

the connexion

Singing a new song

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In the interest of public safety and to
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this play area is

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Health & Safety inspections of the play
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Please follow government advice on social
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David Perry
Editor

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Psalm 137:4

The last edition of *the connexion* was written before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, and represents a world and a normality that now seems so strange and far away to us. By contrast, the majority of the articles in this edition have all been written during the period of absolute lockdown here in the UK.

Our aim is to give you an overview of how the pandemic has impacted the life of the Church globally and a sense of how, in the midst of this terrible crisis, God has been inspiring us to respond in fresh and creative ways. Other pieces reflect the underlying challenges we face as we seek to put the gospel into practice, such as the timely article on antisemitism.

However, the murder of George Floyd in the United States and the consequent groundswell of support for the Black Lives Matter movement, with its necessarily strong determination to call out and confront racism, needs to be addressed too. We have therefore included a special section written by five Black British Methodists, who responded to my request with next to no time in which to write their contributions. To them I am profoundly grateful.

As a sign of solidarity with everyone who is living through lockdown I asked each contributor to provide a doorstep portrait of themselves, to reflect the shared consequences of the instruction to "Stay at Home". You will appreciate that the magazine looks different too, as we were not able to send our superb professional photographers to cover the stories in their usual imaginative depth and detail.

So in every respect this edition of the magazine is itself an expression of what it is to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The wonder, of course, is that singing a new song is precisely what God enables us to do. Indeed in times of crisis and disconnection it is what we should expect. Psalm 137 expresses both a cry from the heart in anguished times, and the fulfilment of the very hope that once seemed so elusive and out of reach. I hope that the contributions in this edition of *the connexion* will affirm the wonderful truth of God's new song for all of us and prompt us as the Church to be transformed together.

Love and peace,
David

the connexion

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Sign on children's play
equipment, Filey

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What is the Connexion?

Methodists belong to local churches and also value being part of a larger community. In calling the Methodist Church in Britain 'the Connexion', Methodism reflects its historical and spiritual roots.

In the 18th century a 'connexion' simply meant those connected to a person or a group – for instance, a politician's network of supporters. So when people spoke of "Mr Wesley's Connexion" they meant followers of the movement led by John Wesley.

Wesley believed that belonging and mutual responsibility were fundamental Christian qualities. The language of connexion allowed him to express this interdependence, developing its spiritual and practical significance in the organisation and ethos of his movement. Both language and practice are important for Methodists today.

Go to www.methodist.org.uk/theconnexion to order more copies of *the connexion*, or to download articles for use in your own church magazine. Images are available at www.flickr.com/methodistmedia

What do you think about this issue?

Email theconnexioneditor@methodistchurch.org.uk

Highlights



4-7 Black Lives Matter



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Get Creative!

Children and young people (aged 4 to 18) are invited to write, draw, paint, or get creatively busy with their camera to enter the fantastic Get Creative! competition.

Responding to the theme of 'What is God saying?' whether to entrants, or the Church, or to the world,

submissions can be in the form of a poem or spoken word piece, a picture or a photograph/photo collage.

There are ten activities for children or young people to explore for listening to God and then for inspiring their creativity.

Full details of how to enter are on the Church website www.methodist.org.uk/Getcreative

Virtual tours of Methodist Heritage sites

While heritage sites remain closed, you can still explore Methodist history with online virtual tours, including Epworth Old Rectory in Lincolnshire, the New Room Bristol and the Museum of Methodism in London.

John and Charles Wesley grew up at Epworth Old Rectory, so visit the house for a glimpse into their family life.

<https://epwortholdrectory.org.uk/epworth-old-rectory-old-visit/virtual-tour/>

'Travelling' south-west to Bristol, virtually enter the oldest Methodist building in the world, the New Room, with its museum illustrating the social issues that faced the Wesleys as Methodism took root.

www.newroombristol.org.uk/museum/explore-the-museum/

In London tour Wesley's Chapel, built by John; view his house where he lived and died; and learn more of Methodism in the museum.

www.wesleysheritage.org.uk/your-visit/virtual-tour/

Not online?

With churches closed for lockdown, at the time of writing, worship continues. Virtual services and prayers have seen large numbers 'attending', but many church members do not have access to the Internet and so risk being isolated from their church communities.

For people not online, there is a free weekly telephone news and prayer. Call **0808 281 2514** to listen to a prayer. And on **0808 281 2478** callers will find the latest news from the Methodist Church. The content of each phone line is refreshed every Thursday evening. The Methodist Church website has downloadable information sheets about this telephone support to print off and share with those people who might wish to use this free service www.methodist.org.uk/dial-a-prayer

The brutal killing of George Floyd, who died at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, USA, prompted a wave of anger and revulsion around the world. As Christian people, the Methodist Church is appalled that someone could die in such a fashion and appalled also

From the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, Secretary of the Conference



The Methodist Church endorses the call of Black Lives Matter for radical action in addressing the causes of racial injustice. We believe that racism is a denial of the gospel. However, we have to recognise that we have not yet eradicated the problem from our Church.

I have read the articles in this section with a heavy heart. I was outraged and horrified at the killing of George Floyd, and am completely supportive of the call of Black Lives Matter for radical action in addressing the causes of racial injustice. But the experiences of our contributors make difficult reading. They speak of an unsupportive Church and one that does not value diversity. If we are going to be reformed and renewed we need to listen to those in whom, too often, the breath of God has been stifled by the powerful majority.

The Methodist Church believes that racism is a denial of the gospel. However, we have to recognise that we have not yet eradicated this evil from our Church.

The Church that we hope to become will celebrate and not be afraid of diversity; it will be disciplined and uncompromising in its refusal to tolerate any form of racism; it will encourage the vocation of those from minority groups to serve in senior leadership; and it will be a Church where all are assured of a welcome as they come to share in worship and ministry with us.

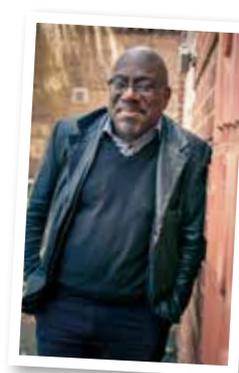
We have to be honest that we have not been that Church. We repent of how we have fallen short and we continue to look for how we can witness to the all-encompassing love of God and be the change that we want to see in the world. 'Only the Spirit's power can fit us for this hour': we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit, come!'

Toppling the monuments to **White supremacy!**

**Professor Anthony G Reddie,
Director of the Oxford Centre
for Religion and Culture**

The Black Lives Matter movement emerged to counter the patently obvious fact that Black lives do not matter. This is not just a question of economics or materiality; it is also about seemingly 'ephemeral matters' like the

impact on our psyche and associated questions of representation and spirituality. It has been interesting observing the concern of some White people for matters of law and order, and governance and property over the tearing down of the Colston statue in Bristol.



at the continued injustice which many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people experience. The following responses present our solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement's challenge to racism.



I worked for a year in Bristol and was confronted with the sight of statues built in honour of men who enslaved my ancestors.

Polite petitions to move these and other statues were ignored. Long before a so-called mob tore this one down Black activists asked for it and other statues to be moved to museums where those who deliberately wanted to see them could, but saving those of us who didn't the ignominy of having the lives our oppressed ancestors constantly insulted. White authority ignored our claims, **BECAUSE OUR LIVES DON'T MATTER** and in the face of White complacency and disregard, **OUR FEELINGS DO NOT MATTER EITHER**.

In 2007, I along with many others, campaigned for a national monument to mark the epoch of the slave trade and the countless millions who died under the yoke of British slavery. We were peaceful, respectful and went through the usual democratic channels, and successive governments ignored our pleas.

We were peaceful and respectful and made our entreaties in the time honoured and peaceful way.

I find it interesting that following the pulling down of a statue, we had the usual anguished voices of White people sharing their greater concern for property, than the feelings of Black people. So, White people can complain about our not abiding by the rules when our attempts to do so have been ignored completely and treated with indifference and contempt!

In the context of the Methodist Church, the Conference has adopted countless reports committing itself to Racial Justice and yet at the time of writing, we have for example, a Learning Network comprised of Learning Development officers that does not include one Black British Methodist. Black lives matters but not as much as White middle class ones, obviously!

I have used the iconic toppling of the Colston statue as a microcosm for the wider Black Lives Matter movement and the indifference of White people to our pleas for justice. The frustration of the protestors that led to the toppling and disposal of the statue reminds me of the very human 'righteous anger' of Jesus in turning out the money changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48, John 2:13-16). It seems like it is alright for a 'White Jesus' as depicted in Western iconography to be angry and destroy property but not Black people!

If the Methodist Church is serious about Black Lives Matter then we need more than rhetoric and well-crafted words and Conference resolutions. I am not going to be so arrogant as to pretend that I am speaking for all Black people in the Methodist Church and beyond. So, instead, I will speak for myself. I have lost patience with a Church that has treated Black people with benign neglect for far too long.



The Revd Faith Nyota



The events surrounding the death of George Floyd and the outcry of those who suffer racial discrimination in this country, with many tens of thousands protesting, asks us all to re-examine ourselves and our attitudes towards those who live here but are a different colour. There is palpable anger towards systemic and structural racism in all institutions including churches. Black people (BAME) live it daily. We need to redouble our efforts to not exclude people on the grounds of race. I know that having served in different church roles and contexts for the last 20 years. I have sometimes felt treated as being less.

What are we to do as Methodists? John Wesley's letters to Wilberforce comes to mind. First, we are called as the church to examine our sins of omission/commission on this matter, to be deliberate in bringing BAME to the centre of governance. To recognise the times we have failed to challenge racist behaviour in our local areas. When we have failed to



stand with those who are abused because they are a different colour to us. When we have overlooked the gifts of those who are in our own congregations or in those with leadership potential because of their race. Galatians 3:28 suffices.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (NRSV)

Thelma Commey, Methodist Youth President 2019/2020

Being in relationship with Jesus should be a completely transformative experience. One that isn't limited to salvation nor restricted by religious practices but fully focused on death of oneself and new life in him. At least I can say that is what it has been for me. For this reason, my heart aches: not only because I am Black but mainly because I am a Christian. Racism, murder and injustice breaks the heart of my Father and looks nothing like the Jesus I follow.

Diversity is intended to be a gift from God yet, for so many, colour has been the cause of death and ill treatment. As God's people,

we are called to model unity and love to a divided, sinful world. We are called not only to empathise with the oppressed but also to seek justice for all. This is why sympathy is simply not sufficient.

If you say you love God but hate, or tolerate the hate of a fellow Black person, not only are you a liar but you do a great disservice to the Body of Christ and the gospel of love: 1 John 4:20.



The Revd Sylvester Deigh

I do not want to write this. I have learnt to keep my hurt and pain to myself, and that there is no point complaining when I am treated less than others. Invariably there is no recognisable evidence and no explanation given.

Racial injustice is not always as visible as you might think. We no longer have the signs that say “no dogs and no blacks” but we do have the ‘silent’ shop assistant who suddenly appears next to you to stack the shelves and reappears beside you in the next aisle. And there is the security guard who follows you around the store,

missing the white person who leaves without paying.

The hardest thing with racism is not being believed and not being heard. Being made to feel that you don’t know what you’re talking about as there’s always an alternative explanation that is believed over yours. It leaves you feeling that you are losing your mind. You lose confidence, belief in who you are, and trust in those around you. It is a denial of the gospel because it eats at the soul, the very foundation of who we are.



Winnie Baffoe

Methodist organisational culture has taught me there are no consequences within Methodism for racism other than the psychological harm on those who see and experience it. Our Calling as Methodists is in opposition to institutionalised racism; the practice of anything else is contrary to our discipline.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s resistance to National Socialism demonstrates that Christ’s representatives must have the courage to go against the grain of powerful forces. A failure to do so relegates our institution to being a Pinocchio puppet to the powers and principalities around us. We become nothing but an imitation of what we are supposed to be.

Furthermore this is indicative that at the core our values are the antithesis of the gospel and it is damaging to the people that are dependent on our institution for faith, employment and ethics and in the case of Black people it perpetuates the *maafa**.

George Floyd was not the first black person to die due to police brutality: what has captured the collective heart of the world is how he died. He died not by a weapon, but by the casual and callous force of another human being given the authority to act as he did by the institution designed to protect and serve.

Methodism has committed institutional suicide because of its resistance to

diversity; in effect not all are welcome. Where is our institutional integrity? Let us stop apologising for institutionalised racism and do something. Jesus did not keep crying at the death of Lazarus, he corrected what the sisters said was wrong.

Large organisations have responded to the Black Lives Matter movement because they acknowledge their client base and that is the shallow end of the morality pool. If we are to regain our moral depth and the trust of the Black community much work is required to fix the Methodist position, because racism is corrosive to the four dimensions of Church: up, in, out and of. Sentiments of regret cannot be believed for as long as the processes which work to exclude remain in place, for as long as that exclusion permeates we are not meeting Jesus as a Church.

This is how change could look:

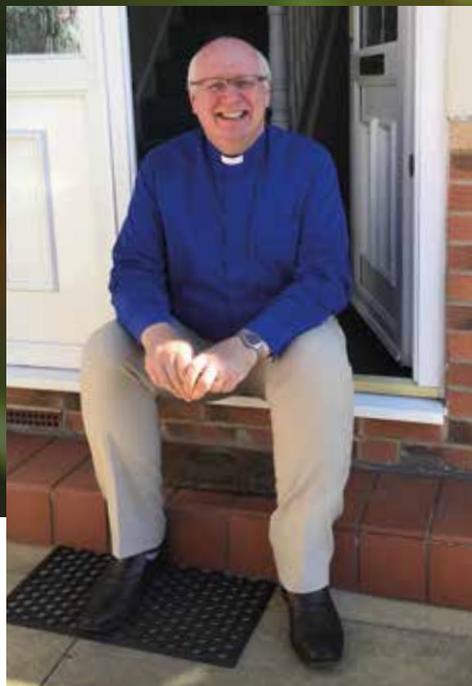
- Begin by dismantling appointment and recruitment processes which remind black people and others of our difference.
- Stop inferring that our skills and knowledge of things other than English middle-class Methodism are irrelevant and inferior.
- Reject protecting the institution over people.



Winnie Baffoe is Bermondsey Central Hall Methodist Church’s ‘Fresh Expressions’ pioneer worker

** A Kiswahili term for ‘disaster’ or ‘terrible occurrence’ or African Holocaust. It is used to describe more than five hundred years of exploitation of Africans through slavery, colonialism, and imperialism.*

THINK PIECE



The new President of the Conference, the Revd Richard J Teal draws us to trusting God for singing a new song in our strange, coronavirus-changed, land

The virus has shown how connected we all are

At the time of writing I have just returned from my daily bicycle ride of nine miles. It was beautiful as the sun rose and broke through the mist, its warmth began to heat the new day. I serve in a rural circuit in East Yorkshire; indeed I hope during the Presidential year to offer a particular focus on supporting the rural church.

This morning I saw for the first time in a number of years hares in the field and a snowy owl gliding with outstretched wings down the side of the hedgerow. The birds appeared to be more plentiful than usual and their song was a joy to hear. Daffodils and snowdrops were out in abundance, trees were bursting into life and the new born lambs were lying with their mothers. I passed a pond where a duck had made

her nest and laid a number of pale green eggs in the midst of a perfect downy circle.

Isolation

It was a beautiful ride, to be thankful for, but there was something not right... No lorries passed me and only the occasional car. When I peddled through a market town centre the shops were nearly all closed and the street was empty. The only human I saw was one farmer tilling the land on the isolation of his tractor. As I then watched the news over breakfast, it was hard to take on board that makeshift hospitals were being built in a number of cities; people dying in their hundreds every day.

The majority of people were self-isolating. It is difficult to connect my bicycle ride with COVID-19. Hard to think that it is the same





**Real faith
doesn't skip
the reality of
life**

world. But of course, it is. The virus has shown how connected we all are.

So how can we engage with Psalm 137:4: "How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?" (KJV).

Keeping faith

This psalm asks the question that is key for all of us who are attempting to live with the beauty and joy of life in tension with the world as it is. Real faith doesn't skip the reality of life: it learns to live with it and wrestle with it.

The psalm needs to be understood in light of the exiles' return from Babylon; seeing the ruins of the city of Jerusalem which they loved and had longed to return to; the temple was destroyed and they remembered the cruel tortures inflicted on them by their captors. As they sat mourning with the reality of their current situation, they recalled how their captors had amused themselves by wanting them to sing songs of joy (v. 3). What is remarkable about these exiles is that they were able to keep their faith at all.

New song-old song

We find ourselves in a strange land. COVID-19 has changed everything. As a people of faith many of us feel huge loss, trauma, and there is fear around. In our church we didn't share in Lent groups or meet with our friends in worship on Easter Day to celebrate the risen Christ, nor share bread and wine in joy. Our buildings are closed, and many are asking how will local churches recover? Like those exiles, how can we sing a new song? Many people are saying the Church will never be the same again, while others expect things to slip back into the ways they were as we become

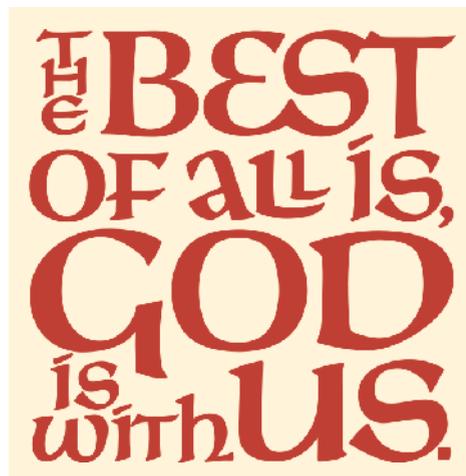
'normal' again. As I write, it is far too early to predict what will happen, but there is one thing for certain: that the new song which the Lord's people will sing will be the old song in new and exciting ways.

God's renewing

In the report 'What is a Circuit Superintendent?' You find these words:

"Methodism arose as a missionary movement. Wesley's focus was upon the spirit of God burning like a fire in the hearts of converted individuals, renewing the Church, firing communities and spreading until scriptural holiness covers the whole earth. His vision was of the restoration and renewal of all things through grace."

Carolyn and I have chosen as the Presidential theme this year what are attributed as John Wesley's final words: "The best of all is, God is with us." That was and is and will continue to be true. God is the one who will lead through this present time and our responsibility is to join with God and to sing the new song wherever God leads us.

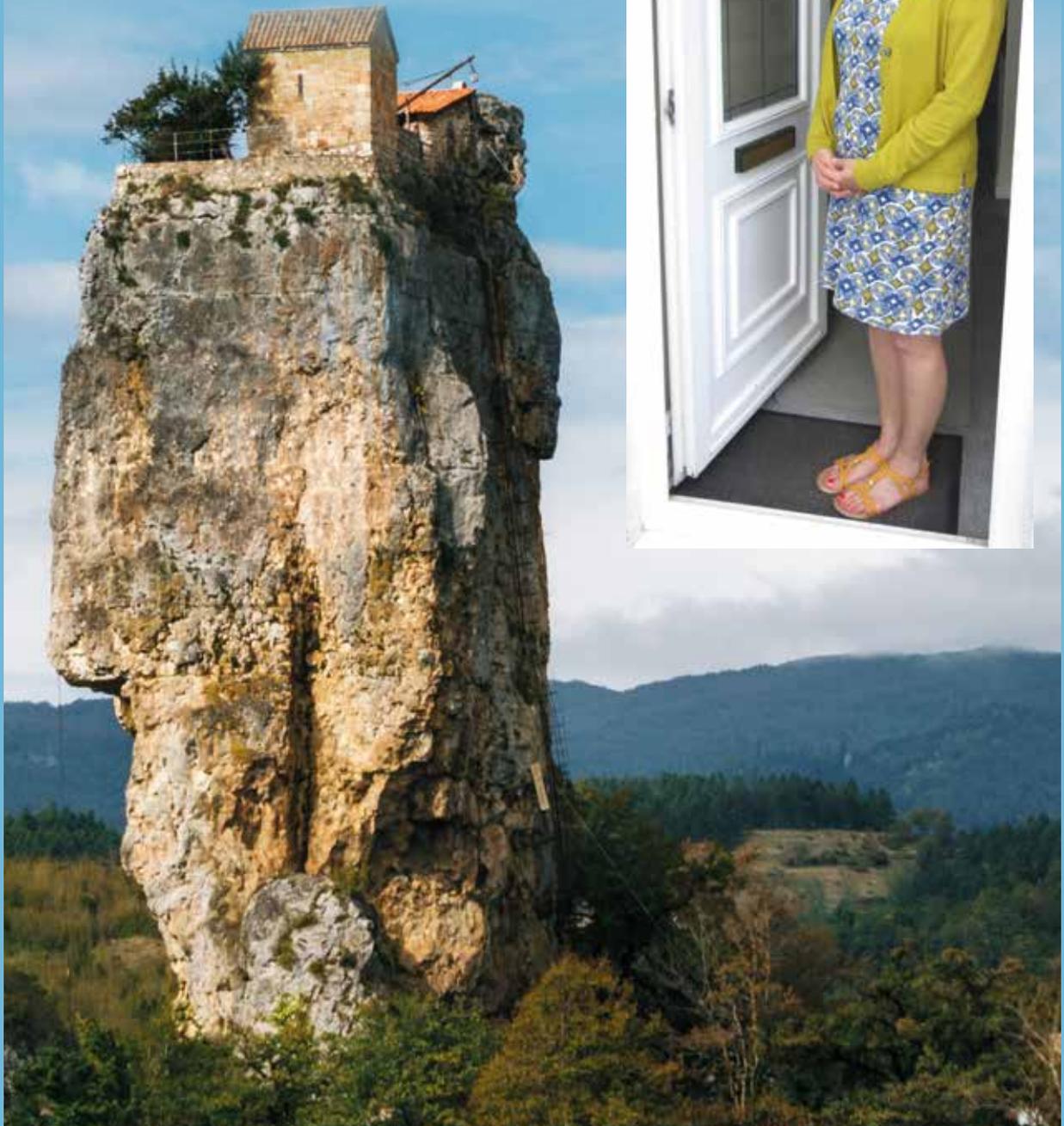


Question

**What is your hope
for the Church
when our
buildings reopen?**

THINK
PIECE

Carolyn Lawrence, the new Vice-President for 2020/2021, encourages the Church in gaining strength to sing our 'new songs' and to look for the 'new thing' that God is doing



There's a Bob Dylan song, *The times they are a changin'*, that certainly sums up recent events in our communities, our nation and our world. It feels as though the steady path we have been walking on, with our plans neatly laid out before us, has suddenly crumbled beneath our feet – and we are all living in strange and uncertain days.

Shaking and grieving

For many this is a time of shaking as we rethink ways of living within our families, our communities and our churches. It is also a time of grieving, shock and anxiety as old certainties and routines have shifted and people's lives have moved beyond recognition. Most of us are currently living in a very strange land with many looking for some sure footing as the sand shifts.

The words of Psalm 137 are written against a backdrop of a people uprooted from their homeland and taken captivity to a strange land where nothing is the same. This lament comes from losing everything that is familiar, while remembering life before, in the homeland. The cry of loss in verse 4, "How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (NRSV) is echoed by many today in these difficult times. I have noticed that several lyrics of well-known songs and hymns are deeply resonating with my spirit and I realise afresh how many of these songs were written by people in their own times of adversity. What an encouragement they are to us day by day: singing the Lord's song in this metaphorical strange land has taken on a whole new level of meaning.

We have learned that this year's Methodist Conference cannot function in the traditional way. So for Richard and myself there is uncertainty about how our year of office will begin and how it will proceed.

God is with us

However it plays out in practice, our theme for our year, based on those well-known words of Wesley, "The best of all is, God is with us", is now even more relevant. This theme is hopefully a great encouragement to us all as we remember that even in the shifting sands of these times, Jesus is the

rock on whom we can safely build our lives. No matter what circumstances we face, Christ is faithful and has promised he is with us always to the end of the age.

Richard and I plan to use our year to think about growth, both personally and corporately and the verses that God has particularly laid on my heart are from Isaiah 43:18-19:

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (NRSV)

They remind us that God wants to do new things amongst us and to bring life and growth even in people and places that seem dry or tired. It has been so encouraging during lockdown, to hear of creative new ways of being the Church of Jesus Christ and of showing his love to our communities.

Our theme also fits with the launch of *A Methodist Way of Life* – a great tool for our personal discipleship and growth; and also the Evangelism and Growth strategy *God for All*. Both will help us continue finding ways to reach out to our communities with God's love and to make disciples of Jesus.

Looking to the future

During the year ahead, I hope to look at churches, large and small, that are growing and find out why. I hope that I will have the opportunity to encourage many people in their discipleship and maybe to challenge some of the things that hinder spiritual growth and maturity. I have a real passion for reaching out to those who don't yet know Jesus. And also to help people grow and develop in their faith through finding freedom in Christ from all the baggage of the past, through prayer, study of the Bible and being constantly filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the Methodist Church moves through this 'strange land' my prayer is that we will be given the strength to sing our 'new songs' and to look for the 'new thing' that God is doing and will continue to do amongst us, for the glory of God and the building of God's kingdom here on earth.



Question

How will the future shape of life and growth for the Church be different where you are?

Jesus is the rock on whom we can safely build our lives

I have a real passion for reaching out to those who don't yet know Jesus

EVANGELISM

and the way of unknowing

Trey Hall, Director of Evangelism and Growth, challenges us to reflect on identity and fresh ways of being church



Where is church?

In my twenties, I regularly ran by a church building whose sign announced “Oakhurst Church meets here on Sundays”. I didn’t think much about it at first but over a few runs its message landed: church can be wherever we gather, or scatter, as disciples of Jesus.

Our way of life as a local church may include meeting for worship on a particular day in a beloved place, but our foundational identity as community in Christ expands far beyond the walls of our buildings to where we dwell and the ways we connect with others Monday-Saturday.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we’re all contending with that challenging truth. Even if we completely affirm it in ordinary times, it hurts when physically distancing. We

may feel like the writer of Psalm 137, our hearts broken by lament in a kind of exile, trying to remember how to sing in drastically different terrain.

The difficult mystery of faith

Many Christian mystics teach that though God does not desire anyone to be traumatized, it’s often in great suffering and uncertainty that we encounter God most profoundly. To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 13: *when everything else passes away, we are left with only the love of God*. So ‘not knowing’ is not only okay, it’s good spiritual practice. Though it makes no sense, offering ourselves into the unknowing of faith may help us remember the most important things: whose we are, why we exist, and what we are for.



Questions towards transformation

In 2018 the Methodist Conference took the bold step of prioritising evangelism as a non-negotiable dimension of Our Calling. We seek to be, by God's grace, a growing, evangelistic, justice-seeking, inclusive Church of gospel people – so that more people become disciples of Jesus Christ and committed Methodists deepen their faith.

Though we never would have chosen the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, might we use this time to reflect on our core identity as Church? Can we ask God for humility to let this season transform us by taking us right down to our foundations?

As we have endured and emerge from lockdown, these questions can help shape a fresh commitment to evangelism. Not trying to return to normal nor rushing into change; but by discovering a way forward that balances prayer and action and builds up life.

- What have you learned as a local church during lockdown that excites you about evangelism and building relationships with new people? What new commitment might emerge?
- What have you not grieved for, or missed, as a church during lockdown? What might you decide not to pick up again?
- In your personal experience of the pandemic, how have you perceived God's presence and hiddenness? How might you speak differently now about the good news of the kingdom of God?
- What has lockdown taught you about the foundations of your mission as a local church?

Learning as we go

Across the Connexion, individual Christians and churches are learning and responding in diverse ways.

Mary from a church in Leeds noticed that people were struggling to get out and top up electricity and phone cards and so offered to do this for them. She assumed they had cards because they



were elderly and struggled with the IT for direct debits, but quickly she realised it was because people were living in poverty.

Devon pioneer **Ali Mansfield** and thirty Team Horrabridge volunteers share God's love with a foodbank, legal and financial support, prescription collection, and book-sharing. Church also happens in discipleship Zoom groups, prayer/phone buddies, and broadcasting on village radio.



Grange Methodist Church in Cumbria is finding that live streaming services on Facebook allows for greater participation, says the **Revd Jo Rand**.



During Holy Week, people sent in short videos of signs of hope for inclusion in the service, such as birds nesting, "Thank you NHS" notices, and leaves moving in the breeze.

Next steps – Maybe you are asked by God to reflect on a fresh way of being church?

- Dreaming about starting a new Christian community? Email finchm@methodistchurch.org.uk about Methodist pioneering.
- Exploring real transformation in your local church? Find out about the transformational leadership learning community at: transform@methodistchurch.org.uk
- Inspired to try lay testimony? Check out: thetoryproject.org.uk
- Want to connect justice and evangelism? Write to your MP, share your faith, and ask them *not* to reduce Universal Credit back to £76/week in 2021, and to investigate how much money families need to live healthy lives. Check out: jointpublicissues.org.uk/writetoyourmp
- Looking for a rhythm of growing your faith, prayer and action? Check out: www.methodist.org.uk/MWoL

Many **NEW** songs

Choruses of new songs are forming across the North Bedfordshire Circuit since before and during COVID-19, according to the Revd Lorna Valentine



Question

Which new songs might God be calling us to sing?

When asked to write this article, my initial reaction was, 'are you sure?' Still in my first appointment, I thought others had far more experience of singing new songs, whereas I was still learning familiar ones.

Chorus of new songs

Immediately though, the congregations with whom I share ministry came to mind. Together, we have been seeking what new songs God might be calling us to sing in our context of rural Bedfordshire. This then is a chorus, not a solo.

Right song, right place

At the start of 2019 I was privileged to help establish a management group for our new Circuit Outreach Development Enabler. This encouraged me and the five churches I serve to be more intentional about 'missional' conversation. Over time, we've asked, and kept asking, questions about where we've seen God, where our strengths lie, what our concerns are and where we feel God is calling us. Our shared questions highlighted the importance of the right song in the right place.

Although all could be broadly labelled as 'rural', each church and the way it relates to its local community is unique. Ecumenical working, house groups, fellowship, prayer,

variety in worship and building community, including over coffee and meals were just some of the strengths identified by the local churches.

Sing-able new songs

No surprise then that our new songs are varied. Two we've started include a monthly after-school Family Drop-in and new way of worship called T@3. The drop-in is the right pitch for us because it develops work with Open the Book and holiday club. It gives space for families to meet for a range of activities exploring a theme and Bible story. T@3 was an idea from a fellow circuit church who graciously supported us in learning what worked there, so we could see what might work here in our situation: We start with afternoon tea. As people fill up with sandwiches and cake there's normally a creative activity to enjoy at the table and informal reflections. It is sing-able because it harmonises with ongoing work to build community and relationships through coffee, lunches, cafe church and lots of other events.

We are still composing as well. One church is seeking stronger partnership with the local foodbank, which began by hosting an open day. At this, families received clothing, accessories and toys as well as enjoying soup, beans on toast and cake.





We hope to develop this as restrictions around COVID-19 are eased. Plans elsewhere include leading a 'Start' course for those we have already built connections with, though COVID-19 means we've not been able to 'Start' just yet.

Prayer is essential for new songs and one church in particular made praying regularly for the church and community their priority. This commitment has seen new people connect, meaning they feel more hopeful.

Back catalogue

In exploring new songs, we have found some need moving to the back catalogue. This doesn't diminish their importance, or mean we will never sing them again, but it does allow us to keep composing, or even re-mixing. The Family Drop-in is a good example. We acknowledged the holiday club was no longer viable, but built the drop-in using elements that still worked well.

The unexpected song

Occasionally songs not part of my usual repertoire find a way to unexpectedly inspire me. For all of us, COVID-19 has been a difficult and unprecedented experience. But unexpected songs are emerging as we seek what it means to be church when we cannot gather for our usual worship and meetings.

Sharing the connexional service along



with local news and reflections via email, and working together to deliver these where needed, has felt genuinely connecting. Technology we never imagined using for church is becoming routine and little things like a rainbow prayer for a notice board feel much more significant. I've been struck personally by how pastoral care, often squeezed out by busyness, is integral to my new daily pattern.

I hope we see continued learning for individuals and churches out of lockdown, and there are some new songs we will keep on singing. As Jonas Myrin and Matt Redman wrote: "For all your goodness, I will keep on singing; ten thousand reasons for my heart to find."

Prayer is essential for new songs

NEW

TRAINERS

to a new song

After just one year of offering friendship and support, the Food for the Way Project is having a significant impact on the lives of Shetland people struggling with drug or alcohol addiction, or loneliness or other mental health problems, says Superintendent the Revd Dr Andrew Fox



Set up in Lerwick during early 2019, supported by a connexional grant alongside local funding from churches and individuals, the Food for the Way Project is coordinated by former drug addict, Peter Jamieson. Peter leads a team of volunteers from a variety of local churches, and here shares one man's story from the past year.

James (not his real name) is a heroin addict from England, who came to Shetland in the spring of 2019 wanting to escape the everyday horrors he encountered. He had hoped that "life in Shetland might be easier".

It wasn't long though before he fell in with local addicts and was caught up in the escalating drug culture already well

established here. In July 2019 things took a very unexpected turn when people who had been at his apartment, in a homeless shelter, attacked a middle-aged drug user, not far from his door. James attended the victim as soon as he was able to, and with telephone guidance from emergency services he attempted to help her. But he could not save her life. As a result of this traumatic incident James was immediately locked out of his apartment: it was now part of a crime scene. James was relocated in an area he had never been to before and he was not allowed any of his belongings, including his phone and clothes. James suddenly found himself very vulnerable and having to rely on others to help with all basic needs.



Question

What is God saying to you through James' story?



Food, clothes and shoes

He was then told about the Food for the Way Drop-In cafe and as soon as he could he came to see us for some food. James told us about what had happened and what he had to do, and how he now had nothing, not even clothes to change into, with the clothes he was wearing having been borrowed. Peter asked him to attend our Lunch Club the following day and we would get him some clothes. James replied “What I really need is a pair of shoes”, as the borrowed ones he had one were almost worn out.

The following day James arrived and stayed for his lunch, he enjoyed speaking with some of our helpers, then we bought him a new pair of trainers. I wasn't sure if we would ever see him again after that, even thinking that he may take the new trainers and sell them for drug money. But a few days later I bumped into him on a street, and there he was with new trainers on, and ever so thankful.

Worship, work and hope

James has since attended many of the Food for the Way groups, hardly missing a day, but more astonishingly he immediately began to attend our Sunday Gathering where we worship God and eat together. James admitted he had always been an atheist. But soon after James attended every night of a five-day Bible event and has

since taken part in an Alpha course. After seven years of being unemployed, he has started working again, using his skills as a joiner helping a local Christian to refurbish a house.

James is still in addiction, but he now has a very real hope of a future – something he hasn't had for a very long time. At one of our 'Sunday Gatherings' we invited everyone to give thanks for something. James stood up and said “I thank God for all that you guys have done for me, I now have a faith, which is the last thing I thought would happen to me, and I am even working again, my life is changing, thanks to all of you.”

During the lockdown Peter has been responding to requests from social services to help provide food and other resources for families, such as games for children.

James continues to make steady progress and hopes to move into a new flat after the lockdown. He looks forward to getting back in touch with his friends from church when we can meet together again.



Top right: Andrew Fox
Lower right: Peter Jamieson



SAM'S SPACE

Reshaping an old church building brought new songs of community connection in a sacred space where God is found, according to the Revd Mark Goodhand



What would bring life and hope?

Just some of the many comments we heard when we opened Sam’s Space, a community facility for one of the poorest wards – not just in Sheffield but the country. It gave us confirmation that all our hard work to become a serving church was bearing fruit. A building that to many had appeared closed, was now open to all.

From inflexibility to meeting needs

What do you do with a building that can seat 400, is full of pews and has a dodgy ceiling, that you can’t keep warm and is inflexible in use?

Well, you ask the community: What do they need? What would bring life and hope?

So welcome to Firth Park Methodist Church, a faith community made up of two congregations. Our Sunday morning service draws on the local community of Firth Park, including people of Caribbean heritage and families who moved here from the refugee camps of Thailand. The afternoon Family Worship Centre, while predominately Ghanaian, includes people from many African nations. We host two Boys Brigade companies, Food for Thought

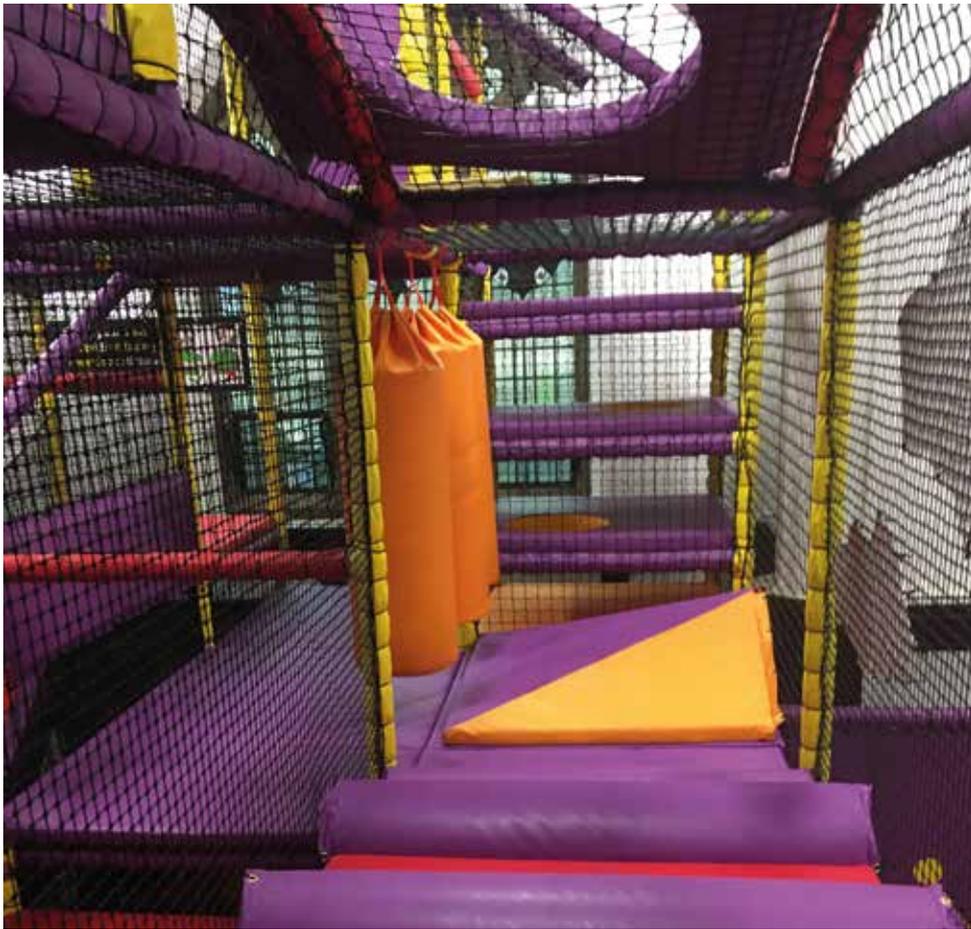
offering affordable meals and socialisation, a thriving entertainment group, a Sunday night youth group, homework clubs, ESOL groups and much more.

The challenge to reshape and repurpose the worship space led us on a journey – of engagement and discernment with the community. The area has a disproportionate level of poverty, with a young population and many families dependent on universal credit, facing the typical social issues of life in an inner city. Through scoping workshops, questionnaires and much prayer, we were led to explore the needs of children and their carers. The vision of two spaces in the former worship area became clear. One for work with children, the other a renewed worship and social cohesion space. However, costings of £1 million were absolutely daunting. So the church tackled this challenge in stages.

Soft play in a sacred space

In February 2020 we opened ‘Sam’s Space’, a community facility containing a large indoor soft play structure. Merging the old and new, with the organ pipes and arches of the building still visible, and





retaining some original pews, creates a wonderful blend. This continues as a sacred space where God is to be found.

It's a meeting place for young children, parents, grandparents, and carers. It's a space that outside of soft play sessions will be used for wider conversations: fellowship groups, local councillors' surgeries, and school curriculum work. As the project has unfolded new opportunities for service have emerged. We hope to be involved with mental health work by using an open area attached to our building to provide raised beds for gardening. It's a place where new expressions of worship will begin to be shaped by the community. This is exciting!

How will it look? We don't want to impose old or new expressions of worship. But rather allow people who gather to explore ways of expressing their need for God and each other.

The attached cafe, in the old vestry, lends itself to true Cafe Church. Our service of rededication saw the space filled with singing and prayer; oh, and the minister and a church steward going down the slide! The church community has been so amazing in pursuing the vision, giving their time as

volunteers to run soft play in the church hall and donating and raising thousands of pounds.

Due to the lockdown, the work goes on hold – but the vision certainly does not. In those first five weeks so many people came through our doors that we know it will succeed. It gives us the trust that we will complete the entire scheme with a new multi-purpose worship space and a place where the community can gather for events that facilitate social cohesion.

It truly is becoming a building fit for worship and serving today.



A journey with the community

Merging the old and new



Question

What new journey with your community is God calling you to take?

**CORONAVIRUS
UPDATES**

from Methodist partners
overseas and in the UK

Singing a **new** song during the pandemic



Coronavirus has brought challenges, requiring us all to work and minister in unfamiliar ways. Through these stories, we lift up our brothers and sisters in the UK and abroad who have found new and exciting ways to reach out and share God's love with their communities. Interviews and stories written up by Mission Engagement Officer Michelle Pellegrino.

The Revd Dr Chris Swift is Director of Chaplaincy and Spirituality for MHA which is supporting 18,500 residents and their families during the pandemic

Helping the **elderly** in self-isolation

What is the impact of coronavirus on your work?

We have had to make some rapid and far-reaching adjustments to our frontline services to support residents and their families. Those on our Live at Home schemes aren't able to meet in person, but our staff have been helping in all kinds of ways, from arranging food deliveries to coordinating PPE supplies. It's been a fantastic effort across the board.

How has your chaplaincy team adapted?

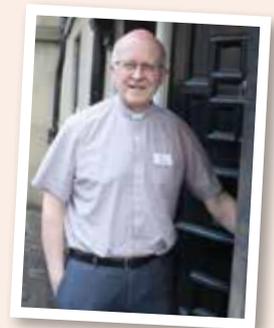
Spiritual care has become even more important as people are experiencing more anxiety. Our chaplains continue to be present and offer support, for example through newsletters that include uplifting reflections and prayers.

We also

provide streaming services; booklets on

spiritual well-being; tips on keeping active during self-isolation; over-the-phone pastoral care for residents; and we also run internet-based support groups.

Ensuring the well-being of our 130-plus chaplains is vitally important too, of course. Since the outbreak began, our regional support chaplains have been in weekly contact with members of their teams. One-to-one counselling for our chaplains is available and we are holding regular coffee-and-chat sessions on Zoom to bring us all together.



Question

How is faith enabling you to live meaningfully through lockdown?



How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

I think we need some humility during this pandemic and to ask people who are familiar with this kind of experience how we can live well. We need to listen to those who have survived wars and natural disasters to learn how faith has enabled them to live meaningfully in a time of loss. They certainly don't believe in a God who looks away or is absent from suffering. We need to pay attention to the less-often-heard songs already sung in our world and open ourselves up to the possibility of being taught by people we too easily ignore.

www.mha.org.uk

Supporting **migrants** during COVID-19



Fiona Kendall is the European and Legal Affairs Advisor for the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy's migrant programme, Mediterranean Hope. Based in Rome, Fiona has been a mission partner since 2018 for both the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of Scotland



How has coronavirus affected Italy?

Around 235,000 Italians have been infected and more than 33,899 people have died from COVID-19, with the northern regions being the worst hit. Italy's lockdown has been very strict. We had to complete a form in order to leave our house and, until recently, could only exercise within 300 metres from home.

Random police checks were in place, and people who did not comply with measures risked fines of up to €3,000. Since 19 May, the government has gradually eased these restrictions.

How have you had to adapt your work with migrants?

For migrants, the lockdown brought particular challenges: how can you stay at home if you have no home? How can you stay a metre away from others if you are living in crowded conditions? How can you regularly wash your hands if you have no access to soap and water?

Sea crossings to Italy from Africa are now around 93% lower than they were at their peak in 2016. Legislation came into effect

in early April, declaring Italy was no longer a place of safety for rescued migrants. Those arriving here on small boats are quarantined for a fortnight, as are all travellers.

Mediterranean Hope continues to support migrants through regular contact by phone, email and video calls; by raising awareness on how to stay safe during the pandemic; and by distributing hand sanitisers, face masks and food parcels. We are also lobbying local government for safer accommodation and fundamental employment rights for migrants.

How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

I feel this pandemic demands that we reconnect with our very essence and re-evaluate what matters. God is at the heart of this process. I am encouraged by witnessing many expressions of love, from the selflessness of healthcare workers to people doing the shopping for elderly neighbours. Perhaps we need to tune our instruments differently during these times; but it's about singing the same song of justice, hope and love.

www.mediterraneanhope.com



Question

Which expressions of selfless love have particularly inspired you?

CORONAVIRUS UPDATES

from Methodist partners
overseas and in the UK



Singing the faith **virtually**

Matt Beckingham is the founder and Artistic Director of the National Methodist Choir of Great Britain (NMCGB). The physical launch of NMCGB was postponed due to the pandemic, and a Virtual Church Choir was launched instead, which is proving hugely popular

How has coronavirus affected your work?

I'm passionate about musical worship, and the strong sense of community, belonging and fellowship it brings. Singing is one of the most deeply honest, personal and direct ways to worship. There is something very special about using the instrument God has given you to offer praise and adoration back to God. The coronavirus has had significant impact on my work as conductor and orchestrator, as it's no longer possible to make music together in the traditional way. Born of necessity, we rejoice to have found new and exciting ways to make music together.

How have you adapted?

NMCGB was due to launch this year, but we've had to put the physical launch

on hold. However, a whole new area of ministry opened up with the launch of the Virtual Church Choir. What started out as a way to connect a potentially small group seems to have resonated more widely, with over 1,000 people joining the choir in just four weeks, from countries across five continents.

Members access pre-recorded warm-up and rehearsal videos, alongside streamed sessions where they're able to connect and have a chat, before sending in a recording of themselves singing and worshipping. These are then mixed together. There is something uniquely special about the sound of people who are worshipping in isolation offering their gifts to God.

How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

To 'sing a new song' is a thought that particularly resonates with me. The vision for NMCGB is to show that the Methodist Church wasn't just born in song, but that it's still living and thriving in song. Our Virtual Church Choir is an expression of singing the Lord's song in a strange, unfamiliar and socially distant world. We have found new ways to be creative. And that, surely, can only be born of a loving creator God.

www.nmcgb.org



Question

How has your worship life been changed by the closure of our buildings?





Sharing Christ in **Japan**

Sheila Norris has been a mission partner based in Nagasaki, Japan since 1986. She teaches English and Christian Studies at Kwassui Women’s University and is a member of the chaplaincy team



How is Japan affected by coronavirus?

Japan was one of the first countries outside China to see COVID-19 infections. At first, all the cases were traceable, and the spread was very limited. We currently have over 17,000 officially recorded cases and more than 910 people have died from the virus.

Although we are not officially under lockdown – the government cannot legally impose fines or other penalties for infringement – it has called for ‘self-restraint’ and most people are cooperating and staying at home.

How has your church adapted?

In Nagasaki, where there are fewer than 20 confirmed cases, most churches continued worship until Easter. I worship at Ginya Machi Church*, where I’m responsible for the choir and I preach occasionally. My church is historically Methodist, although there has been no separate Methodist denomination in Japan since World War 2. Churches are now closed, and we observe Sunday worship from home.

But we also have our minister sending us the sermon by email or post.

How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

Historically, Nagasaki has strongly resisted hearing the Lord’s song. Christianity is still seen here as a foreign religion, and so, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4, NRSV) has been a vital question, as I wrestle with how to proclaim the gospel in a Japanese setting.

Interestingly, the Japanese Bible translation of “foreign land” is “a land of different teachings”. This feels particularly relevant as I communicate Christ’s teachings to people who are predominantly Buddhist and Shinto, while praying that the Holy Spirit will speak to them.

For me, as for countless believers through the ages, singing a new song is about expressing the joy of the Lord who is my strength in times of trouble. During this pandemic, I need to choose which part of the eternal song is apt for me as the singer, and for those who hear me.



Question

In these times of trouble in what ways has God been your strength?

**Ginya Machi Church is a member of The United Church of Christ in Japan, which is a Partner Church of the Methodist Church in Britain.*

CORONAVIRUS UPDATES

from Methodist partners
overseas and in the UK



Question

How might fresh intergenerational work be a blessing to your church?

Connecting the **generations**

Mike Picot is the Treasurer of Ebenezer Methodist Church, which is part of the Jersey Methodist Circuit in the Channel Islands District. Mike speaks to us about new ways of 'being church' during the pandemic, and how young people are bringing hope and happiness to isolated elderly members of the Jersey community

How is your community affected by coronavirus?

Many elderly folk are now stuck at home or isolated in their rooms at their care homes. They are feeling lonely as they are unable to see their families and friends and miss hugging their grandchildren. Some of our young families live in small flats and are struggling to keep their children occupied during lockdown. We are in regular contact with them all. We are streaming services, holding online Bible study groups and regularly posting stories, songs and activities on our Facebook page for children aged three to eleven who attend our 'Pickles' group. Our buildings may be closed, but we continue

to reach out into the community with love.

How has your church adapted?

Perhaps the most heart-warming initiative during coronavirus is our intergenerational work. Our church has a group called 'Generations' that brings the eldest and youngest members of our congregation together. We were inspired by the TV programme *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds*, which looks at the mutual social and health benefits of the elderly making friends with the young.

The children have been making colourful artwork and writing letters to our elderly folk and others in self-isolation. The parcels are put in 72-hour quarantine before being posted out. Some very special relationships are being built and it brings our senior citizens so much joy to receive these special packages! The children have also created art to bring cheer to our local Nightingale Hospital.

How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

The children in our Pickles group love to sing *Our God is a Great Big God*. God is indeed bigger than this pandemic and it is God who is teaching us how to connect with people in new ways. Whatever the future holds, we will adapt and carry on serving our community.

www.ebenezerjersey.org



Protecting lives in **Zambia**

Ida Waddell is the Synod Health Secretary for the United Church of Zambia and a mission partner for both the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of Scotland. She is based in Mwandi and oversees the work of two mission hospitals and seven health clinics in rural and hard-to-reach areas

How has coronavirus affected Zambia?

The number of COVID-19 cases has been relatively low but we rapidly went from two cases in mid-March to 52 by mid-April. One quarter of the active cases are among frontline health workers. Since the health service in Zambia is very fragile and we have challenges such as food insecurity, malnourishment and people living in overcrowded conditions, the effects of a serious outbreak would be devastating. A lot of effort is being made to trace, test and isolate people who are infected to stop the virus from spreading.

Although Zambia has a 'soft' lockdown in place, markets are still open, with rudimentary hand-sanitising facilities at stalls and shops. Most people here live a hand-to-mouth existence, and need to bring in money daily so that they can keep feeding their families.

How has the church in Zambia adapted?

The United Church of Zambia (UCZ) was the first Zambian church to cancel Sunday worship to protect the lives of church



members. Church services are now broadcast on radio, television and social media. The UCZ has responded quickly to coronavirus by setting up an emergency response fund and delivering food basics such as mealie meal, cooking oil and beans to over

10,000 vulnerable households.

How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

We are doing mission in new ways. I live with my husband, Keith, and our two children, Mubita and Ellie, in Mwandi, a remote area of Zambia. We've been helping however we can, driving to nearby Livingstone to buy groceries and other supplies for the hospital and members of our community. We have planted a vegetable patch, as fresh fruit and vegetables will become harder to find, to share with our neighbours. All life is sacred, and we have a life-affirming obligation to protect the lives of all whom God has entrusted in our care – even more so during these times.



Question

What have you appreciated about the kindness of others?



**CORONAVIRUS
UPDATES**

from Methodist partners
overseas and in the UK

Singing God's praises in Hong Kong's troubles

The Revd Eden Fletcher has been the Senior Pastor at the Methodist International Church in Hong Kong for the past three years. He tells us how his church has been living through the pandemic, which comes on top of social unrest in the region

For the Methodist Church's guidance on coronavirus visit

www.methodist.org.uk/

For updates on how coronavirus is impacting our mission partners and Partner Churches around the world and messages of support, prayer and reflection, go to

www.methodist.org.uk/gr-covid19

Coronavirus global statistics were correct at the time of going to press.



Question

How might the voice of your church be heard by many?

How has coronavirus affected Hong Kong?

For the past ten months, Hong Kong has experienced social unrest and large-scale protests over a proposed bill to allow extradition to mainland China.

Sunday congregations were down by around 30% due to fear of travel and being caught in sporadic protests. The 19-strong team at Methodist International Church (MIC) had been dealing with the protest situation: the church being on the front line had been open throughout. We had welcomed hundreds in to use our facilities; we were gassed and had riot police outside. We dealt with much criticism at our stance, considered to be pro-protest, even though we actively sought to maintain a neutral position.

Then on 23 January 2020 the first outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in Hong Kong was reported. The news caused widespread fear and panic, bringing back memories of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-1), which infected some 2,000 people and caused nearly 300 deaths between 2002 and 2003.

However, thanks to the lessons learnt through SARS, the government was able to take early and decisive action, which significantly reduced the number of new infections. Hong Kong currently has 1,107 coronavirus cases, with a total of four deaths.

How has your church adapted?

I am the Senior Pastor and Superintendent Minister at MIC, where people from some 20 countries worship together. We closed MIC on 23 February. It was a very difficult decision: in my 23 years of ministry,

it's something I've never had to do before.

The pandemic has actually resulted in us becoming more creative and adventurous as a church. This is the first time we are streaming services twice a week in Mandarin, Tagalog, Ilocano and English. Church members have eagerly and efficiently learnt to operate cameras and sound equipment. We continue to reflect, have fellowship and pray together over Zoom.

How is God teaching you to sing a new song during the pandemic?

A song is music performed by the human voice. It isn't confined to an enclosed space, it floats out and into the ears of passers-by. Similarly, the building MIC worships in, Wesleyan House, has an open ground floor area with no doors, symbolising that it is open to all. Wherever we are and whatever happens next, we will continue to sing God's song of hope. We pray that our voices may be heard by many, and that they may join in and sing along with us.

www.michk.com



A MELODY

that the world
needs to hear



We sing a new song listening to society and reflecting on our inheritance, says the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler

On Good Friday, I was privileged to share in an act of worship based around the Seven Last Words from the Cross. I had never asked how we came to do that: bringing together in a single act of devotion the seven sentences that the Gospel writers report Jesus saying as he died seems natural. But I owe to Timothy Radcliffe (in *Alive in God*) the information that the Jesuits in Peru in the seventeenth century were the first to do it. As Radcliffe relates, the practice was brought back to Spain where a musical accompaniment was commissioned by the cathedral in Cadiz from Josef Haydn.

Radcliffe's father loved the Haydn piece, which led Radcliffe to write a book about the Last Words. A secondary school picked up the book and wrote a musical partly based on it, which was performed and recorded. Radcliffe observed, "They used a few of my texts but the songs were their own composition. I did not always understand their lyrics. That did not matter."

The centuries of reflection on ancient texts had freed the students' imagination. They sang a new song because they drew deeply on the Christian tradition.

COVID-19 has taken us into unfamiliar territory and the challenge for the Church is 'to sing a new song', a song that is born out of listening to the society in which we are placed. "The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (as the Second Vatican Council expressed it). In that context, we reflect deeply on what we have inherited – in Scripture, doctrine, liturgy, and hymnody – and we allow that to fire our imaginations to sing in a new way "the old, old story of Jesus and his love". By the time you read this, the lockdown might be over. But what we have learned will have given us a melody for singing God's praise which we hadn't known before – and that the world needs to hear.



Question

In what ways can we better connect with the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of our communities?

SINGING

into a perfect storm



As leader of the Joint Public Issues Team, Rachel Lampard calls the Church to a new song of opposition against increased antisemitism



Question

What is your response to the challenge to sing a new song of humility, solidarity and justice?

Friends of mine, who I didn't even realise were Jewish, told me last year how worried they were about the antisemitism being stirred up in politics. Then an Orthodox Jewish friend said that she now felt nervous walking down the street. I was ashamed how I was taken aback by this fear expressed by my friends. What was happening in our country?

There has been an increase in incidents against Jewish people reported to the Community Security Trust over the last year. The number of violent assaults rose by 25%, and the Trust also reports a 50% increase in incidents on social media compared with the previous year.

Jewish people are targeted by far right and Islamist extremists. In early 2020 a teenager was jailed for planning attacks on synagogues. Graffiti on synagogues, graves and shops have increased. In other countries, Jewish people have been murdered in places of worship or shops.

At the same time as a rise in far right activity, there has been an increase in antisemitism from the political left as well. Social media has been used to abuse Jewish politicians, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission is using its powers under the Equality Act to investigate whether the Labour Party broke the law.



Some commentators have described this as a perfect storm, with heads of state emerging, such as President Trump in the USA, or Prime Minister Victor Orban of Hungary, who normalise such views.

Our response

What does it mean for our Church to sing a new song when we are looking at the creeping malevolence of antisemitism?

We all have to begin by learning from our own past offence – with some humility. There is often close sharing between churches and synagogues at local levels, yet historically Christians have been responsible for violence and prejudice against Jewish people. Do we still fall back on stereotypes or use language or actions which could be offensive, for example appropriating the Passover Seder meal for our own Maundy Thursday Holy Communion?

Challenges to antisemitism are sometimes met with responses of “but what about Muslims? Or Sikhs? Or Palestinians?” We should recognise that we don’t need to take part in a competitive human rights Olympics. The antisemitic tropes of power and money perhaps mean that Jewish people are not seen as ‘victims’ of racism and prejudice in the same way as other minority groups. Standing up against antisemitism does not mean we are denying the rights of others. Antisemitism is wrong.

Islamophobia is wrong. We are called as Christians to solidarity alongside all who are oppressed or face discrimination.

But will criticising Israeli policy over Palestine be seen as antisemitic? Some opposition to current Israeli policy certainly crosses the line into antisemitic imagery and insult, for example blaming all Jewish people for the actions of the Israeli government, or equating the government with Nazism. Helpfully the Methodist Conference of 2018 joined the Home Affairs Select Committee report of October 2016 “in emphasising that it is not antisemitic to criticise the Government of Israel, without additional evidence to suggest antisemitic intent.”

Does standing up against antisemitism mean betraying Palestinian people? On the contrary, unless we are strong and clear in our opposition to antisemitism, we will undermine our ability to be heard when speaking out against the daily injustices carried out by the Israeli government.

Listening and learning

I recently took part in a number of discussions organised by the Council for Christians and Jews. These were for the *Listening and Learning Together* resource, funded by the Methodist Church and available for local groups soon at www.ccj.org.uk. The topics touched at the heart of disputes around Israel and Palestine – settlements, security, victimhood, Gaza, Jerusalem, Zionism. The conversations between Jewish people and Christians were careful, courteous and critical, difficult and frustrating at times, enlightening and surprising at others. We talked together respectfully, even when we disagreed, about what justice in Israel Palestine looks like.

Sadly I fear it will be a long time before our country is free of fear based on one’s religion. But together can we learn to sing a new song of humility, solidarity and justice?

What does it mean for our Church to sing a new song when we are looking at the creeping malevolence of antisemitism?



Reflection

“Not one of you will lose your life; only the ship will be lost.”

(Acts 27:22b, GNT; formerly GNB)

At the beginning of the year – before all of our lives were dominated by the coronavirus – I was reflecting on some of the challenges facing our circuit. These included: A number of our churches being over reliant on one or two people; the number of post-holders who had done well over their six-year stint (especially church treasurers) with no obvious replacements available; the challenges of making the circuit plan without giving a church more than one Local Arrangement service per month, and the fact that some churches were struggling to pay their assessment as our numbers slowly but surely declined.

It was around that time that I read again the story of St Paul's shipwreck experience as recorded in Acts 27:13 – 28:10. As a defender of Paul, even I would have to admit that his opening words do not particularly cover him in glory. After the crew had been battling the elements for many days, Paul jumps in with both feet and in effect says: “I told you so.”

“You should have listened to me and not have sailed from Crete; then we would have avoided all this damage and loss.” (Acts 27:21, GNT).

Hardly the words you want to hear when you were perhaps both physically and mentally exhausted, having risked your life to save the vessel you were sailing!

Hope

However, in his very next sentence, Paul redeems himself with a message of hope that was not just applicable for those he sailed with, but surely encourages us all as it echoes down the ages

into the lives of Christians today: *“But now I beg you, take courage! Not one of you will lose your life, only the ship will be lost.”* (Acts 27:22, GNT)

For me as I reflected on the life of our circuit, this was a wonderful image of the love of God. A confirmation that none of us who are following Christ will ever be lost from God's eternal love or eternal presence. But some of the many vessels we are sailing in – some of our church buildings – may not survive the journey.

As I read again the story before us, I began to wonder how much the sailors heard of Paul's message – or how much they wanted to hear. Throughout the story, (despite Paul's assertion that the ship will be lost) the sailors try everything they possibly can to prevent that from happening. They fasten ropes around the ship, they throw cargo overboard and they lower the anchors. They try everything in their power to save the ship – it means a lot to them. Perhaps they have sailed many journeys on it. Perhaps they have an emotional attachment to it.



They didn't want to believe it could or would be lost.

The word that God speaks

Aren't we so often like those sailors? When it comes to the ships (churches) that we are travelling in, do we not also strain every sinew, strive in every way we can and do everything in our power to keep the vessel afloat? We can become so emotionally attached to our buildings and so tied up with time-consuming events shoring up one hole before another appears, that like those who sailed with Paul we can miss the word that God is speaking to us when it is right in our midst. Or perhaps we simply don't want to hear that our vessel may not survive.

Since that time, we have all had to 'abandon ship' as the effects of the coronavirus are felt in all walks of life. All of the vessels in the Methodist fleet currently stand empty.

Many of us are probably wondering what our vessels will look like when we eventually return to them. Will it be worth setting sail in all of them again – or will this be the time when we recognise that some of our ships will be lost?

However long it may be before we can once again board our vessels and physically, fully meet in fellowship together, let us cling to the anchor of our faith – Jesus Christ – and may the knowledge that not one of us will ever be lost to him sustain us all now and always.

May you know
God's blessing.

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Children's Coronavirus Appeal



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