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THE MAGAZINE OF THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE
MARCH / APRIL 2021

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Welcome

From the heart

You may have seen our Stories of Hope series at the end of the year. We wanted to close 2020 on a positive note, so we shared some of the wonderful work that God is doing through local churches and Christian organisations in these times. One such story, from Dundee, Scotland, features in this edition (p. 4–5), and it's encouraging to see the number of people who benefit when we reach out into our communities, just as Jesus did.

Donna Jennings, a member of our Northern Ireland team, looks at the posture of service that Jesus presented in His earthly ministry (p. 2–3). She reminds us that “the Son of Man identified not as those who give but in those who were fed, clothed and served”. She goes on to say that “we too remember Jesus’ servant kingship that shaped not just His death but His whole life – and that of His followers”.



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As we continue to serve as the church of God in Christ, let's remember the example set by Jesus. Let us also remember that we are empowered and enabled by God, who we can call on at any time. “Your face, I seek; your grace, all I ever need. Help me live out the life of Christ; help me share the love of God to my world,” prays Titilola Ossai, our One People Commission coordinator (p. 24–25).

Naomi Osinnowo
 Editor



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THE POSTURE & POWER OF SERVICE

This is why I believe we should stop giving to the poor – **Donna Jennings**, church and mission coordinator, Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland.

I stopped giving to the poor some time ago, and I think the church should stop too. By giving to the poor, I mean acts of service that merely shift material resources in one direction – from those who have to those who have not.

Service of this kind addresses the immediate material symptoms but ignores the deprivation of relationship, opportunity and equality that surround those we seek to serve. This form of giving reinforces the social barriers of ‘them and us’, forming Christian service as little more than good people doing kind things to poor people.

I stopped giving to the poor when I grasped the biblical posture for service requires a radical reimagining of social relationships, through the creation of Christ’s new community – the church.

Lockdowns have intensified existing divisions in our communities. As we, the church, continue to respond, let us seize the opportunity to explore the fullness of Christian service. So, how should the church serve the real, raw needs in our communities?

Parable #1: Them and us

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) has always mystified me. Jesus’ hearers are confronted with two men inhabiting both sides of a human divide: one who has, one who has not. The rich man enjoys abundance of wealth, food, clothing and company; Lazarus, poor, sick and

alone, takes shelter on his doorstep and is given the daily leftovers from his overflowing feast.

Common interpretations accuse the rich man of failing to serve this man in his poverty, but this is not the case. How many of us so regularly feed and house destitute people, right on our front doorsteps? So, what is the cause of this rich man’s condemnation, and what do we learn about service in Jesus’ social story?

The rich man is anonymous, allowing Jesus’ audience to identify with him. However, Jesus gives the poor man a name, and with it an identity, a dignity, a personhood. The rich man gave to the ‘nameless poor’ – to poverty, to homelessness – but in a detached posture, that denied and overlooked their shared humanity.

Lazarus is the name Jesus gives this man, echoing his brotherly bond with the man whose Bethany home became Jesus’ place of belonging (Luke 10:38–42, John 11). While in death, the rich man shows concern for five brothers, in life he failed to embrace Lazarus as brother and offer him a place of belonging. The rich man gave from the overflow of abundance but failed to give from the depths of his personhood – his table and time, his family and heart, his social connections and opportunities.

Reducing Lazarus to an objective recipient of charity, the rich man offered almsgiving without love, which in the biblical vision of service counts

as empty (1 Corinthians 13:3). Jesus teaches us that service is quintessentially love for another, most fully expressed in presence and mutual friendship. May we not in our foodbanks and drop-in centres perform transactional acts of service, empty of love. May we see beyond the poverty and debt, disability and addiction, to perceive, like Lazarus, the image-bearing humanity that flourishes most fully when rooted in community and purpose.

Parable #2: Who, us?

Jesus presents a different posture of service in Matthew 25:31–46. In this parable, the final judgement is based on two different responses to “the least of these” – the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned. The righteous inherit the kingdom, while the other group is destined for eternal condemnation.

The surprising element of this parable is how oblivious the ‘righteous’ are to their acts of service. There is no scheduled project, no weekly programme, no sentiment of pride. The service that Jesus honours is a practical loving response to human need; it is an unforced, genuine welcome that regularly embraces those in need.

This kind of service extends well beyond basic human needs (food, water, clothes). It offers welcome, dignity and belonging through the richest yet costliest resource we own – our whole human selves. The righteous shared “not only the gospel, but also their whole lives” (1 Thessalonians 2:8). In this posture, service reforms ‘them and us’ into a new community through shared humanity, genuine love and mutual friendship.

Even more surprising is that the Son of Man identified not as those who give but in those who were fed, clothed and served. Jesus’ hearers would recognise Him as the suffering servant, “despised and rejected, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isaiah 53). We too remember Jesus’ servant kingship that shaped not just His death but His whole life – and that of His followers.

The righteous are declared so, not because they performed acts of service, but because of the nature of their service. Their unassuming way of life was evidence that they had “the mind of Christ...who emptied Himself...even unto death” (Philippians 2:5–8).

Loving friendship

Translated into our 2021 communities, Jesus not only serves those living in unemployment, debt, hunger, mental ill-health, and trauma; He fully identifies as one of these people, retaining His kingship. Do we expect to encounter Jesus and His kingdom among “the least of these”?

Offering our whole selves in loving friendship to those on the margins becomes the place of our deepest kingdom formation. Jesus knew

this: He repeatedly moved His disciples into the highways and byways, instructing them to bring an individual to Him. Moving towards community needs, being present with individuals requires us, like the disciples, to see faces, use names, place hands and form words to those who we had served from a distance. Walking towards Jesus together in this posture enables us to receive the mutual transformation and depth of discipleship that, perhaps, we do not expect.

In this posture, as church, our buildings, schedules and services facilitate a community of sanctuary and restoration for the whole person. We offer not only tinned food and coffee but share our educational and employment opportunity, our voices and influence. In this posture, as church, my life and yours become places of welcome and friendship. As I have shared myself – my home, table, family and heart with those in deepest need – I have experienced deepest transformation out of my materialism, consumerism and selfishness. In this posture, we see the king more clearly and enter His kingdom more fully.

The cross often makes no sense in the world, but when it is lived out in a countercultural cross-centric community, it seems to answer the heart cry of the watching world. Our culture, hungry for an alternative community shaped by justice and reconciliation, no longer asks, “Is the Christian faith true? Prove it!”, but probes, “Is the Christian faith authentic, does it work, is it beautiful? Show me!” When the church adopts this form of service, a new community is birthed that does not only minister to but witnesses with those we come to serve.

Christian service among our COVID-impacted communities requires us to read scripture not to but with others in raw human need, exploring afresh together: what is the good news that Jesus proclaimed (Luke 4:18–19) for today’s afflicted people? What does ‘kingdom come’ look like for the single mother in food poverty, the child in the care system, the young people plagued by mental ill-health? And how must we, the church, proclaim this good news in our communities this year?

Service in kingdom come prays and acts for earthly social divisions to be remade – just as it is in heaven. Christianity impacted history, not primarily as a doctrine to believe, but as a new social order to live under. To the real human needs in their first century cities, the early church offered themselves in word and deed as people of the cross – and attracted exponential converts into their community. They made the good news known, by making the good news real in raw human need.

Christian service in the biblical vision extends project to personhood and infuses programme with presence. I stopped giving to the poor some time ago, and I think the church should stop too.

We are to be the hands of God, showing love and compassion in practical ways, says **Jacky Close**, director of Faith in Community Dundee.

OUR MESSAGE OF LOVE & HOPE

It's grim! There's no other way to describe the climate in Dundee right now as so many people of all ages face the harsh reality that they haven't got enough money to get by. Some don't even have enough to feed themselves and their family.

The pandemic has pummelled tourism, the lifeblood of this coastal city's economy. It's wiped out jobs and businesses. Dundee already has the highest child poverty rates and it's pushed those who have long struggled into an even greater sense of financial insecurity. People who were getting by have seen their stability and security just vanish.

Coronavirus has been disastrous for my city. Even with government help, such as its Job Retention Scheme, people haven't been able to keep their head above water. How can they survive on 80 per cent of their salary when it was a stretch to get by on 100?

Worse of all, though, is the hopelessness. We see people who feel utterly hopeless. Yes, the rollout of the UK's vaccination programme signals progress, and in December 2021 we could be returning to some level of normality. But the economic fallout of this crisis is real, and it will linger; there'll be a dearth of jobs and poverty levels will rise.

There is a flipside to all this, however, and that is the incredible hope that I hold after Faith in Community Dundee (facebook.com/FaithinCommunityDundee), where I serve as director, joined with 25 projects to set up Dundee's

Food Insecurity Network. It's been heartening to see 15 local churches and several grassroots community projects adapt their missional work and partner with each other in order to meet people's most basic need.

Self-employed Alice, a single parent bringing up two young children, was left with no income during lockdown because she couldn't work. "Without the help of the Larder I have no idea how I would have been able to feed my family," she said. "I am extremely grateful for the kindness shown over such a stressful period in my life. I will never forget everyone's kindness."

At its busiest this network fed more than 4,700 people per week, backed financially by the generosity of Northwood Charitable Trust and then the Scottish Government which has provided £10,000 worth of food every week since May 2020, not to mention the thousands of pounds that have been given by various funds. Is it any wonder the council wants to see this kind of work continue?

As a Christian I've particularly been struck by my brothers and sisters in Christ putting aside their different theological beliefs and together asking, what would Jesus do? and then collaborating in a Christ-like response. I've never seen that before, and for me this prioritisation of the needs of the most vulnerable has been transformational. I've been blown away.

I believe that we show God's message of love and hope through our actions, that we are the hands of God. We see real hope and transformation when we open our doors and reach out into our community. So, as we move forward, my encouragement is that we remember the many ways Jesus reached out and connected with people, and that we have the courage to do this too.

At its busiest this network fed more than 4,700 people per week.

Stories of Hope

This is Jacky's story of hope. There are many more that the Evangelical Alliance's Scotland team has gathered from across nation, and we urge you to find out about these at eauk.it/stories-of-hope-scotland





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GOD'S LOVE IN ACTION

The Matthew Project is God's project, and through it He is helping the hungry and the thirsty, says **Mike Clark**, coordinator of the Matthew Project at Bedlington Christian Fellowship, Northumberland.

We prayed for two years, seeking the Lord's guidance, direction and wisdom. Towards the end of this period, we at Bedlington Christian Fellowship, Northumberland, felt it was time to go ahead. So, in faith, we 'stepped out of the boat' and launched the Matthew Project in December 2011, with 15 committed volunteers, food and finance. This was the first step in our practical outreach into our local communities, to meet the needs of those facing food poverty, to help the families the local social services confirmed were struggling.

Chapter 25 in the Gospel of Matthew has been foundational for us, particularly verses 35-36: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." That's why the project is named after Matthew. Sometimes we're asked, who's Matthew? which gives us the wonderful opportunity to share these verses and an introduction to the gospel message.

Since the early days, we agreed to only accept referrals for food parcels from recognised agencies. The recipient would normally receive up to three emergency food parcels, which contain balanced meals to cover them for three days, toiletries and scripture. Over the years we've sadly seen demand for the project greatly increase, with more families and individuals needing help for a variety of reasons.

We praise God that with the increased demand came increased donations of food and finance. In the last couple of years so many local churches, schools, academies, individuals, and local businesses have backed the project, providing food, financial support and even toys at Christmas. Local supermarkets have set up food collection points for us.

We praise God that with the increased demand came increased donations of food and finance.

The Matthew Project has gone from strength to strength. Relationships with other local churches have deepened, and they are supporting this outreach as we work together for the common good. Additionally, through the project another foodbank has been established to serve a particular community; what's more, Bedlington Christian Fellowship's membership has grown.

From its very beginning the Matthew Project was God's project, with each of our volunteers serving Him in it. Finance has never been a problem. Believing prayer is both powerful and effective, we've seen donations come in when required. We've seen how faithful God is; Jehovah-jireh – the Lord will provide – and He has and continues to do so in ways that often amaze us.

2020 was a difficult year for us all. When lockdown began at the end of March, we decided to continue this good work and so we safely provided food parcels in very uncertain times for many. Around a year later, the project, with God's protection, is still operating from our church building. As a fellowship, we are so thankful to God for His guidance, wisdom, provision and protection so far.

But we want to do more to serve those around us, to share God's love. We firmly believe in the power of prayer and are currently seeking God's guidance for a greater involvement of witness and support in our community. We would value your prayer support in this.

May we continue to sow seeds for God's kingdom, seeds for a harvest in God's time, not ours.

JOB CREATION: OUR CHRISTIAN WITNESS

What can we do to serve those who have lost their livelihoods amid the pandemic? asks **Jo Evans**, advocacy researcher at the Evangelical Alliance.

It's clear that the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic is now being matched by an economic crisis, and people's livelihoods are regrettably being affected. The Government's financial support packages have been widely welcomed, but there are many industries facing a bleak future, and consequently many people are too.

When it's not us, it's easy to say the right thing, offer prayer, shake our head at the situation and yet stay personally uninvolved. But we cannot stay uninvolved – this is not God's nature, and it's not how He'd want His people to act.

It is right that we mourn with those who have lost jobs, those who seem to be on a never-ending hunt for employment. It is right that we pray with and for them too. Much like Nehemiah, who when told God's people were in "trouble and disgrace", initially responded with weeping and prayer.

Nehemiah's prayer led to action, however. Aware of his position of privilege, he planned and prepared. When the opportunity arose,

Nehemiah had everything in place to help God's people. He prayed, he was prepared, and God made it possible.

In his book *Undivided*, Graham Hooper says we can move from identifying a need to hearing it as a call when we realise that we are perhaps in "the unique position to do something about it". Is it possible that we are in the unique position to serve God and people who need help at this time?

The pandemic has destroyed livelihoods and businesses and has caused the rate of those seeking universal credit sky-rocket, with many claiming for the first time. Families have fractured under the strain, children have gone hungry, and all forecasts agree that this will not be resolved quickly. This all serves as a reminder of the state of the broken world, groaning as it longs to be restored (Romans 8:21-22).

In our Changing Church: autumn survey, 97 per cent of church leaders said they are deeply concerned about the long-term economic consequences of coronavirus. At the Evangelical



We are calling for this concern to translate into action through job creation.

Alliance we are calling for this concern to translate into action through job creation. Christians have an opportunity to shape post-pandemic culture, form new relationships with wider society, and be a witness to the restoring king we serve.

We are working to see this materialise in two specific areas: first, resourcing Christians in business with tools that will help them create jobs; second, equipping and inspiring church congregations to see job creation as a potential outworking of their faith, the result of which might be the launch of job clubs and other initiatives.

By responding to this need, we can point to Jesus, who meets our greatest need in restoring people to Himself.

What's taking shape

We have been stimulating conversation and action within the UK's evangelical community. Entrepreneurs, churches and business networks, as well as Christian compassion ministries, have been drawn together to share insights into what is happening and explore what more can be done.

In the weeks ahead, we will be sharing case studies of entrepreneurs who have created jobs to give insight into this work, as well as stories of flourishing church-led job clubs and ideas on how to do this well within your own church.

'Kingdom entrepreneur' Jerry Marshall, who set up Transformational Enterprise Network, kicks us off by sharing how churches and individual Christians can create new jobs in this season. Read more at eauk.org/jerrymarshall



With the right help, churches can adopt a much-needed holistic approach to unemployment, V61's **Kristen Keagy** tells Helen Locke, the Evangelical Alliance's communications assistant.

THE CHANGING FACE OF JOB CLUBS



It's likely that everyone reading this article will know at least one person whose job has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. It could be a colleague who was made redundant, a friend of a friend whose hours were cut, or a relative who's been on and off the furlough scheme. The crisis has changed the face of employment for many.

Compassion manager Kristen Keagy, who runs a job club at Vineyard 61 Church (V61) in Balham, London, says there's also a growing number of job-seekers who face additional problems that have been created or exacerbated by the pandemic. Debt, struggles with claiming universal credit, poor mental health, and low confidence are among them, which makes trying to help people to find work an even greater challenge for churches.

I spoke with Kristen about the changing role of V61's job club to find out how her team is adapting to the increasingly complex needs of their

community, and how churches might work towards a holistic approach to help address the other issues.

Tell me a little bit about yourself. What does being a compassion manager involve?

My husband and I moved to London from the US four years ago and we love it here. The compassion manager role was created because V61 runs many outreach projects. I manage the church's compassion-driven, outward-focused projects, such as the job club. Working out how to be a compassion manager during a pandemic has been interesting!

V61's job club has been running for five years. What was its function before the pandemic?

We've always tried to go beyond helping people find work. We served lunch, created a warm community feel, and set up a prayer corner. Our volunteers did one-to-one coaching sessions: helping with CVs, covering letters, interview prep

and self-confidence, and directing people to job centres as needed. With everyone in one building, we could work out who had the know-how to help each client.

What has changed since the pandemic hit?

We were only closed for two weeks before realising we had to keep going. The virtual version works, and the vision is the same, but it was hard for some because there's less of the community feel that they just love. We also know we're missing people who can't access us online because they don't have the tech ability or means.

There's been talk that COVID-19 could cause a 'tsunami of unemployment' in the UK this year. Many across the UK church will want to help to avert this.

Job clubs are likely to feel the strain in this season, as each vacancy could attract a lot of applicants. It seems like there's not enough work. It's like shovelling snow in a blizzard. But if we can just help one person, that's what we need to do.

Can you tell me more about other issues you're seeing?

It's harder to help some people who come to us than others. Some can't handle work at all right now, because of underlying problems. Some have been out of work for so long that they need help with self-confidence. It's not about having a single-minded focus of finding a job, particularly in this climate, as coronavirus has created or exacerbated some problems. We need to have that bigger picture.

I'm excited that we're now talking more about mental health, because we work with people who are trying to deal with this as well as unemployment, and it's hard. We're also seeing that for so many, it's their first time claiming universal credit (UC). For them, this is a huge issue and they find the benefits process confusing.

Clearly more holistic support is required. How is your team responding and what else is needed?

We dig deep into the underlying problems, putting a client on an education or trade course, for example. We brought in life coaches who can find out people's strengths, rather than just sending them straight onto a jobs board. We had to recruit volunteers who understand the debt system, UC, and the benefit system. Some were already knowledgeable, having claimed themselves or worked in job centres. Each coach doesn't have to know everything.

We took pressure off the coaches by giving them the authority to say, "Even though this client needs work, they can't handle it right now". They can also signpost them to other help or pass them on to someone who knows a lot about UC or to our local mental health services. It's important we know who we're partnered with and that it's actually okay if someone else is better able to guide one of our clients.

What advice would you give to churches that are looking to set up a job club in these times?

Job clubs are needed. They give identity and hope. It's incredible walking with people all the way along the journey towards work. If it's on your heart, God will guide you. Think about what you'll need: volunteers, funds, laptops, and space if you're able to do it in person.

There's a double tsunami of unemployment and debt. So, do you focus on a debt centre (there's significant demand for such support – the ones near us are at maximum capacity) or do you focus on jobs? Remember, God's not calling you to do it all.

You'll be busy, so it's key to get the whole church involved. Bring the congregation with you, share what you're doing so people can offer their help. From the beginning, our Sunday service and our job club were powerfully intertwined. We had one client who had never heard of Jesus, and we helped her and offered prayer. Later, she asked to come to a Sunday service. We never turn away anyone. We don't shove Jesus into people's face, but neither do we hide away in a dark corner. Our volunteers offer prayer. We're clear in saying "we love you and want to help you", as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Are there any specific training, resources or organisations that churches could utilise?

You don't have to start from scratch, know it all or do it all alone. Christians Against Poverty (CAP) has been incredible to work with. You could launch a CAP job club, or reach out to one that's already started. CAP helps with life skill courses and provides resources such as Kick Start (see the Nov/Dec 2020 edition of *idea* magazine at eauk.org/news-and-views/idea). Or you could partner with Crosslight, which has debt centres and a four-day training course. Some of our coaches are getting trained in helping with debt at a debt centre at a nearby church. If someone could design a course on UC, that would be great too.

We have volunteers from the community. Search for partners. Know who your partners are, such as local job centres, mental health services, education services, other churches. We couldn't do it without them. A representative from the Department of Health's Talk Wandsworth came to promote parenting classes, and we pointed some of our clients to them, and then our representative visited them in turn.

How can we pray for you at this time?

I would love prayer for more coaches to support this work and for people to find jobs, to find what they want to do with their lives. Pray for other churches, for a Holy Spirit moment, and for that fire to say, "Yes, I want to do this".

SMALL GIFT, ← MASSIVE IMPACT

A lady emailed us in December to recommend her friend for a Christmas hamper. "I'm writing to let you know about a friend of mine who has recently been released from prison," she said. "She's struggling with bereavement, having lost both parents, and is not in receipt of benefits. Could you give her one of those hampers? I know the impact it had on me when I came out of prison. I've since become a Christian and appreciate the love of God."

Another story from our local area, north-west London, has left a lasting impression. Some years back, volunteers and I delivered a hamper to a lady who lived on one of the local estates. This was pre-coronavirus so, as usual, we spent some time on her doorstep having a chat. The following year, she sent us a £100 cheque with the message: "Thank you so much for being a lifesaver. I was in a really difficult place. Here's a cheque to contribute to four hampers this year."

There are hundreds of good news stories like these, stories of God touching lives through Christmas Lunch on Jesus (CLOJ). This is exactly what we wanted to happen: the love of God replicated and shed abroad.

30,000+ hampers
5,400+ volunteers

Christmas Lunch on Jesus is, as is evident in the name, on Jesus - not me, nor our senior pastor. When we're struggling with the budget, trying to work out how we're going to give out hampers, we look to the treasury of heaven. Every year we know that God will provide. So, representing Him, remembering that He has us here for a purpose, we lean on Him and serve in His name. The result? More than 30,000 hampers hand-delivered with love by more than 5,400 volunteers - and that's just in Barnet.

Christmas Lunch on Jesus has me convinced that God is in absolute control and does wonders with whatever we have in our hands, says **Ayo Adedoyin**, head of communications and community action at Jesus House.

A notorious council estate in 2007

We were mobilised into action in 2007, after we discovered that the year before a guy who lived in Colindale, on a council estate fraught with violence and anti-social behaviour, spent Christmas alone and without food. Our senior pastor, Agu Irukwu, a family-orientated man who has ensured values around togetherness and community run through our church, said: "That will not happen again - not in our borough, not on our watch." We immediately started to make preparations, ready for the next Christmas. CLOJ was born, and our first stop was that notorious council estate in Colindale.

20 London boroughs
15 UK cities & **3** other countries

Every year since 2007 we've served our entire borough, Barnet. By partnering with other churches, local authorities, agencies and businesses, we've offered families that cannot afford a Christmas meal everything from the Brussels sprouts to the turkey.

I have strategic oversight of CLOJ and my primary focus is to mobilise Christians to serve people around the UK. Partnership is key, because by working with others we can do much more. CLOJ is now in 20 London boroughs, 15 UK cities and three other countries as a franchise - and it's not only the idea that's been replicated, the methodology and values around unity have too.

CLOJ has me convinced that God is in absolute control and does wonders with whatever we have in our hands. At the end of last year, following job losses and church building closures, God provided through the congregations that faithfully kept donating and through a partnership with Holy Trinity Brompton's Love Christmas initiative. Therefore, as we look to Easter, I encourage us to place whatever we have at the feet of Jesus and let Him do what He intended to do.

10 minutes with...

GINA SOMERTON

Operations director, Redeemer Croydon



Tell us about Redeemer Croydon.

We're a six-year-old church plant based in Croydon, a diverse town in south London. Thirty nationalities and all ages and backgrounds make up our church family, which now meets in another local school following an unexpected relocation during lockdown. We started with 40 people and over the years the Lord has grown us. Pre-lockdown we were edging up to 200 attendees a week; we don't know exact numbers now as people attend in person and online.

What has been the biggest challenge RC has faced in the last year?

Navigating the multiple effects the coronavirus has had on what matters to us most, people and our mission. The pandemic has caused the entire football pitch to move, not just the goal posts, and for a church with limited resources, this has been tough.

How has the church responded to this challenge?

As a smaller and newer church we can be agile and flexible. We moved into rapid-response mode around this time last year, starting by assessing who and what we had. We decided not to make massive changes to church life or launch huge ministries that'd cause added anxiety or burnout within our staff team. Instead, we adapted the existing infrastructure, cultivated an all-hands-on-deck culture, changed roles where necessary, trained people online as needed, and called peers in the UK and around the world to find out how they could help.

How have church members stepped up?

We've seen church members, our most significant resource, care for each other emotionally and practically. We were already doing this through our Redeemer Care Network, but we enhanced this project in order to provide urgent help for the vulnerable and isolated – and our

members stepped up. Through a database and careful tracking, we matched those with needs with volunteers. Even children got involved, drawing pictures and baking. As much as possible, everyone has been covered.

What has this response taught you about Christian service?

It's been a chance for us to be even more prayerful and trust God. We now know we can be creative, working with what we have, in order to love and minister from

a distance. We've heard wonderful stories of acts of service within our church family that haven't been initiated by staff. On a whole, we've learnt that we can adapt in difficult situations and be stronger and closer as a result.

What has been the fruit of the church's collective effort?

There's been a permanent change in our culture, which is evident, for example, in the way our home groups show Jesus' love. New people have joined our church through online services and they're benefiting from those more personal groups – so is our external missional work. We haven't been perfect, things have gone very wrong, and there are things we could have done, but much positive has come out of a bad situation.



What would you say to church plants keen to serve in this time?

Take stock of who and what you have, prioritising how you can best serve God now; the nice-to-haves can wait. Look beyond staff and the keenest few. People aren't always aware how they can help or if their help is wanted, so the more you communicate and model, the more needs will trickle down and reach further. Lastly, don't discount ideas from other churches, but also don't let them overwhelm you. A church can only do so much when it's young and small, but initiatives can go far when adapted to your setting.

A VOICE OF HOPE, JUSTICE AND LEADERSHIP

If our advocacy is an integral part of us joining in with God's mission to our world, what should we sound like? asks **Danny Webster**, head of advocacy, Evangelical Alliance.

Storming the US Capitol with a banner declaring that "Jesus saves" is not the type of political engagement that the Evangelical Alliance has in mind for its advocacy work. This might appear to be the understatement of the century, but in the wake of events in the US in recent months, and the conflation of religious devotion with political extremism, it is a line that needs to be drawn. We do not, to paraphrase social commentator and author Os Guinness, do the Lord's work in the world's ways.

The last five years have seen immense and tense political disagreement among evangelical Christians on both sides of the Atlantic over the presidency of Donald Trump; but even some of his closest allies found themselves, rightly, having to reject the violence that his words inspired. But somewhat mealy-mouthed repudiation of violence from all sides is surely too low a bar for what we should expect from a Christian voice into politics.

The advocacy work of the Evangelical Alliance is to give a voice for evangelical Christians into the corridors of power and the places of influence in the UK. It's to encourage evangelical Christians to raise their own voice to speak out for God and for good. What then should this voice look and sound like?



A VOICE OF HOPE

Evangelical Christians should offer a voice of hope to society. The past 12 months of pandemic, lockdown and crisis have demonstrated the need for a vision of the future and people who embody hope and speak it out. We believe that Jesus is the hope of the world. We believe that He who has transformed our lives can and will transform others, and through us transform society.

Our voice of hope is not naïve optimism, nor baseless predictions, but the sure and certain hope of a king who is seeking to redeem all things, of a king whose kingdom is coming here on earth. Our voice of advocacy is part of the mission of the church. It's not

a separate endeavour, nor a part that is limited to a few people who are particularly interested or passionate; it is a vital component of outworking in our daily lives what we believe.

For the Evangelical Alliance we continually speak up in the parliaments and the governments of the UK, representing our members and giving voice to our faith in these places. But the work is not ours alone. The work of advocacy is at its most effective when it is broad and deep, when the voices of people rooted and working in communities across the UK speak up for what they believe, what they stand for, and what they see on their doorsteps on a daily basis.

We speak of justice because we follow a God of justice. We believe that God will make all things new, and He calls us to join Him in that work. Justice is a term that has been and is fought over in political and social debates, but at its root it is thoroughly biblical and it's all about putting right what is wrong. It is about restoring broken relationships, between us and God, and between us and each other.

We speak of justice when we call for freedom of religion and belief at home

and abroad, when we call attention to the Christian foundations of human rights and democracy that are ignored by those who want the fruit without the roots. When we speak alongside our partners in the Religious Liberty Commission and call for action for Christians persecuted for their faith, we are speaking for justice. When we support member organisations working in places of greatest deprivation in the UK, working with Christians who are serving with their heart, soul and strength, our advocacy is a voice for justice.

A VOICE OF JUSTICE

A VOICE OF LEADERSHIP

We provide leadership in a society that wants it and needs it. Our political engagement is not from the sidelines but borne out

of a conviction that change requires our involvement. We get our hands dirty. This is not the protest of the mob, nor the complaints of the sidelined, but the action of people who are motivated by their faith in Christ to carry all of their lives into places where they can make a difference.

We carry a voice of leadership from the margins to the centre. We speak, together, of how Christ changes lives and how we are seeing them transformed in every community of the UK. The coronavirus

crisis has prompted calls for more and stronger spiritual leadership in our country; there has rightly been concern that as a society we are too focused on the temporary and not the eternal.

The leadership that we can bring to our society is through all of our words and actions, as we speak for God and for good in every sector of society, as we are unafraid to give voice to our faith in the places where it matters most. Our advocacy, our voice, is an integral part of us joining in with God's mission to our world.

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Christian Aid Week 10-16 May 2021

SERVING IN THE SLUMS

Salem's powerful witness of hope in the slums of Ethiopia's capital city is bringing more people to faith, but so much more can be achieved, says **Jo Clarke**, copywriter at Word in Need.

Challenges of finding ways to live and cope in our pandemic-ridden world aren't unique to any nation; it's the inclusivity of the virus that draws humanity together in a way our generation has never before known. We face our common enemy, and we fight it together.

As we strive to cope with the personal challenges the virus brings, we're called in new ways to look outwards – to give hope and blessing, lift others, feed and clothe those in need, and care for those sick or alone. Hardship, uncertainty, distress and despair in our own villages, towns and cities is mirrored across the world. Although circumstances differ, the pattern repeats, and our struggles are shared.

For children living in slums, hardship was already a way of life and the coronavirus has further impacted desperate lives. Kent-based charity World in Need (WIN) provides practical mission in 12 countries throughout Africa, Asia and the Middle East, running child support programmes and community projects.

We give hands-on help to families in the most desperate circumstances. Our Ethiopia project reaches out to orphans and children from poverty-stricken families in Addis Ababa, its capital, where around 80 per cent of the population are in slums. Families live in one room, often without clean water and a toilet.

We strive to give children access to education, nutritious food and medical care. In the last seven years the number of children we have been able to support there has risen to over 40, although many more are in urgent need.

Ethiopia's level of community transmission of COVID-19 is rising, particularly in Addis Ababa, so the push is greater than ever to help, in living circumstances where it's almost impossible to slow the spread.

Our programme reaches out further than the children, bringing benefits to the whole family. With food parcels delivered, medical care made available to the family and an empowerment programme for mothers, it means that vulnerable women can begin their own businesses and restore their dignity. One single mother with five children now runs a small laundry business, giving her the chance to provide for her family.

So, does the programme make a lasting difference to children living in slums? This is best answered by 20-year-old Salem.



For children living in slums, hardship was already a way of life and the coronavirus has further impacted desperate lives.

Salem's story



I live with my mother and two siblings. When I was seven years old my father got sick with diabetes. After two years he lost his life. My mother was responsible to provide for the family and take care of my sick father. There was no one to help. Rent, schooling, feeding, and helping us grow in our faith were all expected from her. There were times when it was hard for my mom even to feed us. These were dark days for my family.

At this critical time I was a first-grade student and remember my mom's prayers and tears to have help. The WIN programme came to the rescue. My mom got help to send me school and food items and detergents. In addition, twice a year I got a full medical check-up and treatment whenever needed.

This support changed the situation burdened on my mom. My school fees, school materials, and tutorial costs were covered. Also, we had a Bible study time that helped me grow in my faith in Jesus. This comprehensive support brought a light and joy to my family. Gradually we started to heal from our pain and deep poverty through prayer and active support.

I'm now a first-year medical laboratory student in a private college called Africa Medical College. To reach my academic goal I chose this field and need to move forward to my call, which is to help psychologically challenged and mentally ill people. It is my prayer and deep wish to study further clinical psychology to achieve this.

The pandemic brought more challenges. Lockdown means my mother stays home and loses her income, but provision at this time from the programme's support of food and necessities has stopped the return of the dark days of my childhood.

This powerful witness of hope in the slums of Addis Ababa is bringing more people to faith. Bible study groups attract increasing numbers of members, and eight young people now meet together independently as they respond to the message of the gospel.

So much more can be achieved through involvement in practical support and prayer. Growth in funding will have an immediate and direct effect on the number of children who can be helped. The programme also needs prayer for the provision of more workers and for the hearts of those it reaches to be open to the message of hope they bring.

To find out more about WIN, its programmes in Ethiopia and other countries, and to get involved in our vital ministry, visit worldinneed.org.uk

Let's shout with joy, for the Lord is doing a new thing,
says **Chrisanthy Sathiyaraj**, Evangelical Alliance council
member and founder of The Life.

VISIONS OF THE PAST, REALITY OF THE PRESENT

“And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away” (Ezra 3:11b–13).

I have been mulling over Ezra, making time and creating space for the Lord to share His thoughts with me. The third chapter has leapt off the page time and time again. Some of the Jewish exiles from Babylon responded to God's call and returned to Jerusalem to restore the temple. We read in Ezra 3:3 that “despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices”.

By Ezra 3:6 we know that the altar had been erected even before the foundation of the temple was laid (due to the fear that was upon them): “On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid.” The conditions caused the Jews to first focus on what's most important: worship, not the building. Perhaps there's something we can learn here?

We read on and arrive at verse 12: some “wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid [as they remembered the first temple], while many others [seeing the house of the Lord for the first time] shouted for joy” (v. 12b).

I wonder, how comparable is this within the UK church today, as we see the reshaping and rebuilding of Christian ministry amid a global pandemic that started to disrupt life as we knew it almost a year ago now?

Are we, like the older priests and Levites and family heads, gripped by sorrow, remembering what was but potentially missing what is and what could be? Or are we overwhelmed with gratitude for present mercies, recognising that something new has been birthed and the glorious name of the Lord will be blessed? Might it be that God is bringing a new thing to our attention (Isaiah 43:19)? Is He urging us to refrain from saying, “Why were the old days better than these?” (Ecclesiastes 7:10), lest we miss what He is doing today?

Sadly, when we read on in Ezra we find that the work of the temple quickly fell into inactivity and did not recommence for 17 years: “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:24). For almost two decades the purpose was paused; it seems the weeping noise and the opposition were successful.

This year, we want to be open to the new things that God is doing.

A new thing

I believe that our God would like us to rise above the discouragement and opposition in this season and focus on what He is doing, rather than the circumstances. This will require us to have a new vision, to see the bigger picture, and be united in what we do. We do this remembering that God is good and His mercy endures forever (Ezra 3:11; Psalm 136:1). Like the Jews in Ezra, we have much to praise the Lord for.

I praise God for His protection and provision over the last difficult year. I praise Him because we've seen and heard innumerable accounts of His church going into communities and homes (physically and digitally) and putting aside differences in order to serve in unity with others, so that His love is within reach, available to all. I praise God because until now His love, carried by us, continues to heal, renew, bless, transform, comfort and help.

We at The Life, a Christian ministry I founded, have seized new opportunities to serve and connect with our community during the pandemic. For Christmas last year, for instance, we asked karaoke singers from my local area, Southall, west London, to sing Christmas carols as part of our carol service. Not a single singer was a Christian; in fact, most were Hindu. Many people in the predominantly South Asian community got involved; and we were encouraged that almost 2,000 people engaged with the service via Facebook, more than the usual 500 who would attend a church-based carol service.

We have many stories like this one – stories of us reaching out into our community. From connecting with City Vision so that we could give children Christmas gifts complete with a cross and Bible verse, to involving children from Muslim, Sikh and Hindu families in drawing competitions to engage, stimulate and entertain them amid school closures. From providing meals for local families, to supplying university students struggling financially in lockdown with meals so that they're not living on the bare minimum. And so much more, all in the name of Jesus.

This year, we want to be open to the new things that God is doing. We want to follow His lead and His vision. We want to make a joyful noise. As Ezra 3:11 says: "With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: 'He is good; His love toward Israel endures forever'."



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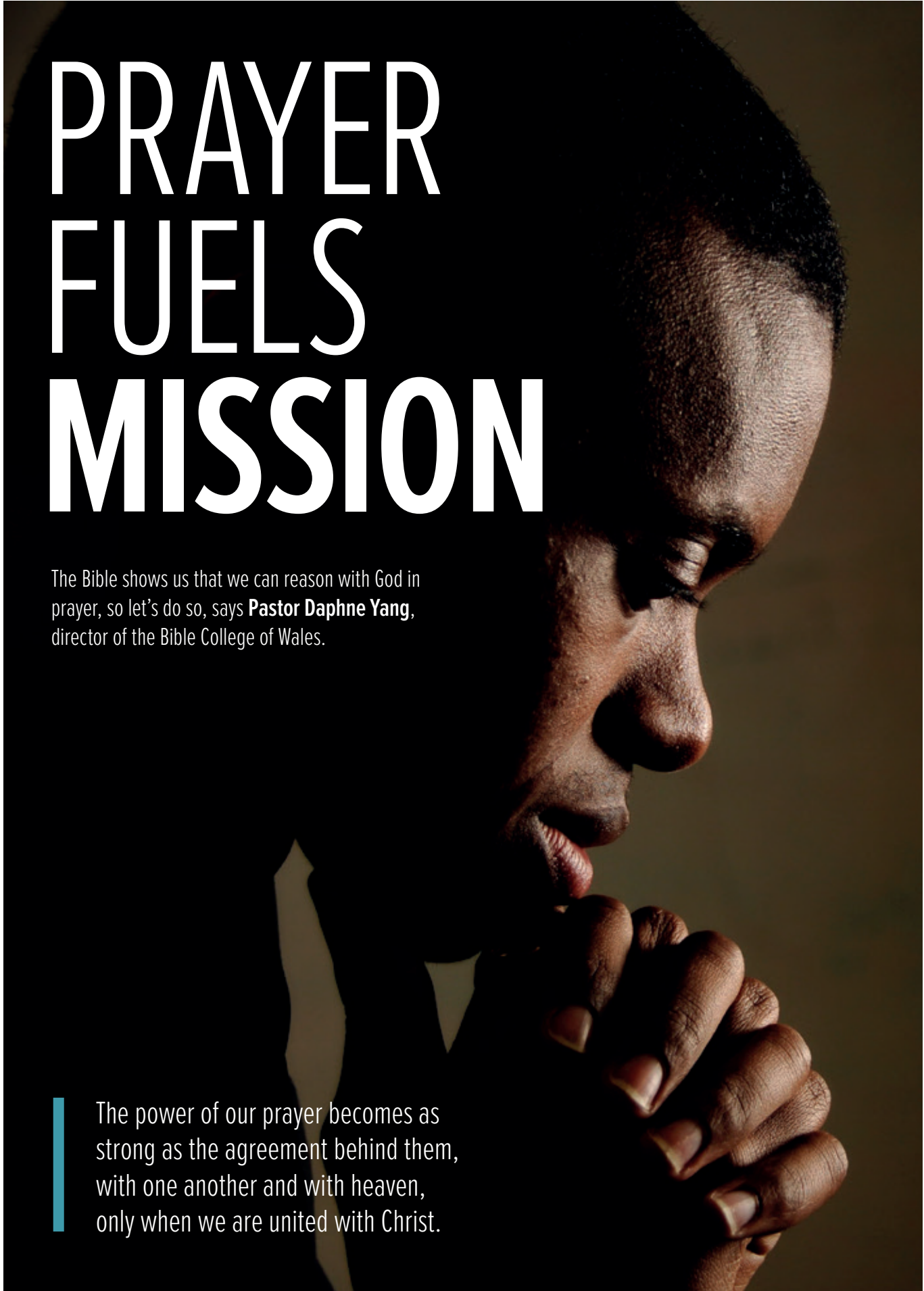


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PRAYER FUELS MISSION

The Bible shows us that we can reason with God in prayer, so let's do so, says **Pastor Daphne Yang**, director of the Bible College of Wales.

The power of our prayer becomes as strong as the agreement behind them, with one another and with heaven, only when we are united with Christ.



As COVID-19 continues to hit the global community in such rapidity, our daily activities continue to be abruptly interrupted and familiar demands removed. Might this acutely draw us to prioritise time to pray with a single purpose for God's divine plan? How else will we be able to carry out His work through us? God has a perfect plan and He'll change His mind if we don't want it.

Malachi 3:6 says, "For I am the Lord, I do not change." This is a reference to God's character, that He doesn't change. One of the greatest lessons from the book of Malachi is to trust in our unchanging God. He's ever the same, yesterday, today and forever. He is gracious, suffers long and is merciful. God loves the sinner, but He hates sin and longs for the day he will be saved.

So, does prayer change our immutable God? God is unchangeable: He doesn't change His mind or will, His attributes are not compromised. But it doesn't imply that He doesn't change His mind concerning His acts, which are not unchanging. Therefore, our prayer affects God's action, but it doesn't affect His person nor His principles. God is capable of modifying His plans if He chooses.

The power of our prayer becomes as strong as the agreement behind them, with one another and with heaven, only when we are united with Christ - when we participate with His Spirit in a bond of fellowship that's so deep we think like one person on the same things.

This agreement and oneness, with the Holy Spirit infusing our prayers, are backed with heaven's full authority. We take on God's desire because we are renewed and prioritise to think like Him. We read of many instances where God changed His intents when the righteous prayed. He changed His mind lest we forfeit the promise and inheritance in our day.

To the city of Nineveh, God said if they repent, He will relent, but if they do not, He will do such and such - and that was God's mind. God was unchanging when punishing sin, and in rewarding repentance He blessed the Ninevites. It may have seemed to men as if God had changed His mind, but it wasn't God who changed, it was the Ninevites who changed.

When Abraham stood before the Lord praying for Lot and his family in Sodom, he pleaded to the Lord to reconsider His plan to destroy

the twin evil cities. Genesis 18:16-33 details Abraham's intercession, asking the Lord not to destroy the cities if he found 50 righteous people. God agreed.

But Abraham couldn't find 50 righteous people, even 10 righteous people could not be found. Ultimately, God did move in judgement and destroyed both cities. Abraham taught us that he could reason with God in prayer.

In Exodus 32:9-10, Moses understood this well. God was on the verge of destroying the whole nation of Israel and He proposed starting over with Moses. But Moses pleaded with God to spare the people from His judgement and reminded God of His promise and plan. "So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people" (Exodus 32:14).

When the Lord relented from the course He had purposed, the New Living Translation describes it this way: "So the Lord changed His mind about the terrible disaster He had threatened to bring on His people." Again, Moses taught us that he could reason with God in prayer, and we see God changing His mind concerning His acts.

One human being standing in this vast universe, like a little speck of dust on this earth, called on the God of all creation to change His mind about the destiny of one nation. God was listening and He cared. So when Moses prayed, God changed His mind concerning His acts.

Of-times we don't need an army of prayer warriors, but the prayer of the righteous who knows and understands God's heart. Our prayer is the means whereby a change in the events of human affairs can occur and one man can make a difference.

If spiritual blessings are received through prayers, then our prayers are important. If God has determined thus, then our spiritual walk with God is of utmost importance. Therefore, since God has appointed for us to come into spiritual blessings, as Christians we need to develop a prayer life, and this would be the greatest incentive for prayer.

The late pastor Andrew Murray put it this way: "Each time, before you intercede, be quiet first, and worship God in His glory. Think of what He can do, and how He delights to hear the prayers of His redeemed people. Think of your place and privilege in Christ and expect great things."



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let's PRAY

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?”

– P S A L M 8 : 4

*“Oh God my help in ages past,
my hope for years to come.”*
You have been my rock, my shield,
my strength.
Hallelujah!

Your face, I seek; your grace, all I ever need.
Help me live out the life of Christ;
help me share the love of God to my world.
I need more of you,
I need you, more than ever.

Christ, now more than ever, I ask, O Lord;
into your hands, I commit my life.
I know not what lies ahead of me.
Fill me Lord, fill me up till I overflow.

You are alpha and omega, the ancient of days.
Use me Lord, I pray.

All greatness I ascribe to you, sovereign one.
My king, my master, all-knowing,
all-sufficient one.

Beautiful Lord, precious saviour,
you hold my life within your palms,
crafted into your perfect plans.

Your thoughts of me are of good, not evil.
You are the potter and I, the clay.

With a grateful heart,
blessed to be called yours.
May the world be assured of your love.
Hallelujah!

By **Titilola Ossai**, the Evangelical Alliance's
One People Commission coordinator

A culture of prayer

At the Evangelical Alliance we pray regularly and champion prayer, because we believe that as we seek God's face together, the Lord hears us and amazing things begin to take place. Join with us, using our prayer centre for inspiration: eauk.it/prayer



BRENDON CHRISTIAN: MY CONVERSION STORY

I became a Christian during lockdown, and this is my testimony.

I gave my life to Jesus during lockdown, and even now I'm still struck by the calming presence that I encountered when I returned home on that day I was told: "Pick up your Bible and read it."

Since the Brexit vote in 2016 I've been back and forth between London and Dublin for my work – I'm a commercial lawyer. I spent next to no time at the apartment I bought in Penarth, despite immediately falling in love with Wales when there with a client one day in spring. I was considering selling it, actually, so decided to stay there during lockdown in order to arrive at a decision, rather than at the houseshare in Dublin where I was at the time it was announced in March.

As I opened the door and walked into the apartment, I heard a quiet voice: "Pick up your Bible and read it." When I think back to that moment, I remember the atmosphere – it was peaceful,

beautiful, calming. I'm convinced that I couldn't have told myself to do that. That's just not something I'd say! I'm constantly at work, always reading, going through reports, drafting reports. I'm always in the written word, so to enjoy my downtime, I want to do something different – walk or listen to music.

I chose to follow the voice, to trust it, and pick up this Bible my mum bought me years ago. It's always just sat there, along with other stuff in the apartment. I wasn't even half-way through Genesis and the stuff I was reading, I kid you not, was coming off the pages at me. I was picturing myself there. I noticed a common denominator across Old Testament stories, that the people of God were plugged into a source that's so incredible, so powerful. This source parted the Red Sea!

I had questions – many questions – so I jumped onto Google and typed in "church online Cardiff", as Cardiff is my nearest city. I did this



having struggled with the concept of church and Christianity. I'm African by birth, born in South Africa in the 1970s, at the height of the apartheid, to an interracial couple. Being mixed-race in a place with a system of legislation that upheld segregationist policies against non-white citizens shaped my identity - words cannot begin to express the experience.

Where was the church? It seemed the church was silent in my time. As a young person I couldn't see how the church could reconcile itself with something like apartheid. And what about unfair treatment of women? Or 'witches' being burned at the stake by Christian churches? I was turned off church. It didn't help that Dad never took us to church, and his father didn't take him. For many years I was far removed from church, only hearing about Christianity from people in my circle who weren't even Christians.

Anyway, I hit enter and City Church Cardiff comes online. Someone else was clearly in the driver's seat because I started to attend the 11am Sunday service online and joined an Alpha course. My questions were answered in a way that I could relate to. I met people who were exploring - our life experiences were similar, or different, but we were in the same place. I'm now a committed Christian.

My new-found faith is a whole new experience, one like no other. A standard week in my life, which was work, work, work and then party, party, party, has completely changed. It was like a rollercoaster ride when I first believed. If I were asked what the church can do the support new believers like me, I'd say, offer loving reassurance, recognise the different upbringings that people have had, and provide solid support mechanisms for after the altar call.

WHEN ALPHA WENT online

It's crystal clear that there are many benefits of hosting Alpha online, for churches, communities and guests, says **Hannah Hawkings**, operations and projects director, Alpha UK.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK in March 2020, the whole world moved online, as did Alpha. It was all new territory, but with that came huge opportunity to serve churches around the UK, as they were also navigating so much – getting services online and caring for their communities.

With hospitality and face-to-face interaction through small groups being such a core part of the Alpha DNA, we approached with slight hesitancy but equally with huge excitement and expectancy for what Alpha could look like online. In the first instance, we were focused on helping churches across the UK land their already existing courses, so in most cases, a face-to-face relationship had been established and the courses (which had already started in person) were finishing online. We were surprised by how well it worked and the response we received from many of the churches we work alongside.

Then came the question of launching a whole new term of courses across the UK; in fact, the very terminology of 'term' was out of the window by this stage. Alpha was no longer boxed in by school term times or church calendars. One of the main upsides of Alpha Online is that it can start whenever and wherever, as it's all from the comfort of your own home. It's also free to run, which is a huge benefit to many churches too.

Many of our churches have also suggested that guests appear more vulnerable in an online context, in comparison to in-person Alpha. Perhaps this is down to the removal of one of the biggest barriers for many, which is the very action of stepping foot into a church building in the first place.

Interestingly, many churches are also discovering that the retention rate of guests attending throughout the course is far higher online too.

The way in which Alpha Online has been onboarded and used by churches so quickly across various contexts throughout the UK has been truly staggering. In 2020, just over 6,000 courses were run across the UK, and as we stand at the start of a new year, 2021, we expect this journey to continue to grow and reach more communities and contexts across the UK – that is our prayer.

With our primary goal to serve the UK church, we of course are always thrilled to hear of stories of many coming to discover a relationship with Jesus through Alpha. In these strange and uncertain times, it is evident that God is moving across our country in a powerful way.

What's in store this year? We don't know! Questions of life and meaning are now more than ever at the forefront of many people's minds. Topics such as prayer and faith are being searched online more than usual. We sense there is a unique moment in time for the church to step up and meet these needs and questions, and we believe that Alpha is a tool that can help facilitate this.

We know 2021 will be a year where we continue to run online, and we pray we will be able to run in-person courses too. Perhaps even hybrid versions will exist for a while as we transition back from online to in person. There are many unknowns, but one thing is for sure: Alpha Online will certainly remain post-COVID-19, and it will be a way in which we serve the UK church in the future. It is clear there are many benefits of hosting it online, for churches, communities and guests.



In 2020, just over

6,000

Alpha Online courses
were run across
the UK.



Charlie

Alpha Online changed a lot for me. I haven't quite figured out how much, but it may be one of the most important decisions I've made.

I was new to the faith and had absolutely no idea how to pray. I was like, "I feel so stupid asking but... how do you do it? I have no idea how." The people in my Alpha Online group were lovely and they helped me massively to understand how to pray and why we pray. It wasn't as scary as I thought it'd be.

With Alpha Online, I could come from work, sort out my dinner and then enjoy meaningful conversations with people. For me, this online option made fellowship much more accessible.

Ozlem

One of the main things I struggled with was believing that God loves me unconditionally. Realising that He does has been a gradual process - there wasn't a single moment when the penny dropped - and Alpha Online has helped.

The environment was friendly, open and inclusive. Everyone was willing to explore different concepts. I felt like I could ask questions, learn through other people, but also think about questions on my own. This was key for me.

I wanted to explore how I could have a meaning in my life, how I could lead a fulfilling life. I'm still exploring, it hasn't stopped, but Alpha Online has been a great start.

With God's presence, plan and peace, we can most certainly grow old well, says **Ian Knox**, author of *Finishing Well*.



GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY

Sharing our faith with older friends, relatives and neighbours should be a key part of our own lives and witness.

I think it was the white hair that swung it. I had lunch with a man who wanted a book written about growing old. It seemed I was first pick to do the job. Perhaps it was that I had already written a book about older people and the church, but being in my 70s, married nearly 50 years, with 10 grandchildren, plus the hair, all helped.

A few months ago, *Finishing Well* was published by SPCK and, in writing it, I found a whole load of things which are helping me in my own life as I grow older. Because the challenges are considerable. My body will not run as it used to. My mind forgets names even more than it did. I don't have a fixed job anymore. Friends are dying too frequently.

Unfortunately, the challenges I face are seen as problems to lots of others. It seems society views us oldies as a drain on its resources. Take pensions. When these were first introduced, the average lifespan after someone retired was two years, so the state and work pension funds laughed all the way to the bank, with monies paid in significantly exceeding pensions paid out.

Now we live far too long, as we pensioners take out more than we put in. Just one statistic will do: in the first year of our Queen's reign, she sent 134 telegrams to those who had become centenarians. The Queen now employs eight full-time card senders, there are so many who are 100 or more. And who is at the front of the queue for anti-coronavirus jabs? We oldies are.

Sadly, the church is often a mirror of the secular world. Ask a church leader if they would like 30 new members and they will rub their hands with delight. Now add that all 30 will be over 70 and wait for the sharp intake of breath. Of course, I generalise: many churches are happy to have us around - but not so we take the place over.

Enough of negativity! Because God has a totally positive view of ageing. In all my research, this

was - and is - the best bit. Among the many things we read in the Bible, here are my favourite three as I get older.

God is with us

"Even to your old age and grey hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and rescue you" (Isaiah 46:4). It is not too late to let God be at the centre of our lives. I have held the hand of a dying neighbour, a lifelong churchgoer, as he trusted Jesus. Sharing our faith with older friends, relatives and neighbours should be a key part of our own lives and witness.

God has plans for us

"The righteous...will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green" (Psalm 92:12-15). After frenetic working lives, we can learn the truth of the old saying 'we are human beings, not human doings'. My grandchildren want me to be their grandpa who is simply there for them. My sons want my wisdom more than my money (although the latter does help). And there are many things to do. My old Bible class leader, Norman Bussey, was still leading a weekly worship service in his nursing home when he was 94. God has plans for us.

God has peace for us

It was that old French singer Maurice Chevalier who said, "Old age isn't so bad when you consider the alternative." Death, dying, dementia, the need for care, are all feared. But God said to Abraham: "You will go to your fathers in peace and be buried in a good old age" (Genesis 15:15). Isn't that a great promise? Jesus has beaten death on the cross and proved it by being raised from the dead. His peace can be ours.

Can we grow old well? Yes we can!

Good news for every generation

Catch Ian Knox and his nephew Phil, the Evangelical Alliance's head of mission to young adults, online from Monday, 1 March as they share their experiences of evangelising to their own generation and explore how we can learn from each other as we seek to share the good news of salvation in Jesus: eauk.it/good-news-video



FAITH WITH *deeds*

By **Gavin Calver**, CEO
of the Evangelical Alliance



I'm often drawn to the fact that Jesus, before Passover, during the evening meal, gets down from the table to wash His disciples' feet (John 13). He is just about to be arrested, flogged and beaten, humiliated and shamed, suffer the cruelest kind of public death known to man, and yet He chooses at His final meal to get down and wash the feet of others.

I'd be thinking, "I must enjoy this last meal; it's a moment of life and freedom and fellowship with my friends," if I were in that situation. Instead, Jesus comforts, cleans and prays for His followers. This extraordinary moment is heightened further by the fact that the only gentile slaves washed people's feet. Here to the amazement of His disciples the Lord, who threw the stars into space, humbles Himself to the point of washing His followers' feet. This is the reality of our saviour: even though He knows that His time on earth is coming to an end, He does not think of how He can be served; His love for the people causes His focus to be on serving the people.

In Matthew 20:26-28 Jesus challenges us to the core as He says, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Jesus tackles the motivation of our heart and causes us to question why we do what we do. Is it to make personal gain and achieve in human terms? Would we continue to do what we do for Jesus if no one ever saw it, or if we were never encouraged by others to serve? How about if other people started to reprimand us for the way we were choosing to live? Would we still serve if it meant we did not

get a pay packet or a pension? I'm challenged to consider who He is calling me to comfort, pray for and serve in this unsettled season.

I am again deeply personally impacted by the life of our saviour. He didn't come to be served but to serve. Who are we serving and who do we expect to serve us? I remember back in the late 90s my dad telling me about a little old lady in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. The arrival of Hurricane Mitch brought great devastation as it caused such flooding and landslides that her whole town had been buried under piles of mud. She had lost her family, her market stall and everything she owned, but when my dad met her she was almost bouncing down the road with joy. She wasn't thinking about what she had lost, she was on her way to church. When he asked her why she was smiling in the face of such horror, her reply was gobsmacking: "This is an opportunity for those of us who know Jesus to show those who don't that even if you have lost everything, you have lost nothing because you still have Jesus."

This kind of response only comes through the power and love of Jesus at work in our hearts through the power of His Holy Spirit. We are not in Tegucigalpa or about to witness the Messiah go to the cross; however, we are in the face of economic difficulty and rising challenges in mental health, poverty and pain. As followers of the Lord, it's an opportunity to shine like stars in service for Him. Together, let's rise and keep asking the Lord to help us follow Him no matter what. This year, let's invite the Holy Spirit to enable us to take up a posture on our knees, and ask Him to keep equipping us to serve in the places that we are called to.

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