technology to be upgraded and 'techy' folk are now able to take this forward. We believe this is God's timing and a website, although fledgling, is now linked to the Facebook page. We also feel that it is important to reach out to the community using the digital world and develop this. This goes alongside our community outreach with Tea Coffee Toast, the Community Garden development and other activities bringing the community together.

Prayer requests: Because we have grown quickly as a fellowship over the last two years, please pray for unity and a common sense of purpose. We have a fellowship meal planned for the end of January to assist this. Please thank God for all he is doing and pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to give his guidance and direction as 2024 unfolds.



The prophetic and creativity

Jo Allen, Rural Ministries



Within the church family, 'the prophetic' is a term both avoided and leaned into. It's something that fuels ministry for some, whilst others often avoid it. There are many reasons that some of us have turned away from the term, it may be due to bad experiences, cessationist teaching, or simply never being taught it. Whatever your stance, I'm here to say that our negative experiences of 'the prophetic', our view of scripture and what we have been taught should inform how we listen to God's voice, but when we drop 'the prophetic' completely we are cutting ourselves off from the way God wants to communicate with his people, and I believe it is destroying our creativity. 'The prophetic' is not just the gift of prophecy, but extends into how we think, feel, and communicate with God and the world around us. It inspires our missional imagination and creativity.

Brueggemann argues that prophetic ministry is very much about the imagination of the church community, how they view the world and engage with the world as a result – specifically seeking to penetrate the despair and numbness of its day, believing and embracing a new future.¹ It's discovering the mind of Christ and offering his truth, life and hope in what can be a dark world. Prophetic imagination is missional. His focus on the imagination is a misunderstood dimension of the prophetic. Much of this is done as we walk, talk, play and dream. It's when I read the Bible and take a moment to stop and pray, asking God "what are you saying and how does that impact me or the world around me?", it's when I go on a walk and the way a tree has grown speaks to my imagination connecting nature with God's Character, it's when I have nothing left so I put the music on and dance with

abandonment – releasing my prayer to God, it's when on the rare occasions I take a paint brush out and strike colour across the page, it's when I go the cinema and ask God to speak through the narrative...

When we let God speak to us through creativity and imagination, we are shaped and formed in new ways. Creativity and imagination allow us to articulate what we can't, or perhaps shouldn't, in words, to dream a Christ filled future, to see the old made new, to speak life into the darkness, calling forth God's life into the world. This is deeply prophetic. Tom Wright says that art ...offers the chance to say several things at the same time in a way which ordinary prose finds almost impossible, one has the possibility not only to say, but to express and embody the truth of Hopkin's poem, both the sudden flaming out of Glory and the tragic disappointment of creation spoiled by 'man's smudge and smell' – and the resolution on the further side.² Art can be deeply prophetic because it taps into both the messiness of humanity and the glory of God, imagining a new future in Christ. Creativity needs to be actively encouraged in our churches as it's a way to bring the Kingdom of God into the imagination of the church and to breathe Spirit filled life into its missional adventures; to be prophetic.

The prophetic invites us to hear the Spirit's missional whisper, to creatively make sense of his words and to express his hope filled voice in this world. It involves imagination and action, dreaming with God and living that dream in the world, and a prophetic church is one where the culture of discerning the missional Spirit and following his lead is right at the centre.



When we let God speak to us through creativity and imagination, we are shaped and formed in new ways.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 117.

² N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology* (London: SPCK, 2019), pp. 269–267.

Sutton St James Baptist Church, Sutton St James, Lincolnshire

Those who know me, Sue the Pastor, will know that patience is not one of the virtues that I am blessed with! I can get frustrated when we don't see early fruit from the outreach activities that we hold. However, I have learnt over the last six years as Pastor, that if we stick to God's plan then His timing is always perfect.

This time last year, we had just started a chair exercise group on a Monday morning as an optional extra at our Renew Wellbeing centre, which is open every weekday morning, as keeping active is one of the five ways to wellbeing. We had different people pop along to give it a try, but the numbers were disappointingly low. It would have been very easy to decide to stop offering this activity, however we kept going as we believed that God had laid it on our hearts to offer this. For us, we were offering much more than just a chair exercise group, for everything we do at SSJBC is covered with prayer and full of love for those who come through our doors. After all, that was God's original call - open the doors and love people!

Twelve months on and the group is now thriving! We regularly get in excess of 20 people come along to enjoy exercise, friendship, and a really good coffee! Many have made new friends and join in other activities that we hold at SSJBC including some of the big annual services and they are encouraging their friends to come too - they are all part of our SSJBC family!

We would appreciate your prayers that all who come into SSJBC for any reason would come to know our awesome God - in His good and perfect timing.



Mount Pleasant Church, Grovesend, Swansea

Although at face value it would seem that we are a declining church (admittedly our Sunday attendance isn't what we'd like it to be) God is definitely moving in Grovesend.

We have a coffee morning twice a month that has regular attenders, a youth group of approximately eight youngsters and a beautiful link with the local residential home, Llys-y-Twysog, where we provide a Sunday Service and a midweek devotional.

We have recently started an intergenerational work with Llys-y-Twysog and our youth group and once a month we take the youth down to the home. The first month we played games with the residents, which was enjoyed by all, and we are now devising a quiz to take down to them. Every week our youth ask if we are going to the home, so it's safe to say they enjoy it. It's a lovely thing to see both generations enjoying each other's company.

We've also finally put in the paperwork for charitable status for our Community Hub, to be able to build an extension on the back of the building for use by all the community. We have also extended our carpark in preparation for the extension and installed the internet into the church, which now gives us all sorts of opportunities.

We truly believe that God wants Mount Pleasant Church to be a light in the community of Grovesend. Our prayer requests are firstly, that there would be thirst for the things of God in Grovesend and, secondly, that the application for charitable status is approved so that we can start to raise funds for the extension.

Alnwick Baptist Church, Alnwick, Northumberland

Although the church has several different initiatives, many of them share two common threads, one is our faith, and the other is food.

As an example, we have strong links with a local retirement complex, both with staff and residents, and one of the joys of this missional community is a chip supper held there once a month. Also, 'Faith Talks', our discipleship group that meets in the complex, enables conversations about the Christian journey. We find that eating together puts the emphasis on hospitality and is a key part of our missional community life. The joy on the faces of the residents, by simply sitting down and eating together demonstrates how integral food and drink are to our being together, allowing relationships to grow and the sharing of our love for one another, and for Christ.

Dales Faith, Bedale, Yorkshire

Firstly, thank you to all of you who prayed for us. We serve a God who answers prayers. I would love to report a sudden breakthrough or a new initiative beginning to bear fruit, however, these must wait. Nevertheless, a couple of weeks ago I did receive an email from a pastor in the United States who had seen our website (dalesfaith.org) and had felt a 'nudge' to get in contact. I had a very encouraging Zoom call with him a week later when we were able to get to know each other and pray together.

This conversation, and a planning session I had earlier this week, where I wrote down the names of all the people I had met or spoken with in recent months, prompted me to consider again our prayer that God would send out workers into this harvest field. I am blessed to know a lot of people involved in His kingdom work. We are all busy working in our own locations and communities, serving the people around us and praying that God will grow his church here. The need for more harvest workers has never been more pressing.

What struck me, however, was how much more we could achieve if we all worked together. The Psalmist declares in Psalm 133 that where there is unity, God commands his blessing. So, we continue to seek his blessing and to explore how we might work in unity with all those who call on the name of Jesus in the North Yorkshire Dales.

Parkview Chapel, Botesdale, Suffolk

I have to start our report with thanking God for all that has happened over last year's Christmas period. A comedy gig kicked it off, with the Christian comedian and writer, Paul Kerensa. Nearly a hundred people filling our building to capacity as we laughed, and sang carols to some unusual tunes, e.g. God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen sung to the theme tune from Benny Hill!

This was quickly followed by our traditional Christmas Carol service and Christmas buffet, for which again we were full. Together with our service on Christmas Day, we saw around two hundred people this festive period.

We have much new housing going up in our community, and what pleased us more than anything was the amount of people who came along who are new to the village. One lady asked, "Can I come as I'm not religious?" to which I replied, "Yes of course, because neither am I!"

So, we really need your prayers with regards to taking Jesus to these people. What comes next, at time of writing, I am not sure. But what I am sure of, is that Jesus loves these new friends of ours, so it's an opportunity we simply can't miss.

Great Moulton Evangelical Chapel, Great Moulton, Norfolk

Once again, our Remembrance Service was well attended with a display of details of those from our village, and the neighbouring village of Aslacton, who lost their lives in the World Wars.

Although all the preparations for getting a church ready for Christmas can be a chore it can also be a time of blessing. As we came together, all hands on deck, to clean every nook and cranny in preparation for putting up our Christmas decorations, it proved to be a lovely time of fellowship and working together.

We ask for prayer please for travelling mercies for two of our congregation who are on extended holidays to exotic places and also for the health of several from the fellowship who are suffering from illness at this time. We pray that our fellow Rural Ministries congregations have had a wonderful Christmas as they welcome new people in through their doors.

EFC Christian Fellowship, Sutton-on-Sea, Lincolnshire

Our fellowship continues to reach out to the community with the giving out of tracts and newspapers, holding community events in the Church Hall, and our work in unity with Churches Together which includes taking Open The Book into our two local schools.

We are looking forward to the New Year as we continue to try to be obedient to the Lord and in anticipation for anything new that he wants us to do. Our Prayer Group continues to be strong, with over half of the fellowship coming most weeks. We strive to pray for revival and renewal, our brothers and sisters who remain faithful, and for all those who face persecution.

Please pray for us as we ask for boldness, and for our numbers to increase so that we can be more effective in our witness and that God will give us a new vision for the future. We give all the Glory to God as he supplies our needs and works through all our weaknesses. We appreciate all the prayers from all the saints in the Lord.

Bawtry Community Church, Bawtry, South Yorkshire

We are excited to have recently welcomed Scott Seivewright as our new Pastor who was formally inducted at the end of November. Scott has moved from Stoke with his wife, Ange, two children (Amelia and Gabriel) and an undisclosed number of cats! We already feel they are part of our church family.

The house they have moved to is, literally, a stone's throw from the new hall where we meet on Sunday's, and can also accommodate Scott's mother who needs care from the family.

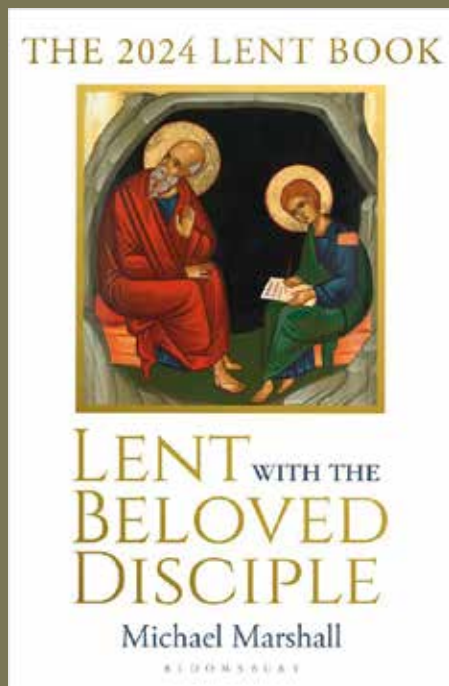
Please pray for them all as they settle into the area and new relationships; and for the current outstanding issue, which is finding an appropriate school place for Gabriel.



Book Review

Lent with the beloved disciple

Michael Marshall



Lent with the Beloved Disciple is ideal for both individual use and for small group study and is available from Bloomsbury Publishing.

Some people's plans to give up chocolate may be derailed because the beginning of Lent falls on the same day as Valentine's Day this year. However, I have a feeling that the Lord would not be offended if they started Lent a day later than planned.

The season of Lent is one of those times when many people abstain from certain foods or beverages, including coffee, wine, beer, cheese, and chocolate, to name just a few examples. The word 'Lent' comes from an old English word meaning 'lengthen'; perhaps this is because of the time of year when the days start to get longer, as we approach spring and the times of the clocks changing in March. Whatever the name's origins, for many Christians, it is a time of reflection and asking for forgiveness. It is also a time during which Christians prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ at the festival of Easter, which takes place at the very end of Lent.

For those wanting to spend intentional time to pause and reflect during the season of Lent, I would like to recommend the book "Lent with the Beloved Disciple" written by Michael Marshall and published by Bloomsbury. It is a book that will take you on a journey with the "beloved disciple" through the narrative of the Gospel of John over six weeks.

John, reportedly the only disciple to have been present at every stage of Jesus' ministry, from the Last Supper to his crucifixion on Calvary, records certain implicit details and signs that, when seen through the eyes of faith, indicate a more profound and more long-lasting significance than perhaps we get at first reading.

Michael Marshall's journeys with the reader explore what these signs are and how, with prayerful reflection, they draw us ever more deeply into the personal, eternal, and cosmic significance and awareness of all Christ accomplished by his death and resurrection.

Simon Mattholie
Rural Ministries

Faithfulness in a 'day of small things'



Why might words written twenty-five centuries ago resonate so strongly with us today? Reading Zechariah recently, I found the phrase, 'Who dares despise the day of small things?', reverberating in my spirit and taking up residence in my thinking.

From a purely empirical viewpoint, most of us do live in a 'day of small things'. With notable exceptions, the church of our day is characterised by the small. Some years ago, while writing *The Invisible Church* (SAP, 2016), having reviewed data relating to the changing shape of the church, I was forced to conclude that, '...the Church's mode of being is shifting rapidly from being predominantly institutional towards patterns of fellowship and discipleship that are characterised by small, loosely organised, relational groups.'

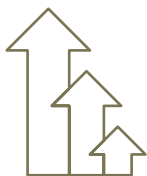
Zechariah's words emerged from a context of exile (or, more accurately, post-exile) and we live at a time when many thinkers from across the theological spectrum find the metaphor of exile to be a helpful lens through which to understand our contemporary context. Being moved from centre to fringe, the church has experienced a kind of dislocation. Questions and insights arising from biblical experiences of exile have taken on new significance.

Our 'day of small things' has emerged as the big has become smaller, but also through a burgeoning of small, informal, Christian communities. Many of these exist 'below the radar', failing to show up in denominational statistics or censuses. However, when researchers do the diligent digging necessary, they find them to be diverse and widespread. When the Church of Scotland asked parishes about 'new worshipping communities' in its

2021 statistical returns, over 250 parishes reported at least one recent 'mini church' development. When those statistics were explored through a personal telephone call with someone involved in each new community, it was discovered that, for two thirds of the 12,500 people involved, one of these relatively new, invariably small, faith communities is their main or sole experience of church.

The context of Zachariah's exhortation, cautioning the people not to spurn the small, is best understood through the words of his contemporaries. Ezra describes how, as people saw the foundations of the new temple 'many ... who had seen the former temple, wept aloud ... while many others shouted for joy' (Ezra 3:12). Some were distraught, wondering how





With such a strong theological imperative for the small, it is unsurprising that smaller Christian communities are more likely to experience numerical growth.



this could be God's promised future when it looked so insignificant. Nostalgia rendered them unable to see what was in front of them with anything other than disappointment. However, others saw the same thing as a reason to rejoice, the first signs of a new thing.

Every season is characterised by its own challenges – and blessings. The small is the ideal context for the radical mutuality the New Testament calls us to foster. It is in the intimacy and highly relational context of the small that we are best able to 'one another' one another. As Bishop John V. Taylor, a messenger to the church ahead of his time, explained: 'the ideal shape of the church ... will provide this "one-another-ness" ... [with] the least possible withdrawal of Christians from their corporateness with their fellow men in the world ... little congregations must become normative if the church is to respond to the Spirit's movement in the life of the world.' (*The Go Between God*, SCM, 1972).

With such a strong theological imperative for the small, it is unsurprising that smaller Christian communities are more likely to experience numerical growth. The *From anecdote to evidence* report (Archbishops' Council, 2014) was unequivocal: 'Small churches exhibit the most positive growth

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trends.' When the Institute for Natural Church Development analysed responses from 70,000 church congregations, they concluded that, of 170 variables, it was 'small groups' that had the strongest positive relationship with numerical growth.

'Small' is also the best context in which questions and doubts can be explored and we know that the lack of opportunities for that is an important factor in people disengaging from congregational life. Where the small is celebrated, it is easier to nurture a variety of expressions of church – and that kind of diversity is vital in enabling more people to encounter the gospel.

As we seek to be faithful in this 'day of small things', hear the words of another of Zechariah's contemporaries. Addressing that crowd, with their mixture of despair and hope, joy and despondency, Haggai declared the words of the LORD Almighty: 'Be strong ... and work. For I am with you ... And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' (Haggai 2:4)

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Mount Zion Church, Cliviger, Lancashire

Who knew that Lego connects? God! He had a plan for MZC. Back in July 23, one of our outreach team mentioned a Lego Café that her sister's church in Norfolk was running – November 23, we had our first Lego Café. Forty-six children and forty-five



adults came along to a two hour session on a beautiful Saturday afternoon (Burnley FC were away) It was probably one of our most successful outreaches in recent years. MZC was filled with people we didn't know. So, if you are looking for an outreach that connects your church with local people – try a Lego Café.

Alongside this activity, God also connected us with another Lego based activity. GoChatter Videos launched a QR code Lego Christmas Nativity trail November. God-incidentally, we heard about this brand-new initiative at the same time as planning Lego Café. The tiny parish of Cliviger near Burnley put the real meaning of Christmas front and centre in 2023. Check out GoChatter Videos for a mass of resources – Lego animation Bible stories for all seasons.

Leaping forward into 2024, all our plans at Mount Zion Church will be based upon our theme – Building a Community of Believers – Acts 2 42-47. We will be placing more emphasis on church family activities, building on last year's family meals and get togethers. We will be looking for new ways to come together, share and be in communion with our Lord and Saviour, and each other. We aim to connect more with our village through a balance of activities and be more intentionally evangelical in our established activities, as well as exploring how to get more involved with village life.

We are so excited at what the Lord has in store for us in 2024.

Millom Baptist Church, Millom, Cumbria

After a busy Warm Hub last winter, we thought we would pause for summer 2023. But a regular visitor to our Warm Hub asked permission to continue the weekly opening as a Social Hub with sandwiches or toast rather than soup. After a very successful six months the Warm Hub has resumed, and we have understood more clearly the value of a space for people to be, to share and to feel welcomed.

Over the coming months we hope to continue to strengthen relationships, and keep noticing where God is at work, often surprising us, building and encouraging individuals, and growing us a little more like Jesus. We are a diverse community, united by a love for God and for others, and seeking to reflect more of God's love in every situation. Please pray with us that we might seek God's leading in all we do.

Sycamore Chapel, Tewkesbury

We are delighted the church is slowly growing and we thank God for this. Shortly before Christmas we ran an Alpha Course, so please pray for those who attended that they may draw nearer to Christ as a result. We are also pleased that a young lady from Bolivia will be joining us shortly as a children/youth worker which will help ease the workload pressure.

We have a lot of activities planned over the Christmas period so please pray that these will have gone well and that we may be effective in our follow up with those involved.

Waypoint Church, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Looking back, 2023 was a big year for our children's work, starting with a relaunch of our Little Lights ministry at Waypoint Church – focused on 0-5-year-olds and families of young children within Waypoint, as well as reaching out to those in our local community – and this work is really growing.

Currently, we run a parent-led creche for our 0-2 year-olds and we visit a preschool every six weeks during school terms. Now, we are launching a new group, called Grown-ups and their Little Lights, focusing on parents and pre-school children. With our ministry into preschools, we hope to be able to expand our visits to other preschools and nurseries in Berwick and the surrounding area.

As part of Grown-ups and their Little Lights, we will be exploring the 'Babies and Toddlers' course from Parenting for Faith, part of the BRF. We plan for this to develop into a weekly group with a short teaching, time to listen, support and encourage parents, and a safe space for little ones to play, including a small rhyme time.

Working closely with Waypoint's Sunday children ministry, WayKids, we are also developing community events such as our successful Pumpkin Heroes Party which attracted many children and their parents from the local community. We hope to hold a children's activity and outreach event in each school holiday including, at the time of writing, an imminent Christmas party.

We have lots of ideas for the future and are excited about the coming season to see all that God will do. We would love for you to stand with us in prayer. Thank you.



The Meeting Place, Westbourne, Sussex

Over the past few years, we have worked to establish our small chapel building as a meeting place for the community but now our plans to restore a worshipping community are moving on apace. We are holding our first invitation meeting in January and will build on that as the Spirit leads, perhaps launching a regular gathering on Pentecost Sunday. Alongside this we are raising funds for a part-time leader to drive things forward.

Thank you for your prayers at this pivotal moment in our evolution.

Derbyshire Rural Chaplaincy

Please give thanks for the continued support for our regular reflective services held at the Agricultural Business Centre in Bakewell where all are welcome, and all those who have supported us in 2023 through prayer, attending events and financially.

As we enter 2024 please join us in praying for:

- Our farming community juggling so many ongoing changes – administrative and practical against the pressure of national agenda.
- Our many upland sheep & beef farmers feeling frustrated & disappointed at being left out of the new Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) because very few options to receive remuneration are available to them in their situation.
- Our dairy farmers who continue to work day in day out hoping to hear better news in the New Year about their milk prices after a difficult 2023.



Coastal Roots Community, Perranporth, Cornwall

New Wave Community has now finished the process of becoming its own charity and we now have a new name – Coastal Roots Community!! This reflects our missional passion for the coastal community of Perranporth, the fact that we are rooted in Jesus and rooted in place and purpose together.

We are excited about the journey we are on with 24/7 Prayer and becoming part of their network. Our leadership team is beginning a journey of embrace and discovery with the 24/7 Communities Team. Please pray for the team as they grow and develop through this process.

We thank God for our small youth discipleship group that has started meeting this year, please pray that in 2024 this group would grow deeper and stronger together. For strong peer relationships to develop so they can encourage each other in their faith as they navigate the teenage years. Pray for God to bring more leaders to support this group and build a team so that the youth provision can grow and go as the Lord leads!

In March the ladies from our community will enjoy a weekend away together for discipleship, learning and fun. Please pray for them as they gather.

We continue to be involved in local beach cleans, and be part of local community groups which builds relationships in the community, sharing our faith as opportunities arise. Please pray for those seeking and searching as they journey with us. Pray for the Alpha Course that will be running in homes in the new year around kitchen tables.

Acoustic84 communities, Dorset

It has been a varied, busy and changing season for Acoustic84 communities operating around Dorset including:

■ **Weymouth and Portland:** Acoustic84 have called pioneer minister Jayne Newton to begin missionally listening in Weymouth and Portland. Please pray for her and her family as they move into this role, and that both the community and God will be heard.

■ **Parkstone:** We celebrated two baptisms this season with an average age of 85! Beautiful. We are in conversation with local partners to turn the ageing large church building into a community centre. Please pray for these conversations.

■ **Purbecks:** Continuing to be a blessing in the larger gatherings, and the small groups are becoming more and more beautiful. Please pray as they make important decisions in the new year.

■ **West Dorset:** We celebrated a baptism and have grown in number – both with converts and with already Christians. The larger numbers have changed the dynamic of the group and we need to pray about how we plant/split to continue growth. Please pray for wisdom. This community is now a registered charity, and we are thankful for the trustees – please pray for them as they settle into this new role.

■ **Dorset Pioneering Network:** This continues to grow and be of great encouragement. Please pray for the gathering in the new year where up to 30 pioneers will gather online.

Village Church, Oldmeldrum, Aberdeenshire

Since our last update Village has been growing and developing. We are exploring a house church model that is sustainable and empowers individual ownership and support and where everyone is invited to participate and be involved. Since this change we have seen an increase in people inviting friends and family, stepping up individually and taking part in helping the life of Village Church happen.

Organic growth is important to us as we feel it help develop sustainability and ownership. An example of this would be a member of Village Church starting a group for women with different activities each month, such as crafts or afternoon tea, to provide a non-threatening space for people to make friends and connect with others in their community. It is hoped that a group like this will be a safe space for people to share stories of faith and build real relationships where everyone is welcome.

We recently have started our first youth group. This has been a long time in the making as until now we haven't had the chance to create space for the young people in our community where they can be supported, belong and grow.

Community Partnership is important to us and at Christmas we are privileged to work with key organisations and groups including the local council housing services, Home Start, local schools and health visiting teams. We work together to provide key support and resources to support struggling families. It's by working together that we see our community transform and be more like heaven here on earth with God working in, and through, his church.

James & Ruth Neve, Chapel-en-le-Frith, Derbyshire

We write this article just before Advent begins, in the knowledge that it will not be read until after Advent (and Christmas!) is over. Advent is, of course, often experienced as a time of waiting and for many today, in this world of instant gratification and an "I want it NOW!" attitude, waiting seems a wasteful and unnecessary thing – much better to be getting on and doing. Yet for us the season of waiting continues into 2024.

One member of our support group recently invited us to a webinar with Andrew Root to reflect on his new book 'When church stops working'. In it he observes that the first commandment the church received as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (a misnomer Root suggests – it should really be called the Acts of God!) is to go to Jerusalem and wait! This is the origin of the church – we are a waiting people, waiting for God to act and then discerning how he might require us to join with him out of our waiting. Ruth and I wait – we wait for God to act in Chapel-en-le-Frith, praying and hoping that we might recognise his active presence, and then discerning this, have the courage to join with him as he makes himself known.



Clare Baptist Church, Clare, Suffolk

Over the past year, members of the church family have been offering additional support to our weekly toddler group. This initially started out by offering lunch at the end of the Tuesday morning session as a way of helping people who are facing the increasing cost of food and heating. It has since morphed into an afternoon of conversation with a small number of parents, some of whom only leave when they go to pick up older siblings from school. This has provided the church with the opportunity to forge deeper relationships with these parents, and a discipleship/discussion course is planned to start before the end of the year.

Prayer underpins all of this, with people at home and in church praying for (and receiving prayer requests from) the parents who attend. For the vast majority of these families, this is the only community of faith that they experience – our prayer is that they encounter God somehow and somewhere. Alongside the weekly event, the church is now running Family Fun mornings during the school holidays, when older siblings can join in the fun!

Please pray for the leaders and helpers of this group, for the families who attend, and for the community that God is creating.

ReBorne Sherborne & Milborne Port, Dorset

As I write this update, I've been reminded that there are only 47 days left in 2023. With that in mind I cast my mind forward into 2024, looking forward in faith and anticipation of what God will do through ReBorne in this brand-new year. By the time I write again, God willing, ReBorne's Milborne Port building project will be near completion. This rebuild will enable us to reach out into the community with a new purpose-built coffee shop and community hub. With this new building we believe we will be better equipped and therefore more effective in our ministry to proclaim the name of Jesus. Through this new building Lydia, our recently appointed youth worker, will have a safe place to meet, gather and share the love of Jesus to the young folk, children and families in the village of Milborne Port. May this new building be a hub where many will come to know Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

I close with a prayer of thanks to God for the way He has touched so many hearts to be generous in their financial giving so that a vision can become a reality. May the name of Jesus be lifted high through this new venture so that God's kingdom continues to grow, and He alone receives all the glory.

Discovery Church Dunbar, Dunbar, East Lothian

As Discovery leads, we (Jon and Emma Timms) have recently finished our first sabbatical. This was a fruitful time where God spoke into our lives, ministry and calling. What struck me most though was how the community rallied together to organise gatherings, help and support each other, to welcome new faces and generally ensure that church community life carried on. Church communities often rise and fall on the shoulders of one leader. However, church communities that come together and encourage each other, learn that their voice is heard and valued and discover a place to belong and immerse into life together.

Discovery is now entering a time of discernment as we approach Advent and the winter season. How might God be shaping our community to live incarnationally through our values – Be true, Be kind, Go! We would really value the prayers of Rural Ministries and those connected to it with a shared heart. May we all have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to receive and willing feet to go!



How do I look?

On a recent trip to London, I was struck by the number of people who were glued to their phones or tablets, barely aware of what was going on around them; it's as if people have forgotten how to look. Today's life has an undercurrent of busyness and hurry as we rush from one thing to another, making snap decisions and expecting instant results; there can appear to be little time for reflection, dwelling, and wondering.

In a compelling article by Fr Dunlevy, there is the suggestion that modern society has misplaced its contemplative gaze and with it the ability to deeply look, seeing the Lord present. Clearly, this is damaging our relationship and knowledge of Christ. Dunlevy asserts, "It is only when our prayer and study become truly attentive to the reality set before us that we open ourselves to receive Jesus in such a way that we know Him more intimately and grow in love with Him." (Dominicana, August 2016)



I've been thinking recently about the concept of contemplation and how we as Christians need to rediscover or recover it.

There is the suggestion that modern society has misplaced its contemplative gaze and with it the ability to deeply look, seeing the Lord present. Clearly, this is damaging our relationship and knowledge of Christ.

I've been thinking recently about the concept of contemplation and how we as Christians need to rediscover or recover it. By practising the discipline of contemplation, I am particularly interested in understanding the ability to look deeply and slowly with the eyes of Christ, by which we might perceive what is *really* going on around us. The question that came to mind is this; 'How do we move in our looking from a **glance**, a **glare** to a **gaze**?' Allow me to unpack what I mean by this.

When I'm in a hurry (which happens more often than I'd like to admit), I glance at things; that is, I take a quick look to see if there's anything of interest. The first impression is rarely compassionate; it is too preoccupied with weighing up and assessing: 'What might I get out of this?', 'How will this affect me?', 'How does my self-image require that I react or respond to this?' or 'How might I reclaim control of this situation?' My thoughts tend to be quick thoughts, of which I am largely at the



centre. I am very much aware of the dangers of glancing.

If I allow my eyes to linger a little longer than a glance, there is a temptation to glare; that is, to begin to see the flaws, the wrongs, what is lacking and what needs to be addressed... my eyes become critical. I see the problems rather than the opportunities, and thereby see the need to separate myself from the situation.

In glaring I have perfected my version of the 'Paddington Bear hard stare', through which I am able to communicate disapproval, disappointment, and disgust without needing to use words. I cannot help but wonder if this is something we too often do as evangelical Christians, not the Paddington Bear stare, but rather seeing the problems, all that needs to be addressed, the behaviours that need correcting rather than the opportunities, the beauty, the possibilities, and the compassion. The problem largely occurs when we are in a hurry, or on a mission, where such things become a distraction. In the story of the Good Samaritan, by glancing or glaring, we become the ones who effectively walk by on the other side of the road. We have possibly more in common with the Priest, and the Levite than we might be comfortable considering. We glance and we glare, and then we pass by.

Continuing with this analogy, it is the Samaritan who is the one who looks, sees with compassion, and then acts. Could it be that he felt compelled to stop and help because he gazed and in so doing saw the man through a different lens—a lens that saw the man as his neighbour, as a one-of-a-kind


and unrepeatable wonder whom he welcomed as a gift into his busy and hectic life?

The dictionary defines *gazing* as 'to fix the eyes in a steady intent; look often with eagerness or studious attention'. That is a helpful definition. Gazing, in my opinion, enhances our natural capacity to receive God's word to us, and when we internalise that word, we become able to look upon creation with loving eyes.

Prayer is often interpreted as a kind of problem solving between humans and God; however, the early desert mothers and fathers saw prayer as a transformation of the consciousness of the one doing the praying. The fact that we typically shut our eyes while praying, as if to obstruct outside influences, is paradoxical. Is it possible that God wants us to pay attention to those very diversions? What might it look like if we are to pause, move beyond glancing and glaring, and instead gaze?

I believe that gazing leads us to contemplation; it is more than just conveying images; it is an invitation to God to speak to our souls in ways that inform, inspire, and eventually lead us to action. Gazing is an invitation to have our hearts transformed and our minds liberated; it is a chance to look for and reflect light. Perhaps each of us should ask ourselves, "How do I look?"

Simon Mattholie
Rural Ministries



One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.
Psalms 27:4 (TNIV)

Wellington & District Parish Churches, Somerset

This winter has seen us busy with our social action activities. Last winter the concern in the community was about the cost of fuel, but this winter it has extended to the cost of living generally. Consequently, we have run our Warm Spaces again, this time with extended hours and food. It has attracted even more people than last year.

The talking café has also seen increased numbers. This aims to address problems of loneliness, which are evident in our community. Feedback from people attending tells us how much they appreciate being able to come, have a warm welcome and time to talk to others in the same situation. The Toddlers and Babies group is flourishing too, and those coming also see it as valuable in combatting loneliness, as well as providing mutual support.

We have recently received funding for our programmes from both the local council and the Co-op. So how are we different from Social Services? Well, having attended a recent Zoom series of cross-cultural conversations, with people from the UK, Ireland, and several countries in Africa (facilitated by the Diocese of Bath and Wells under the guidance of our new Bishop) one gem of knowledge became apparent. That is, if we can get to know our local community and address their concerns, within the church, with church people, then something 'rubs off' onto those we meet, and it can lead to people coming to Christ. So watch this space!

Wychwood Baptist Church, Milton-Under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire

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

Since our last entry, we've been blessed with a variety of outreach opportunities, from our 'Kings Quest' holiday club, to our Light Party (both for school years 3-6), and a Harvest lunch (extension of our weekly cafe). Prior to and over the Christmas/New Year period, we will have had a 'Stir Up Sunday' event for families, as well as Carols, a Christmas Cafe and New Year Kids event - each giving us opportunities to share the gospel. Please pray that seeds sown will bear fruit. In addition, we continue to invest in the lives of our community through regular activities such as our Life Larder, Cafe and our Youth Club. Please pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in these too.

As a church family, we are encouraged as we meet together most Sundays. Once a month we meet at the Paddocks (supported living accommodation) for 'Puddings & Praise' or 'Favourite Hymns'. In the New Year we may be returning to meeting every week in the morning (whilst still meeting monthly at the Paddocks).

We are currently in the process of setting up The Life Centre as a separate registered charity (CIO), and would appreciate prayer as we work through how best to manage how this relates to WBC.

Please pray that we point people to Jesus in all we do.



Knighton and Knucklas Baptist Churches, Welsh Borders

At the time of writing, we have had a busy but productive few months, with a successful Holiday Craft Club which saw us meeting with a number of families for the first time. Many have subsequently kept in contact with us through Messy Church and our Lifegroup gatherings, as well as our ever popular Harvest celebrations – always a highlight in this rural community.

We are now preparing for what promises to be a very busy Christmas season which will see us trying a few things for the first time, including a 'Blue Christmas' reflective service in Knighton for those who feel unable to join in with the usual lively festive celebrations and a Community Carol Service in our village chapel in Knucklas. We are also excited that Cytun (Churches Together) in Knighton will be hosting the first Community Carols since the Covid lockdowns, and also a combined service on Christmas morning. We are excited at what God is doing in and around us, and welcome your prayers as we continue to worship and serve Him in these challenging times. Please pray that those who come along will be touched by the Spirit and that we can lead them on a journey to knowing Christ as Saviour.

Abbeydore Deanery, Herefordshire

We are looking ahead to 2024 with hope. In particular:

- We hope for further visits from pilgrims walking the Golden Valley Pilgrim Way. They are a blessing on us as a broad church community and also on those they meet. 2023 was amazing, with really good, meaningful feedback and a baptism, and reports of wonderful experiences of healing and renewal. We are thankful for the publicity received and the prayers for the time and energy to realise the potential of this pilgrimage for the benefit of others.
- We hope for someone to come forward to replace our Lay Co-Chair, Philip Wilcocks, who died earlier in 2023. That they can bring their gifts and talents to fill this important role for our Deanery.
- We are hopeful and thankful that the members of our new Joint Council body, will continue with their enthusiasm, dedication and ideas.

Gosberton Baptist Church, Gosberton, Lincolnshire

Back in 2015, a Commission report estimated that in the UK about 20% of patient medical consultations were for social, rather than medical problems. Gosberton Medical Centre has been referring patients for 'social prescribing' for some time, and we are now opening our church regularly as a base for a walking group that brings together folk who need support to improve their health and wellbeing.

More recently we have established a link with a local charity that seeks to provide a safe space and a listening ear for people who are struggling with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and isolation. Our 300-hundred-year-old building situated on the edge of the village has a certain charm, but with this comes limitations too. We are looking at a range of possible projects, including a sensory garden in our grounds, a gathering place for coffee and chat and a man-shed where guys can gather to share their skills and find friendship.

It is encouraging that we have been approached for help in these projects. They are not an alternative to mission: sharing the Gospel is our first priority. But we are grateful that folk in our community recognise that we really care about our neighbours, and that is an integral part of the Good News of Christ.

The Oatridge Family, Mission Enablers, North Lincolnshire

We continue to meet around the breakfast table on a Sunday Morning for Messi-family with two other families in our street who were not previously attending church. We share food together; read a passage from the Bible and discuss it; pray for and with one-another. We've had a few tangible answers to prayer which have bolstered the faith of the group and developed a real desire to thank and praise God, rather than just asking for more. It is such a privilege to journey with those who are growing in their relationship and discipleship with Jesus.

County-wide, we are in contact with another four individuals, couples or groups who are also seeking to reach out to their neighbours/communities to share God's love - to be light in the darkness. We are meeting monthly to pray for the county, hear one-another's stories and pray for each other. All those in the group are involved in a range of missional activities As Christmas approaches, we have all been seeking opportunities to connect with others amid the festivities - one family is organising a Christmas party and we are helping with our village's Carols in the Hub (an afternoon of singing, refreshments and company for elderly residents in our village).

We thank God for his Holy Spirit at work in our communities as we see folks growing in their faith and discipleship and answers to prayer.

Please pray for:

- All the groups across North Lincolnshire to watch and listen for the leading of the Holy Spirit and hearts that are courageous so that we follow where the Holy Spirit leads.
- Us to make more contacts with other Christians across the county who have a missional heart for their community.
- Plans for a learning day in 2024 about what 'being church' might look like, both for new churches being planted, and established churches being reimagined.

Fenlands Church, Thorney, Cambridgeshire

Fenlands Church in Thorney has been busy in recent months. We have seen a little growth but, of course, we are hungry for more.

During the autumn we joined with Thorney Abbey to host the Harvest Festival meeting at a local farm; this was well attended with several visitors who wouldn't normally attend any type of church service. As usual, everyone was invited to stay for lunch, with an offering to bless the two local food banks.

Our Halloween alternative 'Bright Lites' party was also a success, where we gave away 'Bags of Hope' which contained shiny items, sweets, appropriate tracts and information about the church. To combat the cold we handed out 150 hot dogs, soup and around 3kg of chilli.

Please pray that we will see real growth in the coming months as we head in to 2024.





The Church in Upper Rissington, Gloucestershire

In this village without an established church our weekly homegroup, made up of people who live in the village but may worship elsewhere, continues to be our main gathering. It provides fellowship, an opportunity to learn from God's word and each other, as well as a time when we can pray for each other and our community.

We also hold an informal, family-friendly service once a month in the Village Hall and will be holding our annual Carols by Candlelight which is usually very well attended.

Led by Rev Nina, we are always looking for fresh ways to reach further into the community to share with them the knowledge of God's love. During 2023 we partnered with another group in the village to offer a fortnightly Soup Lunch which has continued throughout the year and has proved to be very popular.

It has been great to have a presence at some of the regular events in the village like the Easter egg hunt and the Village Fete where we had a stall offering various activities.

Recently Rev Nina made contact with the Cotswold Community Connectors and is working alongside them, listening to the community and looking at further ways of building community in this relatively new development including strengthening our god links with the Primary School.

We value your continued prayer support.

Lavendon, Baptist Church, Lavendon, Buckinghamshire

The new year for us sees us looking to build on what God has been doing within our church and community during 2023. We have been really encouraged to see growth in the church, both numerically and spiritually and we give God praise for this. Our children's work is thriving with roughly a third of the church being of primary school age. It does, however, make it more obvious that we need to pray about how we develop youth work within the church.

After a great response to our half day of prayer in November, we are now going to be holding these quarterly, to go along with our monthly 'prayer and pint' evenings.

Like most smaller rural churches, resources are never as plentiful as we would like, but God has blessed us and we continue to be able to open our doors to the community without charging, although our craft and chat group has unilaterally decided to make a donation to the Church each week!

Our new Baby and Toddler group has taken off. We work with a local health visitor to provide a monthly drop-in session for new parents and to have the regular weigh-ins and progress checks. It has worked so well that the local health authority has started to roll this out to other rural baby and toddler groups in the area.

Please pray for guidance and provision going forward. Thank you.

MAKE

PEACE

NOT

WAR

Responding to an uncertain political climate

There's a pattern in political history of stability and comfort, followed by a time of uncertainty leading to people seeking hope and finding it in extreme political voices. These voices often lead to marginalisation, oppression, and persecution. These voices often do not respect that we are all made in God's image. We say, "That won't happen to us, it can never happen here." The world has gone through Covid and an economic crisis and those who have been forced to the bottom society have had enough. Trump is making a comeback, and extreme right-wing governments are being elected across the world. We have a government that has lied, has brought in anti-protest laws and is trying to usher in unwelcoming immigration laws.

Now I know that's a bit of doom mongering, but it's not untrue.

Jesus was born into a Jewish family under Roman rule, and soon after birth he had to flee from Herod's decree to kill baby boys. He grew up around people who wanted freedom from the Romans, including those planning violent overthrow of the regime and praying for a politically radical Messiah to rescue them. Jesus knows what it's like to live amongst people who want political change.

What did he do? Jesus defied expectation in the way he lived and died: he was the prince of peace, and the king of a peaceful kingdom, ushering in healing and hope. He recognised that not everyone would accept his peaceful kingdom and wept for the pain that was coming. "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Luke 19:41-44)

Not long ago, I was advised to read *The Jewish War*, by Josephus, I only got a few pages in because the amount of bloodshed made me feel sick. The Romans actually did what Jesus predicted and Jews were killed on Mount Masada, they that had been surrounded by Roman soldiers who built a rampart up to the desert fortress. There's a monument still





standing in Rome today celebrating their victory over the Jews, something harrowing to see considering the current political climate. Jesus wept for what the people that he came to save were going to go through, and for their rejection of the prince of peace. Then, when he was a victim of violence and his close friend tried to defend him with a sword, Jesus healed the wound he had caused and followed his Father to the cross. He gave his life to bring us peace and reconciliation between ourselves and God, and between each other.

The political situation today in the UK is different to Jesus' time, but it can still be unsettling. As Christians, it's important that we engage with the situation we find ourselves in and respond with

Christ's actions. It is an act of mission. Not long ago I had a conversation with the Church of England representative to the UN, it was deeply encouraging to know that Christians have a voice in meetings discussing world issues, and that they, as our representatives, want to hear what we care about so they can be hold our voices in the places that can make a difference. Some are privileged to be in a place of power that enables them to make

wise decisions - let's be praying for them. If we are worrying about the political situation, let's try to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Let's not bury our heads in the sand but remain aware of what's going on around us, weeping and praying for what could come, and standing up for justice and peace where we are able to, and sharing the news of our good King. In the Spirit's strength, let's keep being the peace and reconciliation this world needs, choosing to serve and love where community is breaking down, trusting that Jesus is the prince of peace that we all need. Thank you for what you are already doing, keep going in the love of Christ.

Jo Allen
Rural Ministries

As Christians, it's important that we engage with the situation we find ourselves in and respond with Christ's actions. It is an act of mission.

Cromhall Chapel, Cromhall, Gloucestershire

We have started a weekly coffee morning for the community, and this will continue in the new year. We hope it will lead to a course of 'Hymns we Love', an outreach to older people using popular hymns which would happen during the coffee morning.

We continue with a weekly assembly at our local primary school which for us is equivalent to having a Sunday School of around 70 children! Many of the children have previously passed through our well-established tots group. Our pastor is a school governor and we are establishing stronger links - this year the school's Key Stage 1 Nativity play is being held in our chapel. We are planning a Holiday Bible Club in the May half term and invitations have gone out to the school already.

One of our elders has written a Foundations course and these have been a huge blessing to the church. A group of about eight meet weekly in homes, over a meal and then look into the basics of the faith. Another course will run in January.

Also in January, our second Ladies Retreat will take place in Sidmouth. Thirteen of us will be away from Thursday to Saturday, staying in a nearby hotel and meeting at a local church. We will be studying the book of Ruth and enjoying deep fellowship as we did last year.



Charlie & Abby Clayton, Missional Listeners, Mevagissey, Cornwall

We will celebrate three years in Mevagissey in January; it feels like we have settled in now and it definitely feels like home.

Charlie's youth work continues to thrive, with around 45 primary aged children attending every Friday night. He has also begun a fortnightly teenage session, which young people are attending too. Pray for him, that these sessions would bless and nurture the young people in Mevagissey and show something of God to all who are involved. Abby is now in the second year of her PhD and is writing a theology of beauty, which is challenging but energising work.

Our fortnightly prayer meeting is growing, and there seems to be a hunger to pray and gather ecumenically in the village. We are considering how to develop discipleship amongst those we journey with - both Christians and those exploring faith.

Please pray that we keep listening to God and remain available and present to those around us. Pray for provision - finances are low. Pray for our children, that they would continue to grow in faith. Pray that those who are asking questions will find Jesus!



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