

Witney Congregational Church

Issue 20

December 2011
& January 2012

R CROSS A D S

Witney Congregational Church is a crossroads where we:

meet God in worship

meet one another in friendship

meet our community and world with the love of Jesus



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WHAT'S ON GUIDE

Witney Congregational Church offer a whole range of activities through which we seek to Worship, Work and Witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in this community today.

Further information can be obtained from the Church Administrator, Minister, Church Secretary or the leaders of the particular activities who are listed at the back of this magazine.

WORSHIP

Daily Worship	9.30 am	Mon-Fri	Short time of Prayer and Reading
Noah's Ark Service	1.30 pm	Tuesday	For under 5's parents and carers
Saturday Praise	11.00 am	1 st Saturday of the month	
Sunday Services	10.30 am		
	6.00 pm		There is a crèche facility at both services

Communion is normally held twice during the month at the first Sunday evening and third Sunday morning services

PRAYER

The Church is open each morning for Prayer; also in the Garden Room on Sunday morning and evening prior to, and after, Worship - All welcome

STUDY & FELLOWSHIP

Thursday	2.30pm	2 nd Thursday of each month at different homes
Friday	10.00 am	Church

YOUTH ACTIVITIES

Sunday	10.30 am	Crèche, Noah's Ark & The K.I.C.K. on Sundays
Monday	10.00 am	Noah's Ark - Infant Group for babies and pre-school children
Friday	6.00pm	www. - 1 st & 3 rd Friday of the month
	7.00 pm	Y4J - 1 st & 3 rd Friday of the month

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Tuesday	Monthly	Deacon's Meeting
	Bi-Monthly	Church Meeting
Thursday	10.00 am	Rest & Chat (Coffee/Tea available)
Saturday	10.30 am	Coffee Morning

SUNDAY LINK

Weekly bulletin for all Christians providing stimulating thought along with news and notices concerning our Church

WITNEY ECUMENICAL YOUTH TRUST (BASE 33)

4 Welch Way (Entrance - High Street) ☎ 01993 200682 (Office)

St ANDREW'S BOOKSHOP

☎ 01993 709429

Opening Hours: Monday - Saturday 09.00 am - 5.00 pm



The beginning of Advent was 27th November, and as we near the time of Christmas, we see the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season; the decorations going up, the people madly shopping for gifts, and, as has become accepted as normal, we are all subjected to the increased commercial hype putting pressure on us to decide what ultimately we ought to buy.

Amongst all this activity, and commercial hype, let us take the time to stop and reflect just why we really celebrate this time. As Christians, we are the only ones who know the real meaning of Christmas and why it is a time of celebration and what that celebration means to all who will believe. If there were no Jesus, there would be no **Christmas**, so let us focus on Advent and the birth of Christ.



So, turning now to the contents, here is just a glimpse of some of the articles that have been submitted; Pip Cartwright continues the history of WCC; there is the 'Crabby old man';

Sharon Watson says 'Be still and know ...'; there is Christmas Unwrapped, and Marjorie gives us an article on Amnesty International, to name but a few.

As always, many thanks to those who have contributed to this edition, but would also encourage anyone to consider submitting articles for the next edition by either:

- CD\Memory Stick
- E-mail: terrypowlesland@uwclub.net
jacquipowlesland@uwclub.net
- Just plainly written on paper, which can be typed up.

ESSENTIAL NOTE: All contributions should be submitted ***NO LATER THAN the WEDNESDAY*** of the week in which the magazine will be published.

The next edition is due on 5th Feb 2012
Your Editor

An Advent calendar, via the Congregational Federation website, can be found at:

<http://www.congregational.org.uk/section.aspx?id=9721>

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Daily Prayer Time:
Mon-Fri 9.30 am

Services

10.30 am & 6.00pm and will normally be led by Rev Jason Boyd unless advised below

Dec

- 3rd am Messy Church
- 4th am Cafe Church All-Age Worship
- pm Joint Service at Congregational Church Communion
- 11th am All-Age Nativity
- 6.30pm WICS - Dreaming of a Holy Night
- 13th 10.45am Springfield School Christmas Service
- 18th am Morning Worship & Communion followed by Word Cafe
- pm Candle Light Carol Service
- 20th 6.00pm Noah's Ark Christmas Service
- 24th 11.15pm Midnight Service
- 25th am Christmas Day All-Age Worship **Note: No evening service**

Jan

- 1st am All-Age Worship & Communion **Note: No evening service**
- 7th 11.00am Saturday Praise
- 8th am Morning Worship
- pm Joint Service at High St Methodist
- 15th am Morning Worship Communion
- pm Joint Service at Congregational Church
- 22nd am Anniversary Service
- pm CTiW United Service at St Mary's Cogges
- 29th am Morning Worship
- pm Madley Park Residential Home

Feb

- 4th 11.00am Saturday Praise
- 5th am Morning Worship
- pm Joint Service at Congregational Church Communion

The following events are given for your particular attention:

Dec

- 5th Noah's Ark Toddler Group Christmas Party
- 6th Deacons meeting 7.30pm
- 8th Rest & Chat Christmas Special with choir from Queen Emma Dyke's School at 10.30am
- Fellowship Group 2.30pm 6 Swinbrook Court
- 'Lyfe' Bible Study 7.30pm 25 Barleyfield Way
- 9th KICK & Sunday Group young people 6.00pm
- 10th Prayer Chain meeting 9.15am
- 16th Beetle Drive 7.00pm

Jan

6 th	www. & Y4J	6.00pm & 7.00pm respectively	
12 th	Fellowship Group	2.30pm	7 Riverside Gardens
	'Lyfe' Bible Study	7.30pm	Hill Side, Witney Rd, Finstock
14 th	Prayer Chain meeting	9.15am	
16 th - 20 th	Week of Prayer for Christian United		
20 th	www. & Y4J	6.00pm & 7.00pm respectively	
24 th	Church Meeting	7.30pm	
26 th	Lyfe' Bible Study	7.30pm	Hill Side, Witney Rd, Finstock
27 th	Women's World Day of Prayer preparation study	10.00am	

Feb

2 nd	Lyfe' Bible Study	7.30pm	Hill Side, Witney Rd, Finstock
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ROTAS

WELCOMING TEAM

Dec	04	Jill & Robert McBride
	11	Nanna Blackman & Iris Lindsay
	18	Sharon Watson & Theo Howells
	25	Christmas Day
Jan	01	New Year's Day
	08	Pat & Ben Smith
	15	Val Obriain & Joan Currie
	22	Pip & Beryl Cartwright
	29	Susan Wass & Irene St Clair
Feb	05	Jill & Robert McBride



COMMUNION

Dec	4 pm	Nanna Blackman & Sharon Watson
		Preparation Iris Lindsay
Jan	18 am	Peter Gamston & Jacqui Powlesland
		Susan Wass & Judi Holloway
		Preparation Rita Hayes
Jan	01 am	tbc
	15 am	Susan Wass & Nanna Blackman
		Chris Esapa & Sharon Watson
Feb		Preparation Beryl Cartwright
	05 pm	Jacqui Powlesland & Susan Wass
		Preparation Iris Lindsay



FLOWERS

Dec	04	Rita Hayes
	11Dec - 1 Jan	Christmas tree



Jan	08	Alison Hazell
	15	Jacqui Powlesland
	22	Judi Holloway
	29	Joan Currie
Feb	05	Beryl Cartwright



COFFEE

Dec	04	Cafe Church
	11	Linda McCormac & Sue Birdseye
	18	Word Cafe
	25	Christmas Day
Jan	01	New Year's Day
	08	Marjorie Lee, Iris Lindsay & Judith Bungey
	15	Jill & Robert McBride
	22	Church Anniversary
Feb	29	Jean Stanley, Marina Bowerman & Marian Walker
	05	Susan Wass & Irene St Clair



REST & CHAT

Dec	08	Iris Lindsay & Joan Currie
	15	Jean Stanley, Marina Bowerman & Irene St Clair
	22	Marjorie Lee
	29	No Rest & Chat
Jan	05	Pat Smith
	12	Jill & Robert McBride
	19	Jean Stanley, Marina Bowerman & Irene St Clair
Feb	26	Marjorie Lee
	02	Pat Smith



Every effort has been made on the rota list to meet individual circumstances. However, please change with someone else if the dates are not convenient for you - Thanks



Dec	04	Charlotte Hayes
	06	Sue Birdseye
	09	Audrey Elliot
	12	David Pearson
	29	Cecily Lau
	30	Jan Schunselaar

Jan	02	Benjamin Esapa
		Joseph Esapa
		Margaret Esapa
		Gwen Mee
	06	Aimee Farrant
	07	Brian Bennett
	10	Cheryl Birdseye
	12	Iris Lindsay
	18	Kay Nicoll

Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a



Christmas Greetings from the Minister



How do you open a gift? Do you tear the paper off or gently tease the cellotape from every join? The first approach is driven by excitement to see what gift will be revealed. The gentle

approach savours the moment, enjoying the beauty of the paper and the process of discovering what is hidden.

The Bible Society has an initiative called Christmas Unwrapped. It is designed to entice people to get beyond the tinsel and lights to hear the story of the Light of the World. They have produced two series of stickers, one of traditional artwork and the other a silhouette design. Every sticker has the web address inviting people to visit www.christmasunwrapped.org.uk. In using the stickers you are giving people the chance to view a video of the traditional series of paintings accompanied by a dramatic reading of Matthew and Luke's stories of Jesus' birth. This is a creative way of engaging with a culture steeped in computer technology.

I would encourage you to obtain these stickers and use them as a gentle form of evangelism, sharing the Good News of Jesus. Would you consider inviting family, friends and neighbours to unwrap Christmas by joining in our worship celebrations? Let's pray for ourselves and for others that there will be moments when, with excitement, we will rip off the layers of Christmas festivities to discover Christ in Christmas. Let's pray for other moments in which we will slowly, carefully unpack the meaning of God's

love shown through the birth of his Son.

By the time Crossroads is in your hands we will have created Messy Church and Cafe Church for the second time. Arising out of the Emerging Church seminars that Judi Holloway ran in January/February, a creative approach to Saturday Coffee Mornings was explored. We have lots of people who come to the Coffee Morning who do not worship with us and do not take part in Saturday Praise. What steps could we take to make the church worship space feel homely - a comfortable place to encounter the Good News in an informal setting?

Action was agreed. The Coffee Morning would take place in the church worship space and a team would organise activities for all ages to get involved in. There would be a low key theme that would be shared.

The planning group took it one step further. Couldn't Messy Church be an opportunity for a Cafe Church on the Sunday? So I was approached about whether I was up for it. I'm always keen to ride a wave of energy.

The first attempt at Messy Church and Cafe Church in this way happened in September. It was agreed that we will do this every three months. We will reflect on what we are doing and adapt.

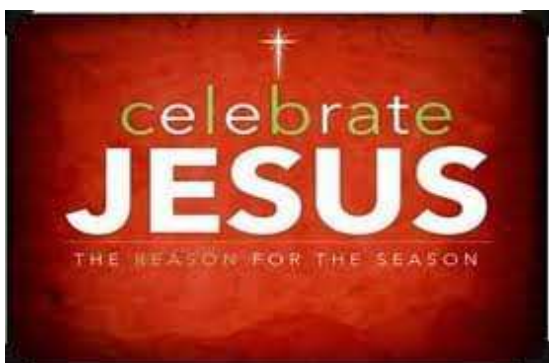
Messy Church and Cafe Church feel strange to those of us steeped in the church. I recognise that some church members find the experience quite stretching. I would appeal to every member, however young or old, to view this as an opportunity for reaching out to people who are not familiar with the church. Instead of having hymns, prayers and a sermon followed by coffee and tea, we begin with fellowship. We explore God's word together and enjoy

singing and prayer. As we continue Messy Church and Cafe Church, think of people to invite. Pray for people to be in a place where they discover the joy of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

As your pastor I'm keen to encourage each member to pay attention to your spiritual development. First, I would like to encourage you to participate in the Word Cafe on 18 December. Word Cafe has been an exciting development emerging out of my PhD research. The participants were keen for this to continue. It is a chance for us to discuss the sermon within the context of the whole of worship and our lives. Second, I would like to encourage you to get involved in an 'Open the Book' group. The groups meet on Thursday at 7:30 pm and Friday at 10 am. At the moment we are working our way through *lyfe*, a fabulous web-based resource produced by the Bible Society. We've explored two zones: still lyfe and real lyfe. The Thursday group will not be meeting now until January. Would you consider committing yourself to deepening your life in Christ?

I pray that over the Christmas season you will choose to make Christ the centre of all that you do. May you experience his peace and joy

Yours in Jesus Christ
Jason



Thank You

I would like to say a huge thank you to all who made my ordination day so special. You have all been part of my journey so far and continue to be very much a part of my journey now. It was great to see so many people taking part and I know that everyone who was able to come really enjoyed the day.

I was especially touched to receive the wonderful gift of a communion set. I have wanted one for such a long time. I haven't had an opportunity to use it yet, but I know I will in the not too distant future.



I won't name names as there are so many of you who took part but to those who arranged the chairs, the flowers, the food, the photographs, etc., etc., to those who stood up front and spoke, and to those who came **THANK YOU** from the bottom of my heart.

Judi

More photographs of Judi's Ordination can be found on the church website:

<http://www.witneycongregational.org.uk/photos/?Judi%20Holloway%20Ordination>



News around the world

The following information has been taken from CWM Website dated 30th November, so is up to date at the editing of this month's magazine

India: Church officials meet chairperson of India's ruling coalition

Churches officials from the major churches in India met Sonia Gandhi, chairperson of the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) heading the federal government in India, urging her to end the decades-old discrimination against Christian Dalits.

Officials from the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI that groups 30 Orthodox and Protestant churches including three CWM-member churches), Catholic church and a prominent dalit Christian activist were in the five-member delegation that called on Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi.

The delegation handed over to Mrs Gandhi, president of the Congress party and widow of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, a memorandum appealing to her to initiate urgent steps to end the undeclared apartheid against Christian dalits.

Dalit' literally meaning 'trampled upon' refers to low castes treated as 'untouchables' in caste-ridden Indian society, who eke out a living by carrying out menial jobs while living in segregation from upper castes in rural areas.

In 1950, the government had enacted a legislation to list Hindu dalits as Scheduled Caste (SC) and made them

eligible for free education and quota in government jobs and legislatures to improve their social status.

While these SC privileges were later extended to Sikh dalits in 1956 and Buddhist dalits in 1990, these have been denied to Muslim and Christian dalits who account for two thirds of 28 million Christians in India.

Despite intermittent protests led by the Christians demanding end to the continued discrimination against Christian dalits, successive governments have ignored the Christian demand since Hindu groups oppose the inclusion of Christian dalits in the SC category fearing mass conversion to Christianity. "We told Sonia Gandhi that the government has been playing delaying tactics in the Supreme Court on the case of dalit Christians," Samuel Jayakumar, executive secretary of the Commission on Policy, Governance and Public Witness of NCCI, and a member of the Church of South India, told CWM.

Despite several government appointed commissions endorsing the Christian demand, Jayakumar pointed out that the government has been playing truant before the court avoiding making clear its stand on the issue. Franklin Caesar, a Catholic dalit who moved the Supreme Court in 2004 challenging the illegality of the discrimination against Christians on the basis of religion which is contrary to the fundamental rights of 'equality and religious freedom' guaranteed under the Indian constitution, was among the church delegates who met Sonia Gandhi.

CWM Europe meets in Swansea

Representatives from CWM's European churches have met in Swansea, Wales, to share experiences and ideas, in order to seek new ways of expressing our faith through word and deed.

While Christianity is growing rapidly in South Asia and other parts of the world, it is in decline across Europe. "We must change the image of the church to be relevant to people, indeed - change the meaning of 'what is to be a church'; to remember that it is the body of Christ in the world and not a building," said CWM Europe mission enabler Rev Wayne Hawkins.

At a time when the European Community is facing a major crisis, it is crucial that Christians seek to understand how the Community works, said Robat Powell.

Few people understand the democratic processes of the EC, he said, suggesting that Europe should be a subject for biblical studies, in the same way as climate change and environmental issues.

The delegates also visited St Peter's Church to see the tomb of a Sir Rhys ap Thomas, and hear about the part he played in placing the Tudors on the throne of England; an act which led, in turn, to the reign of Henry VIII and the establishment of a Protestant Church in England and Wales.

How persecution strengthens the church

Christians and church leaders shudder at the news of persecution of Christians in different parts of the world. But for those living in the midst of persecution, the fear is much less.

"Persecution is not bad for Christian faith. In fact, it helps strengthen the faith and we should pray for that," said bishop Vinod Kumar Malaviya who heads Church of North India (CNI) diocese in troubled Gujarat state in western India.

Bishop Malaviya shared his thoughts on persecution while commenting on the incredible testimony of hounded Christians in troubled Kandhamal in eastern Orissa state despite orchestrated violence three years ago and continued persecution by Hindu fundamentalists.

Following the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati on August 23rd night 2008 by Maoist rebels, Hindu fundamentalists alleged that the Swami's murder was a 'Christian conspiracy' and hounded out the Christians.

In the widespread violence that went on unabated for weeks targeting Christians, more than 90 Christians were killed, over 6000 Christian houses and 350 churches and Christian institutions were looted and torched besides displacing over 54000 Christians.

Thousands of Christians were herded out of their villages and tramped into temples like lambs being led to slaughter houses and forcibly 'reconverted' to Hinduism.

Two years later, several villages remain inaccessible to Christians for refusing to forsake their faith and over 17000 have not yet returned to their villages.

Yet, hardly any of the thousands who were threatened with death to undergo the nauseating reconversion ceremony have turned back on their faith in Christ. On the contrary repentant Hindus have started

embracing Christian faith inspired by the firm witness of the persecuted Christians.

When bishop Malaviya visited the troubled Dangs district in Gujarat where over three dozen churches (including 10 CNI churches), and scores of Christian houses and institutions were damaged and torched during Christmas 1998, he had no words to console his people.

"When I was struggling what to tell them, one of them (who lost his house and properties) told me: 'let them destroy everything but they cannot destroy our faith. We will remain Christians,'" recounted bishop Malaviya heading CNI diocese of Gujarat since 1995.

"Though I went there to encourage and boost our people, it was I who was strengthened and inspired by them," pointed out bishop Malaviya.

Bishop Malaviya recounted another incident three decades earlier that also reinforced the message that persecution does not weaken the faith. In 1968 when he was a student, he was sent with half a dozen others to remote areas under the OM (Operation Mobilization) Mission to sell faith-based books.

"We were given no money and had to survive of our own with the money earned from selling the books," recalled bishop Malaviya. While they were in Vijapur area under Mehsana district, a group of 40 Hindu fundamentalists surrounded them accusing them of conversion, and threw out the books from the van and tried to set these on fire.

As the group was thrashing the Christians students, a local senior politician (belonging to the secular

Congress party) came along the way and reprimanded and threatened the fundamentalists - forcing them to leave the Christians alone as the state was then ruled by the Congress party.

"We slept in the open air that night as we had no money, and prayed for those who attacked us," recalled bishop Malaviya ordained as a pastor eight years later in 1976.

Next morning as the group was having break fast at a village eatery, bishop Malaviya recalled, they were "terrified when we saw leaders of the same group approaching us."

"But when they came near us, they were very polite. They said they could not sleep previous night after attacking us. They apologized and bought Bible from us (and paid for it). It was an unbelievable experience for us," reminisced bishop Malaviya.

Despite the attacks on Christians and anti-Christian propaganda, he pointed out, strong Christian witness is attracting non-Christians. Of the 380 young people who attended a three-day Vacation Bible School in scorching summer in May 2010 (at 45°C) in the tribal area of Gadh, only 81 were Christians, he added.

Because of the anti-conversion law passed by the BJP government in 2003, bishop Malaviya pointed out that Hindus are now 'afraid of embracing Christian faith openly' in Gujarat considered the 'laboratory of Hindu nationalism'.



Mbayani Church, Malawi

Report of visit by Nanna Blackman, Witney Congregational Church
2nd November 2011

Church leaders:

Name:	Position:
Samson Jamu	Chairman
David Kazonde	Session Clerk
Fred Kamkuwe	Treasurer



I met with the gentlemen named above, about 16 members of the women's guild, 3 from the Youth Choir and a couple of other young people, one of whom leads the singing in the services.

I had a very warm welcome, genuine interest in the purpose of the CF visit and an open and frank discussion. There was much laughter as well as mutual consideration of the challenges facing both Mbayani Church and Witney Congregational Church.

Church Building

The current church building is about 15 years old. It is showing signs of wear and there is concern that the pending rainy season will see the roof give way. The floor and concrete seats are also cracking up.

A new church is being built. The total cost is estimated at Kwacha 5 million (~£20,000). There is an ambition also to have a baptism font and a keyboard (or piano bearing in mind there is no electricity), which would add to the cost. The building was scheduled to be finished this year but at present only the foundations and the walls exist. The congregation made some 50,000 bricks and a bricklayer was employed to lay them. The roof is the most urgent need. The cost is estimated at Kwacha 1 million (~£4,000). Unfortunately funds have been depleted. An Indian businessman has made some promises of financial support, but the sum that can be secured is not yet known. Without a roof the building site will suffer in the rainy season as the grounds within the walls will become waterlogged, putting the foundations at risk.

When the new church building is completed the congregation plan to refurbish the existing building and use it as a hall. They plan to let it for functions, to generate some income.

Land has been set aside, behind the new church, for a manse. Mbayani currently shares its pastor with two other churches, who was also recently elected General Secretary for the Churches of Christ. They dream of having their own pastor in the future. Currently the majority of services are led by the church elders.

Partnership visit to Malawi 2011

Organised by Congregational Federation
Sponsored by Council for World Mission



The walls of the new church building, there is no drainage so the rains will cause the ground to get waterlogged which may damage the footings.



From left David, Samson, Elicy (crouched in front of Samson) and some of the members of Mbayani Church in front of their new church building



The old church in the foreground with the new building behind; there is land available for a manse behind the new church

Challenges facing Mbayani Church

The challenges this congregation faces are not so different from our own:

- ❖ Maintaining and growing the numbers in the congregation
- ❖ Achieving funds to maintain and grow the church
- ❖ Stopping the youth from being disaffected and leaving the church
- ❖ Caring for the sick and the elderly
- ❖ Growing the children spiritually as well as physically.

Sunday school materials are hard to come by and I was asked if we could spare some. Unfortunately I did not have any with me. I will discuss with our Youth Church leaders the possibility of sending some material to this church.

I told of our children making cakes at Christmas, which are then distributed to the elderly (and others) in our church. The concept was met by approval but also a concern of 'who pays for it'. This led to a discussion about using church funds for such activities as family lunches. Mbayani church does not have communal meals in this way and the suggestion was met with a great deal of interest. I explained that with collaboration it is actually relatively cheap to feed a lot of people and the emphasis is on fellowship rather than feasting. Plans were made for the hall to be used in this way, when the new church building is finished.

The Mbayani Women's Guild meets regularly with other Women's Guilds from other Churches of Christ churches, for mutual support and discussions.

The Women World Day of Prayer is celebrated, with one service at the main church and smaller services in individual churches. The collection is sent to Women World Day of Prayer via the Churches of Christ committee.

Pastoral Care

Caring for the sick and the elderly is done by the Women's Guild. We talked about how pastoral care was managed; to ensure those in need were tended to. The ladies meet once a week to plan and report on those being cared for. Like us they also use mobile phones to set the prayer chain, or practical help, in motion.

Church Choirs

Mbayani church has three choirs, the women, the Youth and the Sunday school. They practice once a week at different times, with the Sunday school practicing on Saturday morning, the Women on Thursdays and the Youth on a Tuesday evening. There are 10 members of the youth choir.

The Youth choir has ambitions of recording their songs and selling them. A demo CD has been made but they need instruments and equipment before a recording career can become reality.

Both the Youth and the Women's choir gave me a rendition from their repertoire. They then assisted me in a couple of rounds of 'Our God is a Great Big God', including the actions. Much laughter accompanied our efforts.

Partnership visit to Malawi 2011

Organised by Congregational Federation
Sponsored by Council for World Mission

Partnership

There was a genuine appetite for a partnership between Mbayani church and Witney Congregational Church. In the first instance I have a postal address for Samson Jamu, to whom I will write shortly.

My hosts



My hosts in Chirimba, Blantyre were Samson Jamu and his wife Elicy. Tony, the third born son, is a carpenter like his Dad. Aconda, the eighth born and youngest child is in standard 7, she is 12. Because the rains have come, Elicy will be travelling north to Ntcheu, which is about 3 hours by bus. She will supervise the planting of maize, peanuts and other crops in the 6 family gardens. The extended family depend on the crops for food. The second born son works in Ntcheu and called to let Elicy know it is time to travel up. Aconda will look after meals for her Dad while Mum is away for longer periods over the next three months. Aconda received my gift of a pink bible, in English with gravity, but I did get a giggle from her when I presented her with two finger puppets and showed her how to play with them.

Samson is responsible for maintenance at St Andrew's High school in Blantyre as well as being an elder and the chairman of Mbayani church. I stayed with Samson and Elicy for two nights and was made very welcome. Samson and I talked much of technology, especially solar panels, that might afford the family hot water and or electricity where none is currently available. I will be sending him some literature on do-it-yourself solar panels.



PRAYER LETTER No 150

Prayer Letter - Advent, Christmas & New Year

I make no apology for submitting this article in place of my usual Prayer Letter. It has been taken from 'Just One Year', and written by Naim Ateek, Sabeel, Jerusalem, and is so relevant in today's political and world-wide economic crisis. Please use it as a basis for your prayers.

Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those he favours (Luke 2:14)

Some of our people ask how can we celebrate Christmas:

with all the closures and checkpoints

with all the injustice and oppression

with all the violations of human rights

with the presence of a wall that separates families and friends, and a multitude of hardships that the occupation imposes to make people's lives miserable

How can we speak of love, peace and joy when most of our people and millions of others around the world do not experience liberty and peace?

The questions are legitimate. Yet Christmas and New Year must be a time of renewal, of hope and anticipation, of determination and zeal to work for a better world where people can experience these essential qualities of life. Therefore, wherever empire exists and the powers that be are in control through domination, there is a greater responsibility for all of us to take a stand against all that dehumanises people and to work for their liberation

The Christmas story is a story of a liberating God who comes to join an oppressed people in the work of liberation. God's message through the angels is a message of defiance. In spite of the presence of empire, human arrogance and oppression, God is announcing peace and goodwill. This is God's agenda. Glory belongs to God and not to the emperor nor to the powers. Once that is genuinely acknowledged, peace is not far away:

It is in the midst of the Roman occupation that the Incarnation took place;

It is in spite of the occupation that Mary and Joseph found joy and love in the birth of Jesus;

It is in spite of the occupation and in the midst of economic hardships that the shepherds came to visit a family of modest means and discovered great joy and peace;

It is in spite of the occupation that the Magi came to offer their gifts to the child

We celebrate in the midst of the occupation and in spite of it. Through our celebration:

We defy the occupation

We defy the injustice

We defy the oppressors

We defy the powers

They do not possess the last word,

They can build high walls, but they cannot take away our hope,

They can put us in jail, but they cannot take away our joy,

They can prevent us from visiting family, but they cannot take away our love,
They can stop us at checkpoints and impose all kinds of restrictions, but they cannot
take away our pursuit of freedom and liberation
They can prevent us from going to Bethlehem, but they cannot prevent the spirit of
Bethlehem from reaching us,
They can treat us as non-humans, but they cannot crush our spirit nor can they take
away our God-given human worth and dignity,
They can act with hate and disgust but, by the grace of God, we can always refuse to
stoop to the level of hate and maintain our love of God and neighbour that includes them

Therefore Christmas makes us defiant:

We defy the evildoers because we believe in the goodness which they are capable of
doing,
We defy hate because we believe in the power of love and forgiveness,
We defy despair because we believe in life and hope,
We defy violence and terror - both state and individual - because we believe in the
power of peace and non-violence,
We defy war and the occupation of other people's lands because we believe in the
peaceful methods based on International law and legitimacy,
We defy and challenge those who humiliate and degrade others because we believe in the
dignity of every human being

*The Incarnation took place when God took on our humanity, when the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us. This happened in Palestine under Roman occupation. Then, as now, and
in spite of all the hardships, we celebrate Christ's birth, Emmanuel, God with us, giving us
hope, joy, peace and love.*

We are defiant. We are full of hope. We will continue to work for peace through justice

Every Blessing
Beryl

Please note that for up-to-date prayer requests contact Beryl Cartwright (703717)

The following article has been extracted from Church News Service, and is entitled:

Christmas Unwrapped!

A middle-aged woman posted her Christmas wish list on the refrigerator for her husband to read. She requested *'something that will make me look sexy and beautiful.'* To her surprise the husband gave her an exercise bike as a gift!

All of us have received unwanted gifts at Christmas. For Joseph the gift of a child, as recorded in Matthew chapter 1, was not something he really wanted. Although he was engaged to Mary, her pregnancy provided grounds for divorce. Not surprisingly, with the associated social disgrace, Joseph wanted to divorce Mary quietly (Matthew 1:19). However, God intervened in a dream reminding Joseph that the child to be born would fulfil Isaiah's promise: *'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel - which means, God with us.'* (1:23). Joseph's world, like our own, is scary and uncertain and it's not always clear as to what God is doing.

So what is the message of the name *Immanuel* for Joseph, as well as for ourselves as we approach Christmas 2011?

- ***God is present with us***

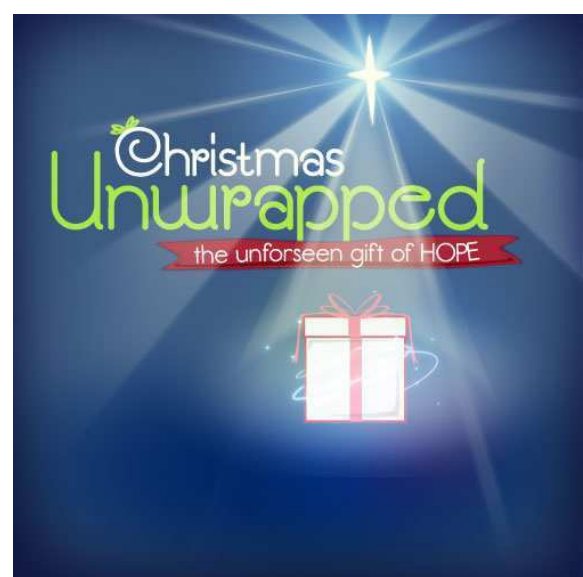
God assured Joseph through his dream that he was working in all that Joseph was experiencing. The conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit is not unexplained; however the wonder of the incarnation is that the eternal and creator God has entered time and space as a baby. This baby is both uniquely

divine but also fully human. The birth of Jesus means that we can know God personally, not just know about him. The Holy Spirit is committed to making Jesus' life and character real in us, as well as bringing meaning to our circumstances, just as he worked in the conception of Immanuel.

- ***God is on our side***

Christmas touches some raw nerves in our lives, including stress, family rows, loneliness and financial pressures. However, God does not remain aloof from our experiences. By coming in Jesus he enters our world of hopes and fears, joys and disappointments. Therefore, he can understand what we are going through, as he is alongside us. By the cross and resurrection he gave his life that we might know his life, joy, peace and forgiveness.

For Joseph, as well as us, the Christmas message is one of hope in an uncertain world. It is a time to re-consider the claims of *Immanuel* (*God with us*) as we entrust ourselves to him for the coming year.



The following article, from the book *Christian Meditation: Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation* by Paul Harris, has been submitted by Rev Jason Boyd, and is entitled:

The Role of the Mantra in Dealing with Distractions

The problem all of us have in coming to inner silence in meditation is that our minds are full of thoughts, images, sensations, emotions, insights, hopes, regrets ... a never ending array of distractions.

St. Teresa of Avila once said the human mind is like a boat where mutinous sailors have tied up the captain. The sailors all take a turn at steering the boat and of course the boat goes around in circles and eventually crashes on the rocks. That is our mind, says Teresa, full of thoughts taking us off in every direction. She also says 'Distractions and the wandering mind are part of the human condition and can no more be avoided than eating and sleeping'.

The human mind has been compared to a great tree with monkeys jumping from branch to branch chattering away. Fr. Laurence Freeman in commenting on this story says there is a path that leads through this forest of chattering monkeys and it is the practice of reciting the mantra in our daily periods of meditation.

There is another wonderful story which illustrates the capricious human mind. In India the mind is often compared to the trunk of an elephant, restless, inquisitive and always straying. In India if you watch an elephant in a parade you will see how apt this comparison is. In Indian towns and

villages, elephants are often taken in religious processions through the streets to the temple. The streets are crooked and narrow, lined on either side with fruit stalls and vegetable stalls. Along comes the elephant with his restless trunk, and in one quick motion it grabs a whole bunch of bananas. You can almost see the elephant asking, 'What else do you expect me to do? Here is my trunk and there are the bananas.' He just doesn't know what else to do with his trunk. He doesn't pause to peel the bananas either, or to observe all the other niceties that masters of etiquette say should be observed in eating a banana. He takes the whole bunch, opens his wide mouth and tosses the bananas in stalk and all. Then from the next stall he picks up a coconut and tosses it in after the bananas. There is a loud crack and the elephant moves on to the next stall. No threat can make this restless trunk settle down.

But the wise trainer, if he knows his elephant well, will simply give that trunk a short bamboo stick to hold on to before the procession starts. Then the elephant will walk along proudly with his head up high, holding the bamboo stick in front of him like a drum major with a baton. He is not interested in bananas or coconuts anymore, his trunk has something to hold on to.

The human mind is very much like this trunk of an elephant. Most of the time it has nothing to hold on to. But it can be kept from straying into the world of thoughts, imagination and fantasy by simply giving it something to hold on to - the mantra.

The mantra is a help towards concentration, enabling us to go beyond distractions, including words and thoughts, even holy thoughts. We say

the mantra slowly, steadily, with attentiveness. When we find our mind has wandered we simply come back to the mantra. We cannot force this way of prayer through sheer will power. Do not try too hard. Let go, relax. There is no need to fight or struggle with distractions. Simply return to the repetition of the mantra.

John Main also reminds us that we cannot attempt to force the elimination of distractions. In fact we must let go of goals and trying to achieve anything. The mantra will become rooted in our consciousness through the simple fidelity of returning to the mantra each morning and each evening. Meditation is centering ourselves on our inner core and allowing God to pray within us.

But a word of caution. The repetition of a mantra does not bring instant peace, harmony, the absence of distractions or silence. We must accept where we are on the pilgrimage of meditation. We should not get upset at continual distractions. Our aim is not to be free of *all* thoughts. Again this would be a goal and we do not want to have goals. John Main constantly advises us not to come to meditation with *any* expectations. So do not struggle and fret over distractions. The mantra simply expresses our *openness* to God and God's indwelling presence.

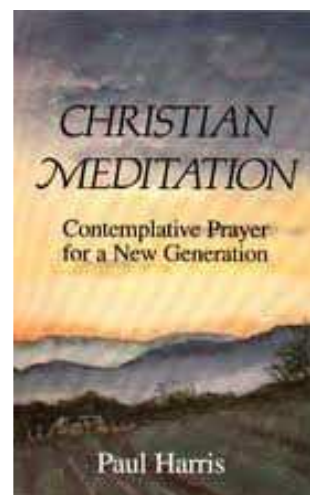
Simone Weil, the French author, who died in 1943 at the age of 33, was an apostle of the spiritual life and defined prayer as *attention*. The mantra leads us to this attention. Another French spiritual writer, Pascal, felt the greatest enemy of prayer was the 'Gethsemane sleep' - when the apostles slept instead of watching Jesus. Pascal

felt that inattention and drowsiness were the enemies of prayer. Again the mantra helps us with this problem by bringing us to attention.

Do not get mad at distractions - meditation is a non-violent way of prayer. Ignore distractions by continually returning to the mantra. If we are distracted with thoughts 50 times in a period of meditation, when we return to the mantra that is 50 times we have chosen God over the distractions.

A problem often observed by those meditating is that the thinking process continues even while saying the mantra. There is even a term for this. It is called *double tracking*. Again this is nothing to be concerned about. With perseverance the mantra will become stronger and our thoughts will diminish as the pilgrimage of meditation continues.

It is important to remember that when we are bombarded with thoughts and images at our time of meditation our will is still tuned in to the presence of God. To handle distractions we do require gentleness and patience. We have to wait in patience and hope. Gentleness and patience indicate the Spirit is working silently within us.



The following article has been submitted by Pip Cartwright, and is entitled:

History of Witney Congregational Church 1988-1990

At the beginning of the year Beryl Cartwright stood down as Sunday School Superintendent after many years of dedicated service. Rev. Bob Henry and family left in February 1988 in response to his call to the Congregational Church in Kilmarnock. He was inducted on February 20th 1988.

The Church was now in an interregnum and the Deacons called on everybody to consider their skills and gifts and offer them as part of the Church's team effort to serve the Lord's Kingdom and our Church family.

In the town, concern had been expressed about Witney's young people and it was acknowledged that the evening Church Coffee Bar fulfilled a specific need. 30-50 youngsters used our facilities most evenings. Fiona Cartwright was the South Midlands Area CFY (Congregational Federation Youth) Representative and Stephen Cartwright represented CFY on the Congregational Federation Church Life Committee. Fiona Cartwright took over the leadership of the YPF and Paul Keates was responsible for the lawn mower rota. Some familiar names were active within the Church such as Jacqui and Terry Powlesland, Judi Holloway, Joan Currie and Graham Beechey who had taken up residence in the Manse.

With the need for a new Minister, the Deacons met the

Federation Secretary for Pastoral Settlement so that the Federation could help us in our search. It was early days but the Church felt it was important that we got started to look for a replacement.

Sadly in July Jim and Monica Davidson moved to Sheffield to be near their family. Jim had been a valuable Deacon and helped with the maintenance of the building.

The Summer Church Outing visited the Abbey Grounds Abingdon by the River Thames, where we enjoyed many family games.

At the Church AGM, in addition to Mr Jack Field, Mr John Hardcastle, Mr Ernie Gascoigne and Mr Luke Taylor, three new Deacons: Dr Richard Paradine, Mr Allan Webb and Mrs Beryl Cartwright were elected. As Mr Jack Field had health problems and had been in hospital he stood down and Mrs Beryl Cartwright agreed to be Church Secretary. Our Treasurer, Mr Tony Clark, also stood down and his position was taken by Dr Richard Paradine.

Before the Revolution in December 1989 Romania was an authoritarian Communist Regime under the thumb of the notorious Nicolae Ceausescu. Under his repressive government the country suffered great austerity and political and religious intolerance. Churches were persecuted and bibles confiscated. One family in our Church, Stuart and Jenny Allen, felt called by God to support beleaguered and persecuted Romanian Christians.

With great courage they smuggled in food, medicines, bibles and concordances. Fiona Cartwright, with other young Christians, also smuggled in bibles. They were searched and followed by the Secret Police but, with

the prayers of the Church and God's grace, they were able to complete their missions. Later, after the 1989 Revolution, our Church continued to support certain isolated Romanian Churches.

Towards the end of the year, eight of our young people joined with the Witney Dramatic Society to put on a production of Joseph and his Amazing Technicoloured Dreamcoat, directed and produced by no less than a certain Mrs Judi Holloway. Some of the proceeds went to fund our Church's Rainbow Coffee Bar. In the Autumn, we hosted the C.F.Y. 16+ Bible Study Weekend led by the Rev. Dr. Janet Wootton and gave hospitality to 20 young people from all over the U.K.

Since 1985 the Church had been investigating the best way to clear our bank debt due to the purchase of the Manse. In January 1989 we received an offer of £245,000 for the 'Gateway' site on the High Street from the Wesleyan and General Assurance Co. The Church, Deacons and Trustees agreed to accept the offer. This money not only repaid our debt, but gave us money for vital repairs. Cracks had appeared in the ceiling below the Long Room, probably due to table tennis activities. A structural engineer suggested some strengthening and a false ceiling as a cosmetic remedial answer. By June the sale had gone through, our debt paid and residual monies invested along the lines of 75% to a Church Trust and 25% to the Manse Trust.

During 1989, despite not having a Minister, the Church continued and developed the various activities with enthusiasm. Stuart Allen, Tony Clark and Allan Catterall successfully led

three Fellowship groups. The problem of pulpit supply was overcome when 10 of our members regularly filled the pulpit. Mr Stuart Allen, Mr Allan Catterall, Mr Tony Clark, Mr Jack Field, Mr Ernie Gascoigne, Mr Ian Hayes, Mr John Hardcastle, Dr Richard Parradine, Mr Allan Webb and Mrs Mary Witt, with local lay preachers such as Mr Anthony Richards and Mr Bob Forster, led us spiritually.

We had "Come Together" Meetings which ranged from visits by other Church House Groups to social events such as a visit to Benetton Racing Cars Factory near Enstone, shown round by Mr Dave Wass (husband of Susan Wass). A programme of events was organised to allow Fellowship Groups to meet both spiritually and socially. Church outings included visits to White Horse Hill (YPF), Lechlade (Church picnic) and to Littlecote Manor (17 century) and a visit to the Theatre (Oxford Operatic Society) organised by Mr Pip Cartwright.

Mr John Hardcastle stood down from the Diaconate and Mr Graham Beechey was elected on. With the departure of Mr and Mrs Allan Webb, Mr Beechey took on the post of the Newsletter Editor.

Sadly, in November, one of our oldest worshippers, Mrs Elsie Keates, died. She was a long standing and loyal supporter who, with her husband Bert, regularly cleaned the Church.

New Year 1990 saw Stuart Allen and family visit Romania. What a difference! The Revolution had taken place a few weeks before. At the border the guards and custom officers shook their hands and threw their arms around them and wished them a Happy Year and then waved them through.

The collapse of the Communist Regime had left ordinary people in a terrible parlous state. The community Stuart visited was amazed at the quantities of medicines and baby food etc. The Churches of Witney had donated £1,800 which purchased nearly one ton of vital materials. In addition, Stuart took 460 Christian books to Romania. A Doctor commented that he had not seen so many drugs at any one time in the last 10 years.

In February and March a certain Pastor, M. Heaney came to preach and immediately got the Church talking. He was still in training until the summer. In April, a Special Church Meeting invited Pastor Michael Heaney to 'preach with a view' on May 6th and to ask him and his wife Rose to attend a meeting on May 8th, to allow the Church Members to talk and ask questions.

After this session Michael and Rose left and the Church made a final decision and agreed unanimously to ask him to be our next Minister. In May Pastor Heaney accepted and the Church recognised an answer to prayer and thanked God for sending a man of his choosing. The Ordination and Induction took place on September 1st 1990, the presiding Minister being Rev. John Bourne. The interregnum had ended and a new chapter was waiting to be written.



The following poem has been written and submitted by Sharon Watson, and is entitled:

Each Moment Stolen

Waking with a mind list,
The musts and shoulds,
My itinerary for the day.
How I see it ought to be.

Out of bed
Head across the room
Before my foot brushes the floor.

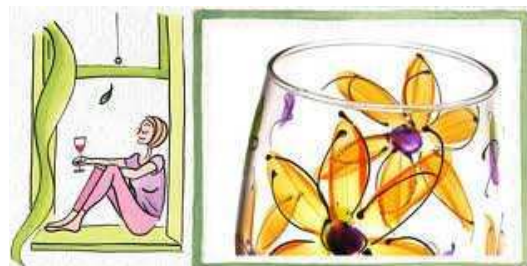
Why this headfirst, headlong, heady
rush,
This doing conquering all?
Funnelling time
Sucking it away
Racing breathless to the future.
Time measured out, task-allotted
And found wanting.

It's fearful, mindless madness.
What am I careering towards,
Fleeing from?

Why not let this moment stand,
Meet it, square on, tall?
Know it, live it, let it flow through me,
Riding the day.

Present to the present.
Present to Presence.

Sharon Watson Sept 2011



The following article has been submitted by Marjorie Lee, and is entitled:

Amnesty International

Fifty years ago Peter Beneson inspired others of like mind and together brought Amnesty into being. Ever since, Amnesty International has worked promoting justice and freedom of speech throughout the world.

During the Advent season choose an Amnesty card that gives you the name and details of people who are declared 'prisoners of conscience' and send to them a bright card with your best wishes from your own greetings cards.

Often, prisoners are never brought to a court and charged with offences, and so many are in systems with no hope for their future.

On each card there are details of two people or groups of people listed. Send to them both if possible, otherwise return the card crossing out the person you are sending to, and be aware of the postage costs. The display board with the detailed cards are by the church entrance on the right side wall.

Amid a turbulent world let us do the little we can to show God's amazing love to those people who are broken and abused.



The following prayer has been submitted by Sharon Watson

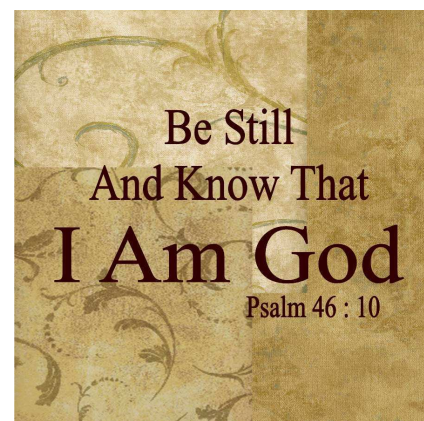
A couple of you have asked me for the 'stilling prayer' I said at the beginning of a service a while ago, which comes from Psalm 46. I thought that at this time of year it would be particularly useful too!

The line is : 'Be still and know that I am God'.

You can gradually 'pray the line down', reducing it to simply 'Be' as below:

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know
Be still
Be.

I find that it is lovely to say it to yourself very slowly tuning in with your breath so that you breathe in two words and then breathe out the next two words and so on till the end and then keep repeating as many times as you want. Focus on your breath, allowing it to become smooth and deep as you continue with the words so that you feel you are simply breathing your prayer.



The following article, written by Rev Paul Hardingham, has been extracted from Church News Service, and is entitled:

Hope for 2012

'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'
(Isaiah 9:6)

As the start of this New Year we are all aware of the uncertainties which we face, especially in terms of our finances, jobs and economic prospects. We have to face the big questions of life: what shall I do?; who can help me?; who cares for me? and what do I say?

The familiar words of the prophet Isaiah were also given by God in a time of political and economic uncertainty. The Assyrians had just conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, fulfilling Isaiah's warnings to the people, who had turned their back on God and his ways. However, Isaiah also brings a word of hope, 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light' (2). For Isaiah, it felt as if the future had already arrived! However, after 700 years the promised child was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. For us, facing a New Year, he continues to be an answer to both our needs and questions:

Wonderful Counsellor: he will give us the wisdom we need, when we have difficult decisions to make at work or home, or in dealing with our finances or future direction.

Mighty God: he will provide the help and strength to face the difficult diagnosis, the family crisis or relationships breakdown, as we trust his plan and purpose for our lives.

Everlasting Father: he cares for us as a father cares for his children, so we can come to him when we feel alone or we are really struggling, knowing that he hears and will answer our prayers.

Prince of Peace: he has secured peace by his cross and resurrection, and so we can find in him true acceptance, forgiveness and peace for our lives, relationships and future.

Therefore at the start of 2012, may 'our joy be increased' (3) as for the people in Isaiah's day. For only Jesus can truly turn our sorrow into joy and save us from the vicious spiral of sin and death. Whatever the mess and mistakes we have made over the past year, he can deal with them. With him both our present and future are secure. This is no pipe-dream, for 'the zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.'



The name of God....

A little boy died and arrived at the gate of heaven. There he met an angel. "Before you come in, can you tell me God's name?" said the angel. "Oh, that's easy," the little boy replied, "His name is Harold." "What make you think his name is Harold?" the angel asked incredulously. The little boy explained: "Because at Christmas we sing 'Hark while Harold's angels sing...' and also, when we pray, we say: 'Our Father in Heaven, Harold be Thy Name...'

The following article, extracted from a Christmas card, has been submitted by Bill Elliott, and is entitled:

A Christmas Message

We'll all spend lots of money
On Christmas gifts and such,
Again we'll be extravagant
And end up with too much

We say that we won't do it
But it's the same pattern every year,
If we look back at how it started
It should be crystal clear

It all started in a stable,
Humble as can be,
With very little money
As far as I can see

Let's remember this at Christmas
And go back to the start,
And for the love of Jesus
Keep kindness in our hearts



The following, written by an ex NSPCC service user, has been submitted by Nanna Blackman, and is entitled:

Being a parent after abuse

I look at him,
he looks at me,
a gummy grin,
he's so happy.
Yes he's naughty,
Yes he'll learn,
But into an abuser I could not turn,
I'm a parent, I'll love, I'll choose, I'll care.
So why am I different,
I don't understand,
When my own parent abused me with an iron-rod hand,
Sexually, physically, emotionally too,
He raped me, hurt me, murdered my soul,
So how am I different, for that's not my goal.
I thought he was normal, that I'd be that way too,
After years of abuse, it's all I would know.
But no, I'm a parent,
I know the truth,
To be a good parent you just need love,
And for bad behaviour?
You just need a 'no!'



The following article, written by Chuck Lathrop, has been submitted by Jason Boyd, and is entitled:

In Search of a Roundtable

Concerning the why and how and what and who of ministry,
one image keeps surfacing;
A table that is round.
It will take some sawing to be roundtabled,
some redefining, some redesigning.
some redoing and rebirthing of narrowlong churching can painful be for people and tables.
It would mean no diasing and throning,
for but one king is there, and he was a footwasher, at table no less.
And what of narrowlong ministers when they confront a roundtable people,
after years of working up the table to finally sit at its head, only to discover that the table has been turned round?
They must be loved into roundness,
for God has called a People, not 'them and us'.
'Them and us' are unable to gather round for at a roundtable, there are no sides, and all are invited to wholeness and to food.

At one time our narrowing churches
Were built to resemble the cross
But it does no good for buildings to do so, If lives do not.
Roundtabling means no preferred seating,
No first and last, no better and no corners for the 'least of these'.
Roundtabling means being with, a part of, together, and one.
It means room for the Spirit and gifts
And disturbing profound peace for all.

We can no longer prepare for the past.
We will and must and are called to be Church,
And if God calls for other than roundtable, we are bound to follow.
Leaving the sawdust and chips, designs and redesigns behind
in search of and in the presence of the Kingdom that is God's and not ours.
Amen

All in the month of December

250 years ago 1761: Marie Tussaud, French artist known for her wax sculptures, was born. She founded Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London.

150 years ago 1861: Prince Albert, consort of Queen Victoria, died.

100 years ago 1911: The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and his team became the first people to reach the South Pole, beating Robert Falcon Scott's rival British team by over a month. Scott and his team perished on the way home.

90 years ago 1921: The Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in London. It ended the Irish War of Independence and established the Irish Free State.

75 years ago 1936: King Edward VIII abdicated to marry Wallis Simpson, a divorcee. His younger brother, the Duke of York, became King George VI

70 years ago 1941: Japan launched a surprise bomb attack on Pearl Harbour, Hawaii and other US bases in the Pacific; thus bringing the US into the War.

60 years ago 1951: Libya declared its independence from the UK.

50 years ago 1961: Birth control pills became available on the NHS in the UK.

40 years ago 1971: Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) exploded a bomb in McGurk's Bar, Belfast, killing 15 people. This was the first major atrocity of the Troubles of Northern Ireland.

30 years ago 1981: Israel annexed the Golan Heights, formerly part of Syria, which it had occupied since 1967.

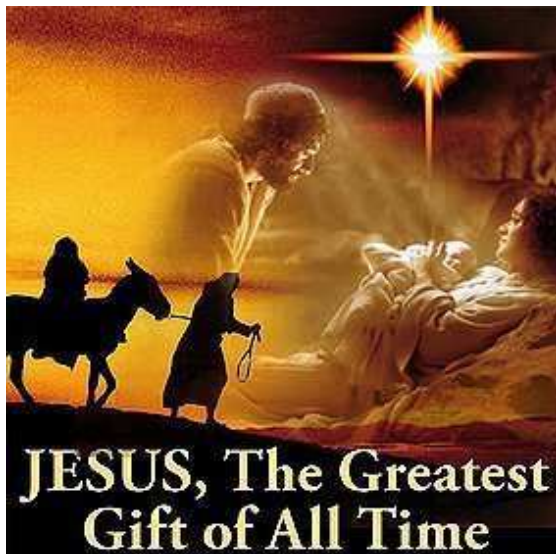
25 years ago 1986: British government announced that the use of canaries in coal mines was to be phased out in favour of hand-held electronic gas detectors.

20 years ago 1991: Maastricht Treaty, which established the European Union, was agreed by the leaders of 12 European nations.

20 years ago 1991: Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union.

10 years ago 2001: Taliban regime in Afghanistan ended as they surrendered their final bastion in Kandahar.

10 years ago 2001: British man Richard Reid attempted to blow up a transatlantic flight from Paris to Miami using explosives hidden in his shoes.



The following article has been extracted from Church News Service, and is entitled:

Thank Dickens for Christmas as you know it!

Ever wonder where many of our Christmas traditions come from? A surprising amount can be traced back to the well-loved story of 'A Christmas Carol', by Charles Dickens.

When you read 'A Christmas Carol', you discover almost a template of the 'ideal Christmas' which we still hold dear today. Dickens seems to have selected the best of the Christmas celebrations of his day (he ignored some of the odd excesses) and packaged them in such a way as to give us traditions that we could accommodate and treasure - more than a century later.

So, for instance, in *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas is a family day, with a family-centred feast. In a home decorated with holly and candles the characters enjoy a roast turkey, followed by Christmas pudding. They give their loved ones presents. Scrooge even gives donations to charity (!). And all the while outside, there is snow and frost, while church bells ring, and carol singers sing, and hope for mulled wine. In 'A Christmas Carol' there is even a Father Christmas - in the shape of Christmas Present. Only the Christmas tree itself came later, when Prince Albert imported 'a pretty German toy' that won the heart of the English court, and hence the rest of Victorian society.

The following poem was taken off the Internet

When an old man died in the geriatric ward of a nursing home in North Platte, Nebraska, it was believed that he had nothing left of any value.

Later, when the nurses were going through his meager possessions, they found this poem. Its quality and content so impressed the staff that copies were made and distributed to every nurse in the hospital.

And this little old man, with nothing left to give to the world, is now the author of this 'anonymous' poem

Crabby Old Man

What do you see nurses? What do you see?

What are you thinking when you're looking at me?

A crabby old man not very wise,
Uncertain of habit with faraway eyes?

Who dribbles his food and makes no reply.

When you say in a loud voice 'I do wish you'd try!'

Who seems not to notice the things that you do.

And forever is losing a sock or shoe?

Who, resisting or not lets you do as you will,

With bathing and feeding the long day to fill?

Is that what you're thinking? Is that what you see?

Then open your eyes, nurse you're not looking at me.

I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,

As I do at your bidding, as I eat at your will.

I'm a small child of 10 with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters who love one another.

A young boy of 16 with wings on his feet.

Dreaming that soon now a lover he'll meet.

A groom soon at 20 my heart gives a leap.

Remembering, the vows that I promised to keep.

At 25, now I have young of my own.
Who need me to guide and a secure happy home.

A man of 30 my young now grown fast,
Bound to each other with ties that should last.

At 40, my young sons have grown and are gone,

But my woman's beside me to see I don't mourn.

At 50, once more, babies play 'round my knee,

Again, we know children, my loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me my wife is now dead.

I look at the future and shudder with dread.

For my young are all rearing young of their own.

And I think of the years and the love that I've known.

I'm now an old man and nature is cruel.

'Tis jest to make old age look like a fool.
The body, it crumbles, grace and vigor, depart.

There is now a stone where I once had a heart.

But inside this old carcass a young guy
still dwells,
And now and again my battered heart
swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the
pain.
And I'm loving and living life over again.

I think of the years, all too few, gone
too fast.
And accept the stark fact that nothing
can last.
So open your eyes, people, open and see.
Not a crabby old man, look closer see
ME!!

Remember this poem when you next
meet an older person who you might
brush aside without looking at the young
soul within.

We will all, one day, be there, too!



The following article, author unknown, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

A Christmas Creed

I believe in Jesus Christ and in the beauty of the gospel begun in Bethlehem.

I believe in the One whose spirit glorified a little town; and whose spirit still brings music to persons all over the world, in towns both large and small.

I believe in the One for whom the crowded inn could find no room; and I confess that my heart still sometimes wants to exclude Christ from my life today.

I believe in the One whom the rulers of the earth ignored, and the proud could never understand; whose life was among common people, whose welcome came from persons of hungry hearts.

I believe in the One who proclaimed the love of God to be invincible.

I believe in the One whose cradle was a mother's arms, whose modest home in Nazareth had love for its only wealth, who looked at persons and made them see what God's love saw in them, who by love brought sinners back to purity, and lifted human weakness up to meet the strength of God.

I confess my ever-lasting need of God; the need of forgiveness for our selfishness and greed, the need of new life for empty souls, the need of love for hearts grown cold.

I believe in God who gives us the best of himself.

I believe in Jesus, the son of the living God, born in Bethlehem this night, for me and for the world.