
Wesley Memorial *magazine*

from Wesley Memorial Methodist Church, Oxford

Summer 2024



Sizwe and the leaders of his Local Preacher Accreditation service, 26 May

Finding a voice



Finding a voice

Dear Friends,

As I was wondering what to write to you, I was reminded that this July brings the 50th Anniversary of the first ordinations of women as presbyters in the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Although the Primitive Methodist Church and the Bible Christians had women in leadership, it was not until 1974 that the Methodist Conference ordained the first women presbyters since Union in 1932.



Women have always been a key part of the Church and have always found a voice through different means. However, the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Methodist Church in Great Britain is something to celebrate! The Methodist Church has come far in its journey towards gender equality, but it is vital to recognise how far we have yet to travel towards full inclusion of God's diverse and beautiful humanity. Throughout generations of Methodism, women have had to prove that they were not only as good at preaching as men, but could be better, in order to be valued. In early Methodism, female preaching was seen as disruptive. Perhaps it is time to redouble our efforts to again disrupt the accepted order in seeking justice and solidarity for all. Not only gender equality, but for all those who continue to be underrepresented in the life of the church, whose voices and experiences have been silenced, people of colour, those who live with disabilities, those who live with mental health issues, those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community and many more.

I have been inspired throughout my life and ministry to find a voice by those women who have bravely paved the way. Those women who do appear, although often unnamed in scripture. Those women whose news that Christ is alive is seen as 'an idle tale.' It's interesting to note that Charles Wesley wrote a hymn about the first Easter that has not found its way into any hymn books, reflecting that it was the women who stayed at the foot of the cross who were first at the empty tomb:

*More courageous than the men,
When Christ his breath resigned,
Women first the grace obtain
Their living Lord to find;
Women first the news proclaim,
Know the resurrection's power,
Teach the apostles of the Lamb
Who lives to die no more.*

Across the generations women have spoken up and spoken out for truth, justice, love and equality. Two women 'in ministry' that I have learnt so much from across the years are St Hildegard of Bingen and St Catherine of Siena. Hildegard of Bingen, a German Benedictine Abbess, of the early 1100s was an artist, author, composer, mystic, pharmacist, poet, preacher and theologian. Hildegard was no stranger to controversy or to using her voice in speaking out for truth and justice. One of her famous quotes still rings so true today – "even in a world that is being shipwrecked, remain brave and strong." How do we use our voices today with courage? St Catherine of Siena was born in 1347 in Italy and became a third order Dominican. She was known for her service to the poor

and her involvement in politics. She also worked for the unity of the Church before her death aged just 33. Catherine used her voice boldly in speaking out into the situations of her day. For example, “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire” and “Proclaim the truth and do not be silent through fear.” My favourite quote from St Catherine is “We’ve had enough exhortations to be silent. Cry out with a thousand tongues – I see the world is rotten because of silence.” Perhaps these are words that we should exhort each other with, in these days leading up to a General Election? How can our voices be heard? What will we speak out for or against? Will we choose to remain silent?

I conclude with a section from a blessing often called ‘A Franciscan blessing’:

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people...

...May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in the world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Blessings,

Miriam

Editorial

As we put together your summer reading, we cannot ignore a world in turmoil. Election battles are hotting up here in the UK, parties and personalities in the US prepare for an ever more intense and unpleasant contest, and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza rumble on, even while stirring memories of D-Day 1944 fill our TV screens.

By the time this magazine reaches you, the UK election will be decided. We all yearn for “justice [to] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5.) Whatever the outcome, we hope that, as Christians, we shall keep on finding a voice to speak out for what is right, fair and compassionate in our world.

Here are a few stories of our friends’ experiences in finding their voices. We hope you enjoy them!

The Editorial team

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Colin Saunders 1932 - 2024

There will be a tribute to Colin's life and contributions in the next issue of our magazine, Christmas 2024.

Finding a voice - speaking out and shutting up

Astonishingly it's 30 years this summer since I left university and therefore left Wesley Mem. I was pleased to return recently to celebrate Ann Lemmon's 90th birthday and to see old friends, but also to see just how much has changed in the church. My time at Wesley Mem as student, and in the John Wesley Society, certainly helped me to find my voice – and I have gone on to work in roles promoting justice and peace.

I have worked for the Methodist Church in Britain for a number of years (and am delighted to be working alongside current Wesley Mem member, Simeon Mitchell). Most recently I have been helping the Church to reflect on what it means for us to be called to be a justice-seeking church and people.

The Methodist Conference last year adopted a significant report, *A Justice-seeking Church*, which explores our heritage, theology and actions, and sets out a framework for the Church and Methodists in our calling to be a justice-seeking people. It asks three questions:

- **what is our God of justice doing?** and offers principles to underpin our understanding;
- **what is ours to do?** and offers five priorities for action of poverty, refugees, environment, discrimination and peace;
- **how do we do it?** and suggests five practices which will help our justice-seeking be grounded in and closer to God, and be more sustainable, transformative and rooted.

How do you respond to these three simple questions? I'm hoping that churches, circuits and districts around the Connexion will engage with them, and use them to shape their justice-seeking.

So how might "finding our voice" help in our justice-seeking? For much of my life, finding my voice has been about growing the confidence to speak out, or finding the ways in which my voice can be influential and contribute to change. But here I want to offer a couple of reflections which suggest that finding the root of our voices can help us to do justice in different ways.



Rachel with Liz and Ken, at Ann's 90th

In the *Justice-seeking Church* report we looked at the stories we tell about ourselves as Methodists, many of which are about a people who have been active for social justice and social action, from Wesley, to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, to Sybil Phoenix. One of the stories I have frequently told about my own "justice journey" concerns my great-grandmother. Jane Ann left school in rural Derbyshire at the age of 13 and went to work as a housemaid at the local big house. On the first day she met the lady of the house and was told, "I will call you Mary, I call all my housemaids Mary." Jane Ann bravely spoke up, saying "My name is Jane Ann. I have been baptised".

13 year old Jane Ann knew who she was, and she boldly spoke up for dignity and fairness for herself, and for other housemaids. She was helped in finding her voice through her baptism: she knew who she was in Christ. Her sense of worth and dignity came from her understanding that she was a child of God, created in God's image.



Jane Ann, Rachel's great-grandmother

In Methodism justice-seeking is never far from the source of that justice, our God whose nature is loving and just.

Finding our voices for justice also helps us to share more fully what good news looks like. For someone experiencing poverty or conflict, good news has to be about being able to thrive and live in peace, as well as knowing that God longs for that flourishing for all of us. A colleague of mine says that “evangelism and social justice are gospel partners”, one without the other is only part of God’s story. Finding my voice for justice has meant rooting my actions and myself more deeply in the God of justice.

And yet does finding my voice sometimes mean...shutting up? In a recent podcast, Anglican priest Al Barrett and Professor Anthony Reddie reflected on “Whiteness”, a term used to describe a way of being and seeing in the world which habituates the privileging of people of European descent and light skin tone. I was struck when Al warned listeners, “The last thing that people like me – that tick all the boxes of structural privilege – should be doing is imagining that we’re in the place of Jesus in the world.” Instead of identifying myself with “social justice Jesus”,

who over-turned the tables and resisted the Empire, I realise I should see myself in Zacchaeus: compromised, guilty, being called to repent and repay, and seeking forgiveness. Finding my voice, as a person with many privileges, sometimes means lamenting and repenting, and listening to the experiences of those who are still most marginalised or excluded. Only then together can I, with much still to learn, offer my voice up for change.

So, finding my voice is both about finding the depths of God in which that voice is rooted, and also using my voice to lament with, instead of shout for, people. Rooted in God and being with people: a rather good summary for Methodists of being justice-seekers, don’t you think?

Rachel Lampard

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You can find out more about *A Justice-seeking Church* at methodist.org.uk/justice

Sizwe Mkwanzazi Methodist Local Preacher

Sizwe’s service of Accreditation on Sunday afternoon 26 May took place with a 4-way link on Zoom from Wesley Memorial to our local friends, Sizwe’s South African friends and family, and Sizwe himself who, to our surprise, was in Morocco for a workshop on his expertise, *Cooperatives and Sustainable Transition in Africa*.

A good congregation sang heartily and applauded enthusiastically when Sizwe expressed in his testimony his calling, his thanks to Oxford, and the people who had helped him on the journey. Miriam led the service and asked the prescribed questions, Paul Spray preached and Grace Samkange led the Intercessions. Phil Crockett from Watlington Church and Shelby Knighton read the scriptures, and Circuit steward Margaret Sawyer read out the President’s letter to new Local Preachers.



It was an inspiring occasion for all those present, and a great joy to welcome supporters from all over the circuit and world! Sizwe thanked us and told us that his friends appreciated a ‘beautiful service’.

(See photo on front cover)

Finding a voice through preaching

In advance of Vocations Sunday this year, I wrote about my Call to Preach for the Connexional website and was also filmed. So, of course, my thoughts turned back to my time at Wesley Mem where my preaching journey had started. With thanks and affection, I recalled both the preachers who had inspired and taught me (Jonathan Todd's sermon on the Christian response to the impending war in Iraq still influences the way I preach on difficult subjects today!), and the friends whose support encouraged me. I suppose we all had a sense that there might be a voice for me to find.

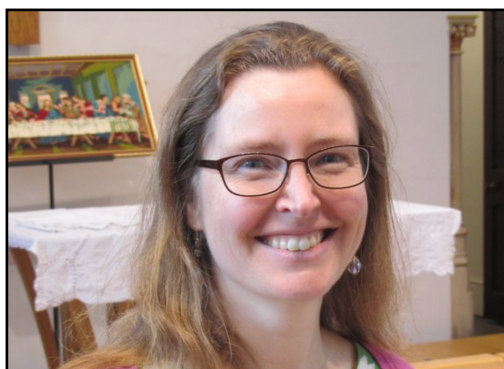
My most transformative preaching experience was in 2016 when I preached at my home church in Bristol only two and a half weeks after our minister had died. A 41-year-old husband, father of four and gifted preacher and minister, Michael Etheridge died very unexpectedly and his death deeply affected our congregation. As the sermon for that Sunday formed in my mind, I was reminded of theology which I had heard Philip Beuzeval and David Cooper preach on. Theology which had made its way into my head, but which only now started to make sense in my heart and for the first time poured out onto the pages of one my sermons. When I gave the sermon you could have heard a pin drop. Somehow I had managed to help many of us make sense of that sad and unfair death in the context of our faith. It was an extraordinary experience which gave me a new sense of authority about my preaching; a sense that I had something to say that was worth listening to. I was discovering that I did indeed have a voice.

More recently, it feels as though my faith and preaching have moved on again. During Lent last year I took part in five weeks of accompanied prayer. Participants were asked to make notes, so we could discuss things with our prayer guide. I enjoyed the writing process, and the time I spent in prayer and contemplation helped me order many of my thoughts about how my faith had developed over the preceding years. That Lent, our church also hosted an exhibition which included over 25 works of art from the Methodist Modern Art Collection (MMAC). Worshipping amongst these beautiful artworks over many weeks and speaking with others about what they meant to us, gave me

the idea for a number of reflections on them. I spent much of the rest of the year following up my theological interests, discovering many new avenues and ways of thinking about God. By Christmas I still hadn't written down any reflections, but couldn't shake the sense that this was something I needed to do (if only to get them out of my head!). So I decided to turn them into a Lent project. By Easter I had written 10 reflections, though I have ideas for nearly as many again. I sent them to a few friends to explore whether to share them more widely. They were all enthusiastic, one friend commenting: "I'm sure this is a medium that you should concentrate on to give expression to your vibrant and challenging faith." Is a new voice emerging?

So I am now exploring how I might make that voice heard. I may approach the MMAC, but also want to expand and write about other (not necessarily explicitly religious) art. I am now tending towards setting up an online blog where I could publish a new reflection each month. Alongside the written reflections there could be audio versions for people to listen to as they visit an MMAC exhibition. But how can I make sure this doesn't just languish in some obscure corner of the internet? How can I ensure that the reflections will reach those who will be moved by them and encouraged to think more deeply about God and faith? Should I try to make the reflections more accessible to those with little or no Christian background? And how can I include visually impaired people? As Joanna Tulloch warned me when I was on note with her: the questions only increase as you continue on your journey of faith.

Vicky Davies



Untitled — Pentecost *John Brokenshire*



A reflection

When you stand close up to this painting, you see that it really is just a white smudge on a dark background. But stand a bit further away, perhaps a bit to the left, and it is clearly a dove, hovering mid-flight. A white dove, a sign of peace, a sign of God's Holy Spirit. Another observer may have titled this *Pentecost*, but to me, it looks much more like the Spirit of God hovering over the waters before creation. And God said "Let there be light", and we can just start to see a new bright sky breaking in, chasing away the dark clouds of nothingness.

But really it is the dove, this smudge, which is so fascinating. The smudge is just a hint of a dove and our mind fills in the blanks. And as it does so, it fills in only the beautiful parts. The soft feathers, the radiant whiteness, the delicate movement of the wings. A photo of a dove would also include the bulging eyes, the scraggy legs, the sharp claws. Even the most beautiful dove would include these harsh realities. But this dove is soft and feathery, delicate and gentle, both still and ever moving.

And so this smudge reflects God, reflects love, much better than a realistically drawn dove ever could. In the same way that our mind needs to fill in the blanks to see this dove,

our mind also needs to fill in the blanks to capture the perfect beauty and holiness of God, the moral perfection of pure love. What we see elsewhere is always only a glimpse, blighted by the imperfections of our world and us humans. Only in our mind's eye, as we ponder God in the stillness and depths of our inner being can we see God's love in its full glory — no bulging eyes, no scraggy legs and no sharp claws anywhere in sight. The dove is hovering, moving.

Like the Spirit of God, it is active, it is free, it is alive! What is it doing as it hovers, I wonder? Is it seeing where it is needed and where it should go? Is it heralding something new? Or are its wings outstretched, like a conductor's arms, directing the actions of love — bringing order out of chaos, light into darkness, life out of nothingness? Both the dove and the Spirit of God seem to be able to fill my mind, my imagination, my being; but also remain just out of reach, never caught and tamed, never fully captured, always a mystery.

Vicky Davies

*Artwork taken from the Methodist Modern Art Collection
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www.methodist.org.uk/artcollection*

The Methodist Church in Britain

Finding my voice: a journey with Oxford Phab

Hello, everyone. My name is Tom Bucknell, and I am honoured to introduce myself as the newly elected chairperson of Oxford Phab. For the past 25 years, Phab has been a cornerstone of my life, shaping not only my personal growth but also my understanding of the power of inclusion and community.

Phab is more than just a social club; it is a beacon of hope and unity. Our mission is to bring together people of all abilities, fostering an environment where everyone can participate equally in a variety of activities. We believe in the power of inclusion and our motto, "Everyone belongs, everyone involved," reflects our commitment to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their abilities, are embraced and celebrated.

In my previous role as a peer support worker for the NHS Oxford Mental Health Trust, I worked with the Individual Placement Service. Our goal was to support individuals with long-term mental health illnesses in finding and maintaining employment. This role was not just about employment; it was about helping individuals find their voice and gain confidence in their abilities.

Many of the individuals I worked with had spent significant time within mental health services, some even hospitalised due to mental health episodes. The transition from patient to employee was often fraught with fear and uncertainty. Questions like, "What happens if I become ill again?" or "Who do I go to in the workplace if I'm unwell?" were common and legitimate concerns. It was my job to help them navigate these fears, preparing them for the workplace with wellness action plans and workshops on legal rights, mental health first aid, and more.

Through this work, I witnessed first hand the remarkable resilience and strength of those overcoming mental health challenges. Their journey demonstrated a profound ability to bounce back from difficult situations, fostering empathy, problem-solving skills, and a strong work ethic. These are the qualities that not only make a great employee but also empower individuals to find their voice in the workplace and beyond.



Tom with Helen, John & Mary

In addition to my role with the NHS, I also trained as a hypnotherapist and counsellor, specialising in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and a person-centred approach. This training reinforced the idea that our thoughts influence our feelings and behaviours. Where our attention goes, our energy flows. When you want change in your life, it is helpful to start out with the outcome you want in mind. By focusing on positive outcomes and channelling our energy towards what we want to achieve, we can amplify our voice and effect meaningful change in our lives.

"My goal is to ensure that every member of our community feels heard, valued and empowered.."

A personal experience that underscores the importance of finding one's voice happened recently. As a dedicated fan and season ticket holder for a women's football team, I faced a challenge when the team played their last home game of the season at the main stadium where the men play their home games. Despite being a wheelchair user with a valid season ticket, I was initially informed that all wheelchair spaces were taken. While it was encouraging to see such high demand, I felt this was an oversight that needed addressing. By my voicing my concerns through a constructive email, the club acknowledged the issue and found me an available space.

This incident reminded me of the significance of speaking up, especially when advocating for oneself and others. It is this very principle that I bring to my role as the chairperson of Oxford Phab. My goal is to ensure that every member of our community feels heard, valued, and empowered to express themselves.

At Phab, we believe that everyone has abilities and that these abilities should be celebrated and nurtured. Whether it's through our inclusive activities or the support we offer each other, we strive to create a space where every voice

matters. As we continue this journey together, I am committed to upholding our mission and fostering a community where everyone belongs, and everyone is involved.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story. I look forward to working with all of you to make Oxford Phab a place where every voice is heard and valued.

Warm regards,

Tom Bucknell

Street Market 2024

“O for a trumpet voice..”

So wrote Charles Wesley in his hymn “Let earth and heaven agree”. A trumpet would have been very useful to attract passing trade to the annual Wesley Memorial and Cowley Road Christian Aid Street market this year. But it was a bumper year, nonetheless. It's a date that is somehow lodged in the communal memory, and once Paul is out ‘loud-hailing’ with the collecting bucket, people happily come along and browse, buy, eat and drink and chat.

On offer were the traditional goods: plants, cakes, jams, some toys and home ware, snacks and lunches, visibly demonstrating once again our commitment to the life-saving and life-affirming work of Christian Aid. This annual event has been in the calendar for many decades and goes from strength to strength, only interrupted by epidemics! We were fortunate this year to enjoy a warm day which proved ideal for the outdoor stalls, and also for relaxing in the hall with friends over lunch, to the accompaniment of non-stop popular piano music.

The cake stall met with stunning success, as did the café; and our careful planning to provide card-readers for payment ensured that we didn't miss out on the takings!

Thank you all for generous contributions of goods and time. This year's happy event raised a stupendous £1835.10 for Christian Aid's vital work. See you there again in 2025!



TOP: Plants;

MIDDLE: Home stall;

BOTTOM: Paul & bucket



Finding a voice as a poet

I have written poems since I was a child, but the verse I wrote then was rather sporadic and, of course, childish. It was when I was in my teens that some of my poems were first published, but I wouldn't say that I found my voice then. I have spent quite a lot of time in hospital (in London and Paris in my teens, and then in Oxford through the 1990s and in 2007), during which times my output increased considerably, and by the time I was discharged in 2008 I found I couldn't start the day without writing at least one poem, and sometimes up to six of them. By the end of 2008 I had written more than 500 poems.

The question then was how to share these poems with others. In 2009 I had an exhibition of watercolours and poems at the Warneford and Littlemore hospitals, for which a slim volume called *Only a Whisper* was published by the Artscape programme headed by Allie Butler, and shortly afterwards I took part in an exhibition at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes, with the same material, as well as some icons with accompanying poems. But I would really say that I first found my voice when I was awarded a highly commended in the Paragram Poetry Prize in 2013, with this little poem:

Open for Business

The gates stand open
on to a courtyard
surrounded by a crumbling wall,
its ancient stones battened
in places by beams of wood.
Overhanging this wall there is a tree
in blossom, promising cherries
all in their due season.
For the moment there is no fruit,
just the spatter of dark pink petals
punctuating light and floating in puddles.
The courtyard is muddy
and you would do well
to put on your Wellingtons.
And you might need your cardigan, dear,
because the spring sun is cool yet
and you don't want to catch a chill.



There is work to be done here
but you can't just pick out the best bits,
cherry-picking from the whole,
because as I said
the fruit is but a promise for now.
But the gates stand open
and you may enter in your cardigan and wellies
and get down to work.

(The words 'you might need your cardigan, dear' were inspired by a preacher at Wesley Memorial who started his sermon by saying that this was the most depressing sentence in the English language; so I set out to use it humorously in my spring poem.)

The Paragram Prize was what decided me to publish my first 'proper' book of poems in 2014, called *A Reflection of God* (the title poem being inspired by one of Philip Beuzeval's sermons about dogs). I shared this book with lots of people, including many at Wesley Memorial, and managed to raise quite a good sum for the Open Doors project. It is still in demand but unfortunately (and annoyingly) the publishers pulped the remaining copies without first warning me, so it is only available now secondhand.

Now I really felt that I had a voice as a poet. The next book, which took me 25 years to write, was a spiritual journey called *The Invitation to the Garden*, published in 2018. Since then George and I have produced our own booklets with the help of local printers. There are now half a dozen more titles, the most recent being *Prayerful Poems from Underground*. And the number of poems in my computer is approaching 1500 and still rising.



“But the gates stand open”

Joanna Tulloch

The Pentecost Pudding Party

The annual Wesley Memorial Pudding Party, postponed from the Sunday before Lent, was finally held this year on Pentecost Sunday. Each tempting pudding brought could be entered into a competition: tasters voted for three favourites. and the top three chefs won the prestigious title and a (very) small prize.

Soup for the first course left a space for helpings of as many puddings as the taster could manage! In some years, we have gathered a couple of dozen puddings: this year there were only eleven, probably because many chefs had excelled themselves the day before, with delicacies for the Christian Aid Street Market cake stall and café. However, there was still plenty of choice and variety!

This most enjoyable event ended with three worthy winners — John McCulloch, Tom Ibbotson and Simeon Mitchell — and



Puddings!



gifts of £120 were collected for the Rose Hill Community Cupboard. Thanks also to all who provided soup, puddings and helped serve and wash-up.

Al fresco faith

Instead of prioritising attracting newcomers into their building, a Hampshire congregation is focusing on taking church out into their community. Circuit steward Martin Letts explains:

Our congregation came up with the idea of turning church ‘inside out’ a few years ago, and we haven’t looked back!

Mindful that most of the Bible stories about Jesus record him ministering and telling stories to people outside of the synagogues and temples, we decided to concentrate our resources for newcomers on an annual day of providing hospitality out in the community.

With just 28 members, Bishop’s Waltham United Free Church, in the Meon Valley Methodist Circuit, isn’t a large church. However, by calling on our various talents and asking friends to help, our *Faith al Fresco* day was born in 2013. It’s been running ever since (with a break for the pandemic), and we’re now seeing around 100 people at each event.

Fun

While our first *Faith al Fresco* was a modest affair, with a few children’s games and crafts, a prayer tent and, of course food, we’ve since significantly developed the event with all age groups in mind. The food element hasn’t changed - we still offer bacon butties and cake - but we’ve put a lot of thought into running activities along a theme designed to be fun and of interest to everyone.

For anyone who wants to wander into the free event, held on a grassy area in the grounds of Bishop’s Waltham Jubilee Hall, we lay on hospitality with a capital ‘H’. This means ensuring that people feel looked after, well fed and loved. Church members and stewards are around to chat with visitors, explore questions of faith and help in any way we can. Our superintendent minister, the Revd Phil Griffin, and local Church of England vicar, the Revd James Hunt, along with a few local Methodist preachers, also mingle with visitors.

Bumper day

Staging the event in the May half term holiday (when the weather tends to be good, and many people are available)

really works for us, and we’re hoping that this May’s event – on the theme of “Who is My Neighbour?” – will be another bumper day. We’re currently busy adding the finishing touches to our props.

Last year’s theme, “Remember the Rainbow”, required a large wooden Noah’s Ark. This was designed and built at home, and then re-assembled on-site (watched by fascinated children), by church member Tom Banks. The structure was strong enough to withstand the combined weight of several children! Things got a bit chaotic at one point, but it was great fun as we acted out the story of Noah and his family with the help of the Bible Society’s *Open the Book* resources. The children pretended to be animals and members of Noah’s family, and, at the end, a dove flew over and the rainbow (painted onto cardboard) came out and fulfilled God’s promise to us all.

Craft tent

Other attractions included an ever-popular bouncy castle, and a craft tent where children made animal masks which they were then able to wear for the story. For people who just wanted to relax, we provided plenty of chairs and blankets.

We’d invited the local media and were blessed with a visit from a *BBC Radio Solent* reporter who recorded lots of interviews and featured them in her following Sunday broadcast...

A lot of hard work goes into *Faith al Fresco* each year, but we feel it’s a brilliant way of building community, encouraging others and talking about Jesus in a relevant way.

Martin Letts

Bishop’s Waltham United Free Church

Reprinted from Connexion Magazine Issue 23, Spring 2024
Copies available in church — complete with photos!

Revisiting George Herbert

Many of us have a particular affection for George Herbert's hymns, not least 'King of Glory, King of Peace' and 'Teach me, my God and King'. In her recent Easter Message, Helen Cameron reminded us that Herbert's religious poems are among the greatest in the English language.

I have long been fascinated by one of his shortest poems, the sonnet 'Redemption', whose allegorical setting is a land lease that is proving too burdensome for a tenant, who is determined to petition his landlord to give him a more generous deal. The relationship with the landlord is one of long standing. The theme of the poem is of course the salvation of mankind by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Redemption

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancell th' old.
In heaven at his manour I him sought:
They told me there, that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.
I straight return'd, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts;
In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts:
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, Your suit is granted, said, & died.

The 14 lines span the time from Creation to Calvary, culminating in the startling last line. The events and their theological allusions are traced in an engaging commentary published by the George Herbert Society (www.georgeherbert.org.uk). The commentary concludes: "Redemption is a powerful and significant poem that repays careful study and analysis. It is generally recognised as one of George Herbert's finest, catching as it does at the very foundation of Christian belief."

An article by the distinguished scholar E. M. Wilson* some years ago emphasised that the use of everyday imagery (tenant, lease, suit ...) was not unusual in the sixteenth century – for example John Knox compared God's favour to a heavy warm overcoat worn in an icy gale. Such imagery was not unique to Protestant England: it was also a feature in Counter Reformation Spain. For example, in a poem by Alonso de Ledesma, a man lets out his house (i.e. his soul) to a tenant named Sin who leaves it in such bad repair that he is shocked and takes on a different tenant, named Disillusion. Domingo de Valtanas, in a treatise on Christian doctrine, makes the point that Faith in this life serves only to light us to the gates of Heaven: 'Faith is like the link-boy who carried his torch to light his master going to the palace; the link-boy does not go into the palace, but he takes his master to the door'.

It is remarkable that these similarities were present in an age when Christians across the divide were submitting those of other persuasions to barbaric and inhumane treatment in the name of religion.

Wilson comments: 'In spite of the differences between England and Spain in religion, the similarities in their respective religious poems seem to be more important than their differences (...) the main thing is the fact that in each country there was a common way to express religious truths.

There are perhaps messages here for our time.

Alan Dobson

**E.M. Wilson (1980), Spanish and English Literature of the 16th and 17th centuries: discretion, illusion and mutability, CUP, pp.234-49.*

Zacchaeus: Luke 19, 1-10

I could call it ‘Zacchaeus finds a voice’, but to be honest, that was not the inspiration at all. The fact is that on Monday night next week, in our house group, we’ll be looking at some characters from the New Testament, and I opted for Zacchaeus before anyone else could!

I like the idea of a small man who couldn’t see over the crowds – I’ve been there! We all knew about Zacchaeus in Sunday School way back then, from the song, “Zacchaeus was a very little man..” The story is a great stalwart for Juniors’ drama: children in crowd mode, one with tea-towel on head plays Jesus, one climbs on a chair (firmly supported, for Health & Safety reasons). Jesus calls Zacchaeus down, says “Tea at your place”, and everyone sits down to drinks and cake. That is, apart from the Pharisees (more tea towels) who stand by to disapprove. Zacchaeus declares his repentance, and Jesus commends the salvation that has come to the house. End of play.

One of the commentaries I found suggested that Zacchaeus, with his wealth, could easily have sent one of his servants to fetch Jesus, rather than making a spectacle of himself by the undignified tree-climbing. But apparently the choice of the sycamore tree also signifies transformation and regeneration, a message our commentators tell us could not be lost on Jesus. So when Jesus invites himself to the chief tax collector’s house, he is responding to the cry for help. The Pharisees are disgusted and we may safely assume that the ordinary tax-payers are not too impressed either! Zacchaeus, facing hatred all around him, has nothing to lose by making a fool of himself. He is determined.

I was intrigued enough to look up more about tax collectors and their position in Roman-controlled society. Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho, was doing very nicely financially. The Romans left their stooges no option but to overcharge the public. They were not salaried, and the temptation to fleece their fellows must have been high. Harsh punishments, beatings as well as fines, for not paying taxes to the Roman occupier were exacted, and there was

no retirement age from tax-paying. No wonder Jesus said, “Give back to Caesar what belongs to him”. (Luke 15, v 25.)

But then, as we know, Zacchaeus declares that he will give half his goods to the poor and repay anyone four times what he has extorted. The Old Testament Law states various levels of retribution: the four times version seems to depend on Exodus 22, v 1 where the thief must repay four sheep for one stolen. What’s interesting here is that Zacchaeus is a ‘son of Abraham’ who clearly knows the Law. And is reinstated as such, following his public repentance.



The calling of Zacchaeus: mosaic in the Basilica of St Mark, Venice

There ends the tantalising glimpse of this encounter. We would love to know what happened to Zacchaeus. When he set out to keep his promise, was he overwhelmed by the claimants? And when he heard news from Jerusalem that Jesus had been cruelly put to death by the Roman governor, was he afraid? Did he hear about the Resurrection? Did he continue working for the Empire? Did he leave Jericho to join the disciples?

All we shall ever know is that this one defining moment, the encounter with Jesus, reset his life on a new track, as it did for so many others in Luke’s gospel, people who met Jesus in their various moments of need. So Zacchaeus finds a voice after all: in just 10 verses, he too is an evangelist!

Kate Dobson

Wesley Memorial at Oxford Pride 2024



Eighteen enthusiastic marchers from Wesley Memorial joined the annual Pride Parade on Saturday 8 June, armed with banners and T-shirts. (See photos!)

Ours was the only named Christian presence there, as Miriam was proud to report to the Church Council of 12 June – a very positive witness and a powerful message for our inclusive church. One of the main Pride organisers made a point of thanking us afterwards.

Huge thanks to all who supported, and organised the banners, T-shirts and little gifts that we gave. These were cards with a small badge and a knitted rainbow heart. In addition, our Circuit Craft group, *Knit&Stitch* that meets on Tuesdays, had knitted 40 'Octopodes' in varying Pride flag colours. These, when offered to young marchers and any bearers of matching flags, were received with gratitude.



A few quotes: *I had not been to a Pride march before, but felt that our Wesley Memorial contingent had an important message to put across, namely the inclusivity and welcome that we offer...* Joanna



It was wonderful to be part of the celebration by and for the queer community at Pride... Katie

I was proud to be at the Pride Parade, wearing a rainbow hat and ribbons under a Wesley Memorial banner. The music from the 'Horns of Plenty' was wonderful... Wendy

One of the most fun things I have done at Wesley Memorial. I felt that the church was accepted and welcomed and that was quite humbling ... Jo



Voices for the Community Cupboard



The concert was everything that the poster promised, and more: a marvellous medley of songs from the shows.

A very full audience enjoyed songs from *Porgy & Bess*, *Carousel*, *My Fair Lady*, *West Side Story* and *Les Misérables*, with *Annie's Song*, and other numbers, on flute and piano.

During the interval there were drinks, and a lavish choice of cakes, supplied by many friends.

Supporters gave most generously, raising a total of over £900.00 for the Rose Hill Community Cupboard's work. Liz Spain has thanked us all very warmly for the support; and at the Church Council on 12 June, the Rose Hill Community Cupboard was adopted as the official church project, to run for at least two years from now.

Thanks to all performers, helpers and audience. And to the National Methodist Youth Brass Band whose concert on Saturday 15 June raised a further £557.80 for the cause.

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All items may be edited by the team.

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