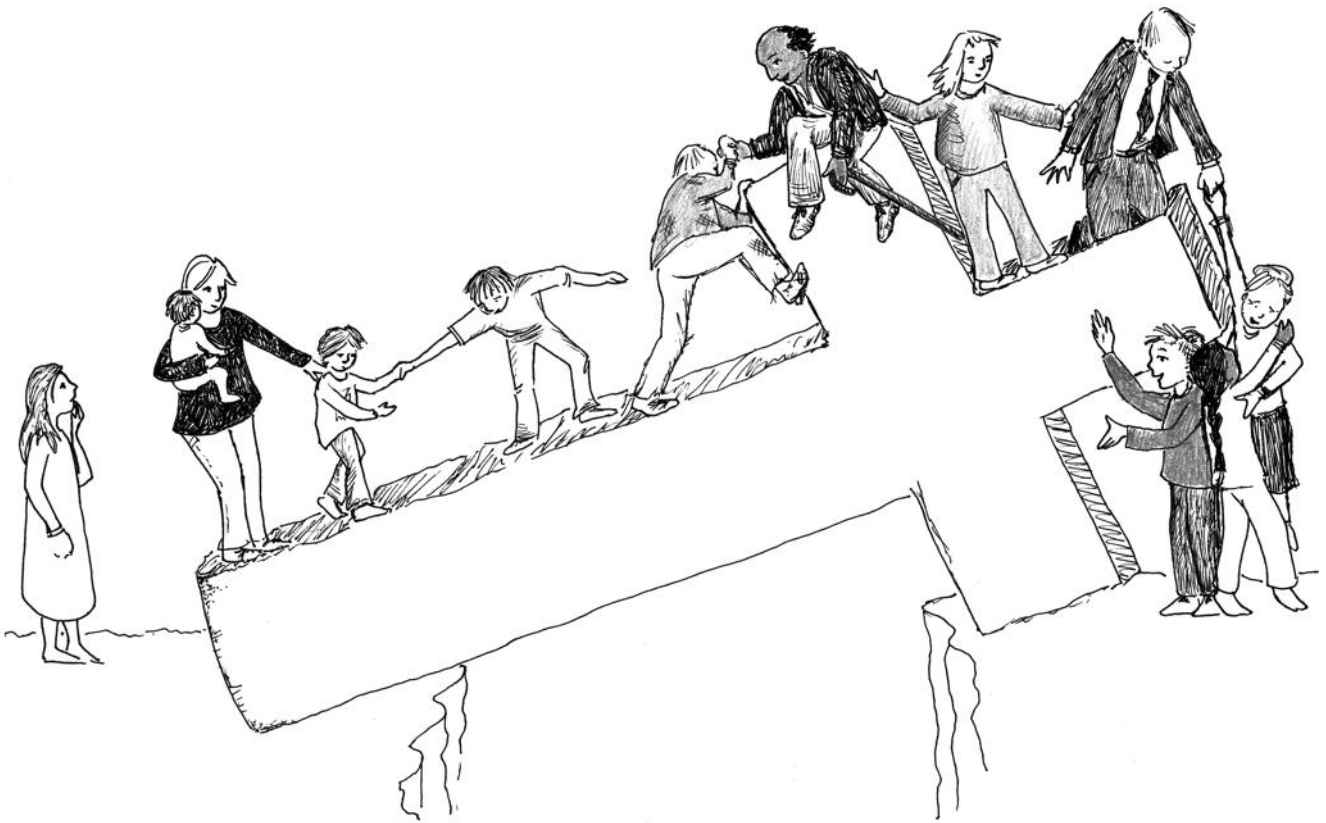


# Wesley Memorial *news*

The magazine from Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford | Spring 2016

---



## *Stumbling* **Blocks**

## *& Stepping* **Stones**

---

The Manse, 26 Upland Park Road, Oxford

Dear friends,

When I was a young teenager, the churches in my home village in Buckinghamshire instituted a Good Friday Walk of Witness. People from the three congregations, Anglican, Roman Catholic and Free Church, gathered at the Catholic Church for a brief service, and then walked in silence for about half a mile to the village green, where another brief service took place. The walk was headed by two people carrying a cross; it took two people to bear it, because the cross was awkward and heavy, made of splintery wood, and there were usually two or three teams ready to take turns to carry it. In more recent years I understand that the old cross has been replaced by one that is easier for one person to carry on their own. Much more practical and sensible, I'm sure, but somehow I suspect that something has been lost in the transition from the rough and awkward old cross to the new smooth and portable one. You see, the cross defies domestication, challenges comfort and remains stubbornly and awkwardly at odds with our best attempts to smooth off its rough edges.

For the twenty-first century Church, the cross is a familiar and respected symbol. For the first-century Church it was simultaneously a badge of pride, a theological puzzle and a source of scandal; both stepping-stone and stumbling-block. Paul, writing to the Christian community in Corinth within perhaps twenty or thirty years of the death of Jesus, spells out the problem: 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.' (1 Corinthians 1:18 and 22-24). For those nurtured on the Hebrew Scriptures, anyone hanging on a tree was considered to be under God's curse. For those who cherished Israel's hopes of a conquering Messiah, ushering in the Kingdom of God, death on a Roman gibbet proclaimed failure. And for sensible people in Corinth, and elsewhere, what could crucifixion mean but a sad end to a promising life? In the light of the cross, how could the Christian claims about Jesus and his significance be anything other than wishful thinking or sheer delusion?

Paul's response is three-fold. First, he asserts that the cross demonstrates the bankruptcy of human wisdom and religiosity. People could not reach God through their own unaided cleverness or virtue, so God found a way to restore the broken relationship which owed nothing to human endeavour. Whatever plan, cunning or otherwise, people might have anticipated, dying on a cross was certainly not in the frame.

Secondly, the cross exemplifies the utter integrity and self-giving love of God, in the face of a fallen world. Jesus' life of compassion, grace and love inevitably brings him into conflict with powerful vested interests, as he challenges the religious leaders, the political authorities and the revolutionaries of his day. He can compromise for the sake of personal survival, or he can continue to live and speak for God, and take the consequences. By choosing the latter course, he not only takes a stand for truth and love, but also bears the world's sin and lostness in his own body. By embracing death, he defeats death.

And therefore, thirdly, the cross is not the end of the story. Beyond the cross stands the empty tomb. Good Friday gives way to Easter. The foolishness of God turns out to be wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. The stumbling block of the cross is a stepping stone to reconciliation, forgiveness, freedom and new life. And so, as the hymn says:-

'The cross he bore is life and health,  
Though shame and death to him;  
His people's hope, his people's wealth,  
Their everlasting theme.'

Holy Week reminds us that we cannot bypass the cross. And the Easter message affirms that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Happy Easter!



# Editorial

At Easter we remember a dark sky, a torn veil and a cross. We also explore an empty tomb, a risen Jesus and newfound faith. In this issue of *Wesley Memorial News* we want to pick up on both these elements of the Easter story through our focus on stumbling blocks and stepping stones.

This imagery has a strong personal resonance, and we are grateful for the willingness of church members to share their own experiences. When you look at your own life, is it stepping stones or stumbling blocks you notice? Could you, with a nod to popular educational thinking on the ‘growth mindset’, see things differently? And if not, what else might you need, to turn those barriers into pathways? Is it through the help and love of others that our obstacles are transformed? And is that change

always possible? What do we do with the stumbling blocks that seem to endure permanently, forever? Can we make sense of them? Do we have the courage to let them be stepping stones for others?

But the stumbling blocks in this issue are also the things that get us stuck in our faith journeys, and the things that actively alienate others from the church. Local preacher John Lenton, and Tim Woolley, erstwhile Director of Mission for the Northampton District, reflect on what in their experience keeps people on the doorstep, and how we might offer them a way in.

There is news here too: of charitable initiatives, of cultural highlights, of building works, of events to come. Plenty to step towards! But for now, Happy Easter, from the *Wesley Memorial News team*

## In this issue...

<i>Stumbling blocks and stepping stones</i>	3-15
<i>Film reviews</i>	9
<i>Why do bad things happen?</i>	12-13
<i>A growth mindset</i>	14-15
<i>Christian Aid at 70</i>	15-16
<i>Farewell to Jonathan Todd</i>	18
<i>Church news</i>	19
<i>Grapevine</i>	19
<i>Diary dates</i>	20
<i>Wesley Membrain</i>	20



***“The Lord set my feet on rock and gave me a firm place to stand.”***

**Psalm 40:2**

*Picture: Church member Nelson Oppong abseiling down St Mary Magdalen’s Church tower in March to raise money for Christian Aid.*

Unsure, when what was bright turns dark  
and life, it seems, has lost its way,  
we question what we once believed  
and fear that doubt has come to stay.  
We sense the worm that gnaws within  
has withered willpower, weakened bones,  
and wonder whether all that's left  
is stumbling blocks or stepping stones.



Where minds and bodies reel with pain  
which nervous smiles can never mask,  
and hope is forced to face despair  
and all the things it dare not ask;  
aware of weakness, guilt or shame,  
the will gives out, the spirit groans,  
and clutching at each straw we find  
more stumbling blocks than stepping stones.

Where family life has lost its bliss  
and silences endorse mistrust,  
or anger boils and tempers flare  
as love comes under threat from lust;  
where people cannot take the strain  
of worklessness and endless loans,  
what pattern will the future weave -  
just stumbling blocks, no stepping stones?

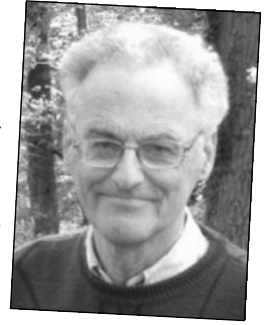


Where hearts that once held love are bare  
and faith, in shreds, compounds the mess;  
where hymns and prayers no longer speak  
and former friends no longer bless;  
and when the church where some belonged  
no more their loyalty enthrones,  
the plea is made, 'If you are there,  
turn stumbling blocks to stepping stones!'

Ah, God, you, with the Maker's eye,  
can tell if all that's feared is real,  
and see if life is more than what  
we suffer, dread, despise and feel.  
If some by faith no longer stand,  
nor hear the truth your voice intones,  
stretch out your hand to help your folk  
from stumbling block to stepping stones.



# A preacher's perspective



During my years of preaching I have come across a number of 'stumbling blocks' and 'stepping stones'. I do not have all the answers, but as Christians we need to think about them.

## Stumbling Blocks

Amongst church-goers I have heard many times that "I'm not good enough to receive communion, become a member, or hold office." Another one is "I'm not a Methodist really," perhaps from someone who has attended Methodist worship for thirty years! Do we do enough to build each other up in confidence and self-esteem?

"The Church doesn't care or visit" can be heard, sometimes from someone who has been visited, but, because it was by a friend or neighbour and not by a minister or lay worker, it was not recognised as "from the church"! I remember one aged housebound member complaining this way. I knew Mary across the road dropped in on her regularly. So I said, "What about Mary?" "She's different", was her answer. "Mary is your pastoral visitor," I replied. Do we make sure we take the Church Newsletter, pass on church news, pray with those we visit?

A perennial problem for many, whether from Church or not, is that of suffering – how we reconcile the belief in a loving all powerful God and the pain and anguish that we encounter in our lifetime. We may say we have choice; we are not God's puppets or we choose to be greedy so there is less to go around. There are no easy answers to why evil Daesh flourishes, while the people of Iraq and Syria flee or are tortured and murdered. Why doesn't God step in? We believe God does not send bad things. God gives us free will. Sometimes our choices have negative repercussions on others.

Sadly another stumbling block in the Church can be other people. The church is for sinners and sometimes it shows. As a result some want to do what they have always done, despite the fact that it doesn't work now. New ideas may not be welcome. If new people come they should not be given responsibility because they will make mistakes. Sometimes there are powerful personalities wanting their own way and not prepared to put others first. They may say they are Christians but they are not behaving as Jesus would.

Non-churchgoers have raised some of the points above, but I have also heard a general view: "Christianity is not relevant now, it doesn't make any difference," "miracles don't happen" and "Jesus may have died, but he didn't rise again."

## Stepping Stones

Thankfully there have been so many ways in which people have been brought to and nurtured in faith in God. Each of us will have had our own "Stepping Stones".

Many will have taken their first steps within a loving Christian home where the faith was lived and talked and prayed about. People have been encouraged by vibrant worship, music, public testimony, thought-provoking sermons, Bible readings and study and discussion in JWS or house-groups. "Doing good things in good company" can be an inspiration whether in Sunday School, Youth Groups or church musicals, working together in fellowship on Church community inspired tasks. Little acts of kindness received and given, can, like good seed, bear much fruit.

Worship is the most important thing we do as Christians and in an age where visual impact is vital, we should use more visuals in worship. This means using banners or other objects around the church building, (short) videos, or pictures or, best of all, drama. It is seeing it happen which makes the impact.

To conclude, the most frequent stepping stones of all are the example and encouragement of other Christians, reaching out to churched and un-churched alike. In the words of number 17 in the Circuit Song Book:

Christ has called us to each other  
linked in one humanity.  
Colour, culture, class or gender –  
break the chains to set us free.  
Hold the hands of friend or stranger,  
hold the dreams of age and youth,  
Hold the cynic and the searcher  
as we journey to the truth.

*John Lenton*

## “I’ll be with you each step of the way”

“What will you do with all the right foot shoes you won’t need?” was one of the questions I discussed with a friend after I heard the news that I was to have an above-the-knee amputation of my right leg.

That, of course, was one of the least of my problems when I had the operation last November. It proved to be a successful attempt to stop the further spread of a persistent cancer, but since then my life has seemed to be full of actual and metaphorical barriers and blocks to stumble against. The physiotherapists from the magnificently named Centre for Enablement at the Nuffield Orthopaedic hospital had me in a wheelchair and down in their Prosthetics Gym on the day after the operation, so there was no time to lie around feeling sorry for myself.

They sensibly introduced me straightaway to the new realities of life in a wheelchair and I was soon home, knocking paint off door frames and skirting boards in my attempts to get around. As two years ago, after another operation on my leg, we soon discovered the apparently insuperable barrier presented by two small steps in our house. And later when I began to use the kitchen for cooking my chief frustration was not being able to see what was happening in saucepans from my wheelchair height.

The Prosthetics Gym has become a second home where I’ve become acquainted with my own new leg - a heavy and apparently unwieldy piece of equipment, named a robot leg by a 7 year old friend. Wearing it meant that everything seemed to be a potential stumbling block. I’d seen pictures of smiling amputees walking with confidence between parallel bars, but my experience didn’t seem at first to be anything like theirs. I walked, but gripping the bars and no doubt looking stressed and anxious, sure that any minute I was going to stumble and fall. Supported by patient physiotherapists I have learnt to relax and trust my leg, but I still see potential stumbling blocks everywhere!

Perhaps more difficult, because more long-lasting, are the emotional and mental “stumbling blocks” this life-changing experience has produced. I see myself in my wheelchair

through the gym’s full-length mirror and find it hard to accept myself as a disabled person. Already this disablement has affected my view of life as I shall have to live it. My first question now when I think of going somewhere is, “Will I be able to get into and around the building?” One of my chief pleasures has been singing in the Oxford Bach Choir, but they perform in the Sheldonian, a building designed by Christopher Wren with no thought of providing facilities for disabled performers in 2016! And will the churches in the Circuit be able to accommodate a wheelchair-bound or uncertainly walking Local Preacher? And will I ever again be able to follow my favourite walks round Oxford?

More immediately my biggest emotional “stumbling block” is my helplessness after a life of happy independence. I don’t always accept help gracefully and Robert, who shares our house with me and through my incapacity has been uncomplainingly introduced, among other things, to the mysteries of the washing machine, is getting used to my cries of frustration as the wheelchair, yet again, seems trapped by the furniture when I’m trying to do something by myself.

And am I beginning to see that this radical change to my life is also providing me with “stepping stones”? One day when the physiotherapist wasn’t too busy and I had just triumphantly walked out of the gym with two sticks she explained that she and her colleague see patients’ progress as a path, a long one, but a path on to an altered but still full life. That’s how one of my friends saw it when she wrote in a card, “I’ll be with you each step of the way.” I am literally stepping on the way towards a different kind of life and already that “way” has taught me new things.

The first is the generosity and faithfulness of family and friends, to me the evidence of Christian love in action. I was cheered by



the people who visited me in hospital and during the first weeks of my convalescence at home, but I've been humbled by the way in which many have 'stuck by me' during the long haul to re-joining life again.

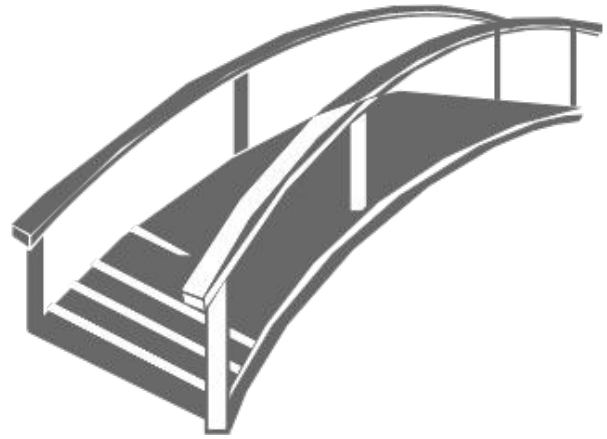
I've also entered the world of the disabled and seen in a small way what life must be like for those with many more handicaps than me. I've cursed kerbs which are too high for wheelchairs and the hazards of badly paved roads. And I've encountered the sometimes embarrassed reactions of adults to my lack of a leg, while children look with frank and unembarrassed interest.

Finally, during a time when the news is full of stories of war and violence and examples of inhumanity I've encountered nothing but the kindness of humanity. The magnificent NHS through its highly skilled and caring staff have healed and nurtured me. When we've decided to venture out to concerts and a restaurant staff have met us with warm welcomes and the many multi ethnic taxi drivers who've driven me have brightened my life with their stories.

Without my amputation these "stepping stones" to a new life wouldn't have happened to me.

And the answer to my friend's question is that the prosthetist asked me to choose a newish and comfortable pair of 'sensible' shoes. The right one goes on my prosthetic foot and the left on my own, and I'm not to change them without consultation. That's why you'll always see me in the same pair of shoes!

*Judith Atkinson*



## The Bridge Builder

An old man going a lone highway,  
Came, at the evening cold and gray,  
To a chasm vast and deep and wide,  
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.  
The old man crossed in the twilight dim,  
The sullen stream had no fear for him;  
But he turned when safe on the other side  
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,  
"You are wasting your strength with building here;  
Your journey will end with the ending day,  
You never again will pass this way;  
You've crossed the chasm, deep and wide,  
Why build this bridge at evening tide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head;  
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,  
"There followed after me today  
A youth whose feet must pass this way.  
This chasm that has been as naught to me  
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;  
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;  
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!"

*Will Allen Dromgoole*

Source: *Father: An Anthology of Verse* (EP Dutton & Company, 1931). Contributed by Mel McCulloch.

## Stepping on crocodiles

When I was seven years of age I began a love affair that has lasted ever since. After much pestering my mum took me to the cinema to see the latest James Bond film *Live and Let Die*. One of the most exciting parts was when Bond escaped from an island surrounded by crocodiles. The fast-approaching ravenous reptiles were a serious stumbling block to 007's survival but he used them as stepping stones to reach the safety of the bank, leaping across them just as their jaws snapped shut.

What are the scary stumbling blocks for us when seeking to make Jesus known today? Here are three of mine:

### *There are other things to worship*

At a chapel in a Surrey village we held a small but successful summer holiday club. On Sunday we invited the 20 or so children to come to a service and only one turned up. Somewhat deflated we opened the chapel doors at the end of the service to see many of the other children outside... on the village green at a car boot sale! The children had loved learning about Jesus together during the week but there was a seemingly brighter, shinier attraction on the doorstep on Sunday.

### *There's a language barrier*

I took a deep breath and tried again. "I want to redeem my points please." It was 5.30pm and I was keen to pay for my shopping with my supermarket loyalty card and get home for tea. Eventually the young man behind the till bravely spoke up "I'm sorry but I don't understand what 'redeem' means." In the 21st century Christian language and concepts are no longer part of the public discourse as they once were, and so the language I speak about the things I believe about Jesus often has little resonance with many people.

### *I might fail!*

When the church in Britain has been declining numerically for many years and initiatives to reverse that decline

have come and gone and none of us is getting any younger, it's easy to echo the words of the philosopher Homer (Simpson), "If something's hard to do, then it's not worth doing." I'll only look foolish and feel embarrassed when people don't want to know, so why bother?


These are just three of my stumbling blocks and I'm sure you can think of many more of your own. And whilst we are obviously living in a particular time and cultural situation which makes these things so, we're not the first Christians to face these challenges. Here Paul's visit to Athens (Acts 17.16-34) gives me food for thought.

In Athens there were other things to worship too. Paul, a devout Jew, who had to turn his distress at encountering so many false idols in Athens (Acts 17.16) into a positive effort to use them to proclaim the gospel (v22-23). That he did is a testament to his determination to 'become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Corinthians 9.22 TNIV) and a challenge to me to examine my own motivation for mission.

If I want to engage those who have no experience of church I need to explore what they do have experience of and when and how I might engage with those things, instead of hoping that they might want to engage with church first at a time I've allocated for it. A much better conclusion to our holiday club week in Surrey would have been a car boot stall offering free prayer or Bible storytelling, or using our

ideally placed chapel as a drop in to offer sellers and buyers and their children refreshments and engage in conversation, whilst holding our regular service later in the day.

In Athens there was a language barrier too. Paul's first attempts at speaking about Jesus in Athens were met with puzzlement: 'You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean' (Acts 17.20 TNIV). Only then did Paul start to speak their



*If I keep my ears and eyes  
open to popular culture...  
that might give me an entry  
point for conversations about  
the work of Jesus as I have  
experienced it.*



## Film reviews

language, using the idea of 'The Unknown God' from a local altar as an entry point to talk about the God he knew in Christ. In fact he went even further, since the poem he quoted 'We are his offspring' from (v28-29) is believed by many commentators to be from verses dedicated to the Greek god Zeus!

Today the need for salvation and repentance of sin is as real as ever but it is no longer the entry point for conversations about the work of Jesus. Yet soap operas, popular dramas and the latest blockbusters are full of stories of persistent love, forgiveness, and changes of heart that might give me an entry point for conversations about the work of Jesus as I have experienced it, if I keep my ears and eyes open to popular culture.

In Athens Paul might have failed too. And with some he did! At best his was a mixed reception, and whilst there was interest to hear more amongst his hearers, 'some of them sneered' (Acts 16.32). Tearfund research in 2006 found that three million people who have stopped going to church or who have never been in their lives, would consider attending given the right invitation. If I speak to others about my experience of Jesus some will sneer. But others will be interested to hear more.

There are no easy answers or quick fixes to the stumbling blocks we all face in sharing our faith today. Trying new things in new places and at new times with new people, listening for entry points for meaningful conversations about our experiences of God in Christ and being less risk averse, all need us to support each other, trust God and pray a lot! But like James Bond when faced with hungry crocodiles approaching, we can either stay rooted to the spot in fear, or take a leap of faith.

*Tim Woolley*

*(The Revd Dr Tim Woolley was Director of Mission for the Northampton Methodist District until 2014. He is now Ministry Learning and Development Officer for the East Central Region of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network of the Methodist Church)*

In the last six weeks, I have been to see four films, two of which I felt fitted into our theme of stumbling blocks and stepping stones. Both films are based on true stories.

*The Danish Girl* has strong, sensitive performances by Eddie Redmayne and Alicia Vikander in the lead roles and is very loosely based on the story of one of the first attempts at gender reassignment in the late 1920s. The film is beautifully photographed and touchingly told. Eddie Redmayne's character, Einar Wegener, a landscape artist, is trapped in a body he does not recognise as his own and has identified himself as Lili Elbe for much of his life, keeping this hidden. When his wife, Gerda, a portrait artist, asks him to step in to sit for her when her female model does not arrive, this prompts an irreversible journey for Einar to find a way to become Lili. The film charts the anguish the couple go through as they support each other and adjust to their changing relationship, determined to find a solution to the situation. There has been criticism of the film as it does not entirely adhere to historical events, but for me, it conveyed the essence of the dilemma facing the main characters and their determination to resolve Einar's gender issues and find peace.

*Bridge of Spies* reminded me of the terrible events of the Cold War, not least the building of the Berlin Wall. There are tremendous performances by Tom Hanks as US lawyer James B. Donovan, and Mark Rylance as Russian spy Rudolf Abel. The intrigue of the situation makes this a thrilling, but also moving story based on the real life events of the 1960 U-2 incident, when Francis Gary Powers' spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union. Donovan finds himself entangled in a web of messy spy exchanges, but within it all he faces every stumbling block with determination and stubbornness, displaying unswerving belief that his goals can be reached. As a lover of crime/spy literature, I loved this film and, though not usually a fan of Tom Hanks, thought he was perfect for the role. I particularly liked the fact that, as part of the closing credits, the audience were made aware of what actually happened to the main characters following the events of the film.

*Janet Forsaith*

## A lesson in trust

At Laughter Hole on Dartmoor there are stepping stones across the River Dart. After winter storms some of the stones are very wobbly (and the river is fast flowing) and could be called stumbling blocks. However, they provide a way across the river, avoiding a two mile detour, so we used them on a rambling club weekend some years ago. It was necessary to trust each other to help cross the stones to reach the far bank. This trust is so often the case throughout life, but stumbling blocks can be turned into stepping stones.



*Ann Lemmon*



# The dreams of our parents

When I was a child, my mum's childhood home was still standing (just), its rich tapestry of memories crumbling into ruins. The house was waiting to be knocked down by housing developers, hungry for square footage on the avenue. She would point at it when we passed by, the half-open front windows and wall just intact, opening into a broken shell at the back.

I always had a vivid imagination, and liked to think about stories that may have happened at the house where my mum grew up. The fourth of five children and the eldest girl, she was trained to serve her siblings at home as was then the tradition. My mum and her sister, my auntie, would mend socks, cook meals, wait on their brothers and feed their pet hens (which my mum point blank refused to eat at the next family celebration.) They were not well off, nor strugglers. The family had a car (because of my grandfather's work as a company chauffeur) and a fridge (into which you had to place a block of ice every few days to help keep your food chilled.)

Ten minutes' walk away, my dad, nine years her senior, lived with his parents and his older brother and sister. Those were dark years for Spain, struggling under desperate poverty after the Civil War. Sometimes, my dad's family would wander around fields after harvest, finding out discarded vegetables and potatoes to take home. They got the entrepreneurial bug and decided to set up a stall, selling lemons and garlic at the local markets, so they could stave off hunger. It worked quite well and their prospects improved. My dad has always kept a love of inspecting fruit and vegetables at the shops, and, now into his 80s, is happy to go on a pilgrimage across shops to find 'two kilos of the right potatoes.'

At some point along the line, their eyes must have crossed across a crowded room. What they said to each other when they met I can only begin to imagine: the dreams and compromises, the arguments and resolutions. I do not know most of the story that took them (us) where they are today. I am their youngest child and I have only been witness to part of their sixty-year journey since they married. They have seen many changes in our society, as we have moved from traditional roles and patriarchal constraints to embrace a more flexible attitude towards different ways of living, with technology helping create a global world.

As a mum and an adult (even if sometimes it feels as though I am just playing at being one), I have come to realise many times how powerful parent figures are in shaping their children's lives. My parents had it tough. They couldn't make their dreams come true, because of powerful socio-political and economic circumstances around them. They lacked opportunities to study, travel abroad, live independently and hold fulfilling jobs. But they chose to do everything they could to make our dreams come true. We always had food on the table. I was always encouraged to read. I was taken to see a trial just so that I could see the workings of the court system for one morning. My sister and I went to university, and my brother got a vocational education.

I think they knew that there was no way around the obstacles, and so sometimes when you can't achieve what you've wanted for yourself, you can help others achieve it, and that's pure love.

*Eva Oliver*



# Why do bad things happen to good people?

Book review: Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981)

For those outside the church suffering can be an insuperable barrier to belief in God. For many who have had faith, suffering has broken it entirely. Perhaps more insidiously, beneath the apparent endurance of belief, our often inarticulate feelings about the ways we ourselves and the people we know have suffered can corrode the brightness of our faith, cutting us off from fullness of life - from hope, joy, gratitude and love. I was able poignantly and helpfully to reflect on the stumbling block that is suffering by reading this small book by Rabbi Harold Kushner, which I would recommend wholeheartedly.

Kushner begins by sketching out what he sees as prevalent but inadequate responses to suffering. Some people blame God. Some, albeit indirectly, blame the sufferer. Some claim suffering serves a higher purpose the human mind cannot understand. While in the abstract I would, like Kushner, reject all these approaches, reading his stories of people wrestling to come to terms with broken relationships, illness and bereavement made me realise how easily we do respond to suffering in exactly these ways. How many of us, in our private hearts, cry bitterly 'why is God doing this to me?' Or think at some deep level that 'had we done things differently, the story would have had a happier ending', blaming ourselves for the darkest struggles of our lives? Or clutch in our exhaustion at the notion 'God must have his reasons'?

Kushner proposes we let go entirely of these efforts to impose order and meaning on the hurt and pain of our lives because such thinking can do unnecessary damage. Anger, at ourselves or others or God, openly voiced or simmering in concealment, drives us to despair. Guilt preys on and plagues us. Jealousy - that other people seem to have it easy, that hardship is unequally, unfairly, unjustly distributed - makes us lonely. For Kushner we have at some point to accept that the world just is an unfair place. Disaster and disease are random and unpredictable. Events

and circumstances combine and collide to produce pain. 'Sometimes,' he says, 'there is no reason'. This chaos written into the world for him lies outside the will of God. Perhaps the biggest misconception we therefore need to leave behind is that God is or could ever be in control.



But then where is God? If we can stop asking why things happen, why God lets them happen - if we can stop expecting God to be in charge, and stop expecting the world to be fair - if we can stop wondering where the tragedy came from - then maybe, Kushner suggests, we can ask instead 'where does it lead?' And this is where, and how, he suggests, we find God. An answer to suffering doesn't have to mean an 'explanation': it could be a response. He turns to a writer named Archibald MacLeish, whose reworking of the Book of Job ends with these words from Job's wife:

The candles in the churches are gone out  
The stars have gone out of the sky  
Blow on the coal of the heart  
And we'll see by and by...

And so for Kushner, MacLeish's Job 'answers the problem of human suffering [...] by choosing to go on living and creating new life. [...] He stops looking for fairness or justice in the world and starts looking for love instead.' This is where God is: in the strength that enables us to carry on; in the love we summon, from somewhere, on a barren plain. Kushner ends his book with these questions:

Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease, earthquake and accident? Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect? Are you capable of forgiving and loving God, even when you have found out that He is not perfect, even when he has let you down and disappointed you by permitting bad luck and sickness and cruelty in his world, and permitting some of those

things to happen to you? And if you can do these things, will you be able to recognise that the ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to enable us to live fully, bravely and meaningfully in a less-than-perfect world?

Many of us experience directly suffering in its cruellest forms, and all of us wrestle with the imperfections of human living. I suspect most of us could relate to the person

for whom Harold Kushner says he wrote this book: 'the person who has been hurt by life [...] and who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserved better'. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is a wise reflection from someone who understands that pain can be inexplicable, and who encourages us to step beyond it, in courage and hope, with God's strength, and through love.

*Fiona Macdonald*

## Meet Geraldine

One of the friendly faces greeting visitors to Wednesday Coffee in the John Wesley room belongs to Geraldine Hunt, who has been helping with this valuable work of outreach for the last nine years.

This was the first voluntary work Geraldine undertook after the death of her husband Bill ten years ago this March. Bill had been a Professor of Theology and he and Geraldine were together for almost forty years. Bill was over ninety when he died and Geraldine had been his carer for the last two years of his life.

It was several years before Geraldine came to terms with her loss. Plunged into deep grief, she had no religious faith to turn to for comfort. She found it hard to believe in an afterlife and had not been to church since her son David had been a choir boy at St Asaph's Cathedral in Wales many years before. For some years she had suffered from muscular problems which eventually led to her retirement from her career as an English teacher. During the next few years she also had to battle with cancer as well as heart problems.

Nonetheless, Geraldine believes that what appeared to be insuperable obstacles became stepping stones on her journey to a new acceptance of life. Expert medical treatment and care during her stays in hospital, the support of a holistic healer who helped her spiritual reawakening and her friendships with people she has met along the way

have enriched her life and enabled her to see a pattern to it all.

Through Wednesday Coffee, Geraldine met Isabelle Tams who at that time ran Rainbow House. They shared a

love of the theatre and became good friends. Geraldine helped regularly at Rainbow House for some years. She also met and chatted to people coming to the Cruse office and this led her to the realisation that perhaps her own experiences might be put to good use. So she applied for a place on the Cruse training scheme, was accepted, and has been a volunteer counsellor with Cruse for two years now.

So Geraldine spends quite a lot of her time on the premises of Wesley Memorial Church, and through Bill there is another connection to Methodism which might interest some of our readers. When Bill died Geraldine received a letter of sympathy from Leslie Griffiths, a former President of the Methodist Conference and Superintendent Minister of Wesley's Chapel, London. He wrote warmly about Bill and mentioned the Greek Testament that Bill gave him when he was training for the Methodist Ministry and which is still in his possession.

*Glenda Lane*



## Promoting a growth mindset

Many of us are aware of years of ever changing trends in education. Those who have been teaching for years talk about how things always seem to come full circle. The primary school in which I grew up in the late 1950s/early 1960s is a far cry from the school in which I now teach. I was one of the more studious pupils - I didn't come from a particularly academic background, but I loved school and was motivated to learn. There were others who weren't and some I remember who struggled with learning, were often in trouble and consequently dismissed by teachers as having no real prospects for the future. Nowadays, we recognise that there are reasons that children have hidden stumbling blocks to their learning with, for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, processing disorders and other learning difficulties. To be considered 'stupid' and 'hopeless' by teachers at an early age is hopefully a thing of the past, but there are still children who have a low self-esteem and have given up on themselves at an early age.

With detailed research and greater understanding into the way we learn, there is now more emphasis on providing children with a wide range of tools to aid their learning, recognising that we all favour different styles of learning, be it auditory, visual, kinaesthetic or reading and writing or a combination of these.

Over the last two years, more and more schools have focused on encouraging children (and staff) to develop a 'growth mindset'. Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, continues to lead the way on this. The term 'growth mindset' refers to a way of thinking, learning and taking on challenges. People with a growth mindset are open to constructive criticism, take feedback and use it, take on new challenges, push themselves outside of their comfort zone and show resilience and perseverance. Studies show people with a growth mindset reach their potential, are successful in what they do and are happy (as opposed to

### What Kind of Mindset Do You Have?



I can learn anything I want to.  
When I'm frustrated, I persevere.  
I want to challenge myself.  
When I fail, I learn.  
Tell me I try hard.  
If you succeed, I'm inspired.  
My effort and attitude determine everything.



I'm either good at it, or I'm not.  
When I'm frustrated, I give up.  
I don't like to be challenged.  
When I fail, I'm no good.  
Tell me I'm smart.  
If you succeed, I feel threatened.  
My abilities determine everything.

---

a fixed mindset, where people believe they are born with a fixed limit to their possible achievement and there is little point in trying). A growth mindset is a belief that we never stop learning and improving. This mindset appears to actually encourage the growth of new neural pathways, forming new connections that weren't there before, instead of repeatedly running over the same pathway.

At my school, children as young as five years old can talk about having a growth mindset and what that means for their learning. All our classrooms have displays encouraging the children to believe in themselves and to look upon mistakes not as a failure, but as stepping stones to improving knowledge and understanding. We have introduced the 'Chilli challenge' model for independent tasks, where all children are given a choice of tasks from mild to hot and spicy and are encouraged to challenge themselves. Setting in maths is a thing of the past, which means that children do not feel 'pigeon-holed' and this has proved very successful, even among those teachers who were initially sceptical. Children learn to enjoy challenges and persevere. They have strategies to get beyond the 'I'm stuck' phase.

The whole culture is to promote learning as positive and fun - children support and encourage each other. Pupil voice within the school is encouraged and celebrated.

Children need to learn resilience and be given opportunities. I was listening to a Muslim man speaking on the radio last month. He said that it is his belief that it is only through giving a child an opportunity that you will realise his or her potential. This is so true. Stumbling blocks and stepping stones - providing encouragement and belief that 'I can and will' rather than 'I can't and there's no point in trying' is what we as teachers strive to instil in our pupils, so that they can reach their full potential, feel positive about themselves and succeed.

When, to her great surprise, Nadiya Hussain won last year's *Great British Bake Off*, she said afterwards: "I'm never gonna put boundaries on myself ever again. I'm never gonna say I can't do it. I'm never gonna say 'maybe'. I'm never gonna say 'I don't think I can'. I can and I will." This is the attitude a growth mindset promotes.

*Janet Forsaith*

## Christian Aid: Reflections on the first 70 years

From the beginning of 1942, at the height of the Second World War, Europe was experiencing not only a considerable flood of refugees but also acute famine and homelessness, especially in Greece. In Britain the newly formed British Council of Churches launched "Christian Reconstruction in Europe" and separately a National Famine Committee was set up, which led to the formation of Oxfam in October 1942.

Their efforts to increase public awareness and raise funds came at a time when Britain was necessarily focussed on the conduct of the war and the achievement of victory and peace. Practical support could only be given through the International Red Cross. Gradually, however, the national response to a desperate situation increased, especially when after D-Day in June 1944 there was a further large

surge of refugees in Europe and the Middle East and evidence of widespread human suffering. Against this background the British Council of Churches in 1945 launched the Inter-Church Aid and Refugee Service, later to be renamed Christian Aid, as an ecumenical response with a Christian motivation but to provide aid wherever needed.

In the words of a recent Christian Aid publication, "The Churches' initial vision was of a world where every person is respected because he or she is a human being; a world where women and men, large nations and small, have equal weight; a world where everyone lives in peace and harmony with others as good neighbours; a world without poverty." Initially, Inter Church Aid concentrated on the task of relief and reconstruction in Europe, particularly for all forced to

---

## Christian Aid reflections *continued...*

leave their own home, appealing for donations from churches and the wider community. Then in the mid-1950s the proposal was made for an annual week to increase public awareness of the extent of the need and to raise much needed funding. The first Christian Aid Week was held in 1957 and the concept was soon adopted nationwide by groups set up ecumenically in seven cities, including Oxford, and in 200 towns and villages. It became a widespread annual event from 1958 onwards.

Since then, Christian Aid, in addition to its sustained programme in support of locally based partners in Africa, Asia and South America, has been at the forefront of many specific campaigns. In co-operation with Oxfam and other aid agencies, the first of these were World Refugee Year in 1959/60 and the Freedom from Hunger campaign in 1960/65.

In the 1960s Christian Aid took the lead in setting up the Disasters Emergency Committee to ensure co-ordination between different relief agencies during humanitarian crises. Sadly, prompt action has been essential through many critical situations, including famines in Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s and the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. In addition, Christian Aid has campaigned to secure debt relief for poor countries, to “Make Poverty History”, and more recently on the compelling issue of climate change.

Christian Aid’s annual income has increased from £483,000 in 1959 to £28 million in 1989 and to £99 million in 2015. Christian Aid is now working with more than 140 organisations internationally to provide food aid, water and sanitation, shelter and relief of poverty in places of need.

My involvement in Christian Aid would be typical of many thousand Christians, recruited into a local group as a representative of a local church - for me, Bloomsbury Baptist Church in Central London - or as supporters in each annual week. This was my first experience of real ecumenical activity, apart from the Student Christian Movement at university, and very stimulating. In common with other Christian Aid committees we planned how best to publicise the need for help and raise money. For many in

residential areas this would be through house to house collecting and local public meetings. For Central London in the late 50s we arranged a soup kitchen in Holy Trinity Church forecourt, near Holborn tube station - with food, publicity and Christian Aid film and collecting boxes.

When in 1962 we started to attend a church nearer to our home in north Finchley, I became an active member of the Finchley Christian Aid committee. Then in 1966 I started a new job in Oxford and joined the local Oxford committee as representative of New Road Church. In those early days our activities were limited, but one year we persuaded Christian Aid Head Office to allow us to raise money to purchase a tractor for a Salvation Army agricultural project in Kenya, and St Michael’s Church at the North Gate agreed that we could park a British Leyland tractor on the church forecourt. The appeal was successful and the tractor was delivered to Kenya.

Over the years the committee membership increased to become more representative of churches throughout the city, with the appointment of ward organisers. I was not so closely involved for some years, but in January 1993 Helen and I became ward organisers (in succession to Derek Rawson) responsible for encouraging support and distributing publicity material to nine churches in the city centre.

In recent years the Oxford churches have raised over £43,000 annually for Christian Aid, with about 70% being received in each Christian Aid Week, from church collections, lunches, house to house collections and some sponsored events including an abseil from an Oxford church spire and, of course, our street market, held for over 40 years - this year on Saturday 14 May.

As we come to the 60th Christian Aid Week - from 15-21 May - there is still the imperative and the need to help. In the words of Sydney Carter’s song, “When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there? For the creed and the colour and the name don’t matter, were you there?”

*Colin Saunders*



# Book review: *Hands & Wings*

*Hands & Wings* is an anthology of poems by more than 50 contemporary poets, including Welsh National Poet Gillian Clarke, T. S. Eliot prizewinner Philip Gross, and winner of the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize Susan Wicks. The idea came to Dorothy Yamamoto, as a fundraiser for the charity Freedom from Torture. The sponsorship she solicited has helped with production costs, leaving greater profits for the cause. The charity's logo inspired the book title.

Her invitation to contribute left the poets free to choose their own subjects, to "celebrate human connectedness, and extend our sympathies". They write movingly, often

exploring their encounters with individuals or the natural world, and with cultures very different from their own. Some poems were written for the collection, others already published.



Philip Pullman, in his Foreword to the collection, particularly commends the 'number of pieces that show a close observation of the natural world'. He spoke at the launch of the book last November, in Blackwell's Norrington Room, with Dorothy Yamamoto, and Ann Gibson, the local Chair of the charity.

## Was it for this

She'd carried the bulk of him, felt his kick  
under her kanga, chewed her lip and thumped the wall  
until he squawked in the hut's dim light?

She'd trekked to the well half an hour each way  
with his sweet head nodding against her back  
and empty-bellied had heaped his plate so he grew tall.

He'd walked three miles to the mission school  
and learned to write and read and count  
and vowed to build them a house one day.

They'd sold the camel to pay the man  
who promised a bus, a boat, a job  
in a glittering city across the sea.

She'd striped every sunset in soot on the wall  
for a year and three days in withering hope.  
Then the Aid man came to stammer his news

of a boat ablaze near a northern land.  
A few had swum but many had drowned  
and Kibwe, he feared, was one.

*Gill Learner*

I found the poems variously thought-provoking, entertaining, reflective, off-beat, and some frankly puzzling. I was pleased that Dorothy obtained permission for us to print what seems to me a most powerfully moving poem (opposite), already well known in poetry circles.

The lost son in the poem recalls so many recent tragic stories of drowning in the Mediterranean, so many people abandoned by unscrupulous traffickers. But the title takes us back a century to Lieutenant Wilfred Owen, faced with the death of yet another young soldier, and asking "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" Futility!

Among the 50 plus poems are some very touching personal thoughts like David Cooke's "On my daughter's conversion to Islam" and Gillian Clarke's "Daughter", an elegy for little April Jones who was murdered in Wales in 2012. The alphabetical order of the poets also allows Dorothy, fittingly, to have the last word with a glimpse of Japan many decades ago, in "My father remembers Ajiro's horse."

The collection is worth buying at £8.00, not merely for the good cause, but for the quality and variety of the poems. (Let me know if you would like a copy: we can get them delivered to Wesley Memorial and save on postage!)

*Kate Dobson*

## Moving on

When I came to Oxford I never really thought that 32 years later, I would still be here. In that time a lot has happened: I've got married and seen my daughter grow up into a delightfully intelligent, caring and elegant young woman; I've had a mid-term change of career; I've shared my house with a total of ten cats (though not all at once); I've sung in all sorts of places, for a whole variety of people, on and off stage. Since becoming a presbyter in 1999, I have, at one time or another, been the minister of nine of our churches, and, in so doing, have had the joy and privilege of sharing with many of the wonderful people who make up our church communities.

As I finally leave for pastures new and transform myself into a Methodist school chaplain, the circuit itself is once again considering its future. It won't be the first time and that is as it should be. As a church, we constantly have to think about our mission and how best we can enable people to hear the message of God's love for them. But we are also called to be realistic. Potential is everywhere but we know that we do not have the resources to do everything. In the end, it is not our own wishes and desires that count but the needs of the kingdom, even if that means making very difficult decisions. So what should that future be?

Sadly, I do not have those answers. Nor is it my place, as the one leaving, to say what should be done. But maybe you will allow me, as I go my way, to offer some reflections based on my years in the circuit.

1. Rejoice in the gifts and talents that you have, as a church and as a circuit. They are varied and they are wonderful. Nurture them in each other and, by encouraging each other, enable things to happen.

2. However, don't run yourself into the ground. Choose things, choose places where the church can make a real difference. Doing a few things well is always better than doing lots of things not so well. And, if that means being

imaginative with transport in the circuit, so be it.

3. Care of our young people is essential if we are going to inspire a new generation. That involves people; that involves time; that involves food; that involves cake; that involves doing things differently; and that may involve letting some things go.

4. As Christians we continue to hold on to that deep belief that, one day, God's love will triumph and cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Whether the Methodist Church will be there when the last trumpet sounds is another question and a far less important one. Our longevity is not what matters. It is making a difference while we are here that counts. Our fall in membership numbers may plateau out, may even turn around. But imagine they don't. What if the church only had twenty years to live? What would you want to do? What would you want Wesley Memorial to do? What would you want the circuit to do? There is no point eking out the money if you then die with half of it still left.



That is not a call to be reckless. But it is a call to draw on the resources we do have

and invest them in the right people working in appropriate buildings and potentially fruitful places, whether that is in a refreshed Wesley Memorial, or a transformed Bladon, which still remains the circuit's biggest group of young people, or Lime Walk with its increasing ministry to older people, or on the Rose Hill estate, or wherever the circuit decides it can best use the abundance of gifts and graces it most certainly has. And it may just be that, in not worrying about the long-term future, in laying down one's life in that way, that we might just find that new life which we so desperately seek. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

God bless!

*Jonathan Todd*

## Open Doors update

Over the seven years we have been trying to implement the Open Doors project we have encountered many stumbling blocks on our journey but at the same time also found the stepping stones on which to make progress.

One of the latest stumbling blocks occurred shortly after the Phase Two contract started (the new extension and refurbishment of the large Hall and rooms behind) when we found more asbestos than we were expecting, hidden around the lagging to the central heating pipes under the Hall floor. We also found that the foundations for our new extension had to be dug deeper than planned. Both issues were resolved but at extra cost (£30,000) and with delays, although the contractor hopes to make up the time as the contract progresses.

The Big Give Christmas Challenge was most successful raising £10,695 over the two days in December. Thanks to all who participated. The grant of £40,000 from the Bradbury Foundation has also been received.

We have now paid three invoices from the contractor and the four progress reports and photographs to date can be found in the Link Porch. Thanks to the generous response to our autumn appeal, that has now raised £113,970 plus Gift Aid of £28,700, our projected cash-flow ends up with a positive balance at the end of this phase. Church Council therefore agreed at its March meeting to move forward with Phase Three at a cost of £120,000, including fees and VAT, since there are savings to be achieved by keeping the contractor on site. Phase Three will include works to the



*View of the Moonrakers concert in aid of Open Doors in January 2016.*

John Wesley Room (including a new floor), new windows to the street frontage and the (blue) kitchen having an enlarged serving hatch and roller shutter.

Although we have encountered many stumbling blocks in reaching this point, the stepping stones are leading us to complete phases two and three, hopefully by the end of August. Our application to the Connexion for a large grant for the Heritage Phase has also met several stumbling blocks since our last report, but we are hoping and praying to resolve these as soon as we can.

*Derek Rawson*

### Church Council report

On Monday 1st February, the Church Council met to discuss the Consultation on Circuit Staffing. All churches in the circuit are conducting similar meetings and the results of discussions will be taken to the March Circuit Meeting to be discussed further.

Following the housing crisis in Oxford meeting held in Church on 31st January, there will be further discussion at the next Church Council on Thursday 3rd March.

*Janet Forsaith, Church Council Secretary*

### *Heard it on the grapevine...*

#### **Births**

Rachel Charlotte Arnold, a daughter to Nick and Jenny, 4 February 2016





## Wesley Memorial Church

New Inn Hall Street, Oxford OX1 2DH

Minister: *The Revd Dr Martin Wellings*

Children's, families' & outreach worker:  
*Janice Smith*

Church manager: *Nikos Papolmatas*

Services: Sundays 10.30am & 6.30pm (monthly)  
Wednesdays 12.30pm

Tel: 01865 243216

Web: [www.wesleymem.org.uk](http://www.wesleymem.org.uk)

Wesley Memorial News editorial and production team: *Judith Atkinson, Janet Forsaith, Esther Ibbotson, Glenda Lane, Fiona Macdonald, Mel McCulloch, Simeon Mitchell, Robert Protherough.*

Email: [newsletter@wesleymem.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@wesleymem.org.uk)

Contributions, letters, questions, pictures, book reviews and any other suitable items for publication are always welcome. Please pass them to the editorial team by hand or by email, stating if you are unwilling for them to appear on the church website. Articles may be edited. Articles express the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Wesley Memorial Church or the Methodist Church.

*Printed on 100% recycled paper.*

*Deadline for the next issue:  
27 May 2016*

### Dates for the diary

Thursday 24 March, 7.30pm	Maundy Thursday Service at St Columba's
Friday 25 March, 10.30am	Good Friday service at Wesley Memorial
Sunday 27 March	Easter Day
Friday 1 April	Junior Church Activity Day
Sunday 17 April	Church AGM
Sunday 24 April, 10.30am	Revd Leslie Griffiths preaching
Sunday 24 April, 6.30pm	Circuit Service at Wesley Memorial
Friday 29 April to Sunday 1 May	Church Family Weekend
Saturday 14 May	Christian Aid street market
Sunday 22 May, 10.30am	Faith in Action Group United Service at Wesley Memorial
Wednesday 25 May	Wesley Lecture at Lincoln College
Tuesday 19 & Wednesday 20 July	Inaugural Wesley Memorial Lectures, given by Revd Dr Jane Leach

### WESLEY MEMBRAIN

