

Issue 21 • Winter 2021

The **Methodist** Church 

# the connexion

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Light  
of life

Inspiring stories from the life of your **Methodist Church**



David Perry  
Editor

**Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."** (John 8:12)

This text is inscribed on the flyleaf of my christening Bible, which was a gift from my great-uncle Tom. He was a Black Country Methodist and his choice of text, with the promise that it offers, was truly prescient. I never met him, yet he changed my life.

I will never know if Tom chose John 8:12 because he knew my father and had an inkling of what lay ahead for me, or if it was simply a favourite of his. Either way my dad's struggle with schizophrenia, alcoholism and life-threatening chronic asthma was such that as an only child I would often take that Bible and read the promise of John 8:12 and long for it to be my truth. But by myself I had no way of connecting with this precious gift; it seemed forever out of my grasp.

We were not a church-going family and Christians were notable by their absence in my childhood and adolescence. I have often wondered latterly how different my life could have been had a person of faith reached out to us. Mental illness, however, has a habit of isolating people in a bubble of seemingly endless misery into which others fear to tread.

So it took 19 years for me to actually own the text for myself when, as an undergraduate, Selly Oak Methodist Church became my spiritual birthplace.

All these years later, the truth is that despite experiencing episodes of profound mind-numbing, dread-filled mental darkness, I trust the light of life absolutely. As we struggle on through the pandemic, in the midst of crises that threaten to overwhelm and extinguish so much we take for granted, Jesus's presence means that darkness never has the last word. Even in its depths the life-bringing light at the very heart of existence is always there. As a "light that thrives in the depths of darkness" it "cannot and will not be quenched." (John 1:5, *The Voice*)

The articles in issue 21 of *the connexion* bear testimony to this abiding truth. How might we enable this good news to become real for those who, like me all those years ago, wait in their own darkness?

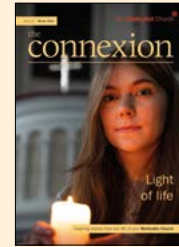
Love and peace,  
David

# the connexion

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## The Methodist Church


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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.

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### What do you think about this issue?

Email [theconnexioneditor@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:theconnexioneditor@methodistchurch.org.uk)

# Highlights



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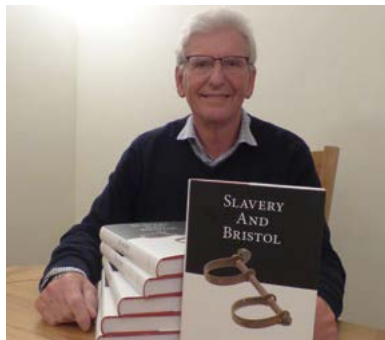
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## Reset the Debt campaign continues as personal debt engulfs millions

**T**he Reset the Debt campaign, launched in October 2020, continues to gather momentum this year.

Large numbers of people have already engaged with it by writing to their MP. They are calling for a 'jubilee' to help reduce the growing gap between people who have lost their jobs and are struggling to pay for essentials, such as food and rent, and those who have managed to save and pay off debts during the pandemic. The campaign is supported by the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, the Church of Scotland, the Baptist Union, Church Action on Poverty and others working in communities that are most affected by debt.

More than half of Westminster's MPs have now been contacted about this campaign. A round table to consider the major social, political and economic issues arising from debt takes place this month.

Find out more about the campaign and how you can support it at <https://resetthedebt.uk>



## Tune In To God: Fridays@5:17

**A** new weekly time of prayer called Tune In To God: Fridays@5:17 is now available from the Children, Youth and Family team.

The 3Generate 365 theme of 'Tune In' encourages children and young people specifically to Tune In to God.

Fridays@5:17 is an opportunity for prayer to take place within local groups and circuits, and sometimes to join with a wider group, facilitated by the Youth President and Youth Reps, or District Ambassador teams.

There will also be regular prayers released on the Youth President's social media accounts on Fridays at 5:17pm.

Phoebe Parkin is the Youth President. Follow her on the Youth President Facebook page, and on Instagram:

**@methodistyouthpresident**

**@3genreps**

and on Twitter:

**@YouthPresident**

**@3GenReps**



THINK  
PIECE

God has  
placed you  
like a star  
to direct  
people to  
Jesus

Oakwood Church  
A Methodist-Anglican Partnership

LIGHT  
in our darkness

**“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’” (John 8:12)**

*The ultimate triumph of light as spring begins, with Easter*

**L**ight in the darkness is a key Christian theme – Jesus is the light of the world! It is a simple image to help us grasp the meaning of Jesus Christ being the Son of God, our Saviour. However, as with most scriptural imagery, there are depths to explore as we hear God’s word for today.

When Jesus says this about himself he is attending the Festival of Tabernacles, or Booths (in Hebrew, *Sukkoth*). Worship at the Jewish Temple at this festival recalled the years that the people of Israel spent in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. Jesus has already used the ritual pouring of water as an occasion to proclaim, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink” (John 7:37-38). John’s Gospel connects clearly the giving of the Spirit to those who believe in Jesus. Jesus is not just using the festival rituals as a metaphor, he is also pointing back to the original events in the wilderness when water flowed from the rock to meet the people’s needs (Exodus 17:6).

Towards the end of the festival period, four enormous oil-fed menorahs (like candelabras) were lit in the Temple’s ‘courtyard of the women’ (the most publicly accessible outer part of the Temple). It was in this context that Jesus announced his claim to be the light of the world. Again, he is deliberately pointing back through the rhythm of the Temple worship to the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 13:20-21). However, whereas before they followed God’s signs and miracles, now God’s action and power is to be found fully in Jesus himself.

### Seeing the light

Through the dark days of winter, there are a whole series of Christian festivals which focus on Jesus as the light of the world: All Saints Day, Christ the King, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and Candlemas (the presentation of Christ in the Temple). It reaches the ultimate triumph of light as spring begins, with Easter and the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the defeat of the ultimate darkness – death. Just as Jesus used the

Temple worship to make a point, so we should see our festivals as signs of the reality of God’s kingdom, with Christ at the centre as the giver of light and life.

In a year when the celebration of all these festivals has been disrupted, we have a chance to sharpen our focus away from the ‘normal’ rituals and towards the light of Christ. How are we able to help people see that light this year? There are many creative and exciting new ways of celebrating to be shared – some online and some digital; some in the flesh and some socially distanced. This necessary adaptation is a valuable reminder that there is in reality only Christ, the people of Christ (the Church) and the world. Jesus does not just say that he is the light of the world, but that those who follow will also be children of the light (John 12:36, Luke 16:8), and even become the light themselves (Matthew 5:14).

### We are called to shine

We are called to abide in Christ, the light source, to such an extent that we are lit up ourselves. Paul calls on us to be ‘light-bearers’ (*phōstēr*), a word that is elsewhere used to describe the heavenly bodies which God the creator has placed in the sky for all to see. The NRSV translates this as “shine like stars in the world” (Philippians 2:15). It may not have been exactly what Paul had in mind, but personally, I especially like the way that this image makes a connection with the star (*astēr*) at Epiphany. The reference to this star in Matthew 2 may be linked to Balaam’s prophecy that “a star shall come out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17). It is not quite using the star as a direct metaphor for the Saviour himself, and leaves plenty of mysterious questions. What does seem clear is that God has placed this star to move in the sky in such a way that it guides and directs the Magi to Jesus.

This winter as you use worship rituals old and new, Scripture reading, preaching and pictures, and, most importantly, loving actions that point like signs to life in all its fullness, perhaps God has placed *you* like a star, to be in the right place at the right time to direct people to Jesus, the light of the world.



**LIGHT**

**How does John 8:12 speak to your experience? What is your testimony?**

The Revd Dr George Bailey is a part-time circuit minister in the Leeds (North and East) Methodist Circuit and a part-time lecturer at Cliff College.

# A light on racial INJUSTICE

Avoiding racism is not enough: we must all choose 'allyship' and actively work to defeat racial inequality, say two recent graduates, Tiana and Cameron



LIGHT

How will your church engage with the need for allyship?

**TIANA:** For most black people in the UK, racial inequality is a normal part of daily life and we all need to work to end it. It's encouraging to see more people committing to positive change and becoming allies, however many people are not sure where to start.

'Allyship' means privileged people using their position to help the marginalised. Black people and people of colour have been fighting racism for as long as it's existed, but we can't change everything on our own, nor should we have to. People who do not experience racism need to work with us and speak up for us. 'Ally' should be a verb not a noun; it's about actions not just words. White people profit from a system of injustice embedded in our society's structures and to ally with those experiencing racism is to acknowledge their responsibility to help dismantle those structures.

**CAMERON:** I also think it's important allying doesn't become a term we use too loosely – a reassuring pat on the back white people use to make themselves feel good. I know I can congratulate myself for doing the bare minimum, just because other people are doing even less. A bit like the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: "God, thank you I am not like these people. I occasionally read articles and watch documentaries about racism!"

We shouldn't simply self-declare ourselves as allies as if it's an ideological position. As you say, it's a verb not a noun. It takes work, and it's not for white people to decide when that work is sufficient.

**TIANA:** Exactly! When trying to do allyship, there are a few key things to avoid:

- *Acting surprised* When something racist happens, people say they are 'shocked' and 'surprised' to hear that racism is still prevalent in the UK. This does nothing but demonstrate that they have not been paying attention.
- *Performative allyship* This is doing things that seem like you're being an ally, but are not accompanied by any substantial action. Posting on social media in itself isn't bad, but evaluate why you are doing it. When posting, don't talk about how



People who do not experience racism need to work with us and speak up for us.

upset racism makes *you* feel because this detracts from the issue itself.

- **Talking over us** It is important to speak up when you see instances of racial injustice, especially if there are no people of colour present, but make sure you don't speak over those who experience racism.
- **Pressuring us** It's okay to ask your black friends questions about their experiences but please don't take advantage of them! Often talking about race issues can be exhausting and even traumatic for people of colour. If you don't understand something, do some research yourself rather than expecting your black friends to educate you.
- **Doing nothing** Desmond Tutu said "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." It's not enough 'not to be racist', we must all be anti-racist.

**CAMERON:** That's really useful! Personally, I think as a white person we must avoid focusing on our own experience when discussing racism. If your first reaction



when hearing about racism is "but that's not *my* fault", or "*my* life isn't easy just because I'm white", then take a moment to reflect. When someone is being vulnerable enough to share their experience with you, don't shift the conversation to your own feelings. These feelings are best explored and unlearned over time through educating yourself, not by placing the burden of your fragility on your black friends.

With that in mind, how do we become better allies?

**TIANA:** It's always important to consider the context. Identify the spaces you occupy and the power you have in them, and figure out the most appropriate action. You can either speak up against injustices or make space for people of colour to speak, depending where you are. In white-only spaces you could be the difference between inappropriate things being overlooked or them being confronted and changed.

**CAMERON:** Yeah, understanding it will be uncomfortable is really important. Recently I saw a tweet saying "If you want to be a good ally, ask yourself: what has your fight against racism actually cost you?" That hit home because I've never been genuinely inconvenienced by my anti-racism. If I were truly committed to allyship, I would have dug deeper to donate to worthy causes and had some really tough conversations with friends and family.

Educating ourselves is important, but if it doesn't translate to action, then what's the point? As Christians we're called to model sacrificial love – in the fight against racism that is absolutely vital.

#### Practical things to remember are:

- educate yourself
- listen and believe people's experiences
- donate to important causes
- be proactive as well as reactive
- talk to white family members about race.

Tiana Dinard-Samuel graduated in 2020 from Queen Mary University of London, and was an Encounter Worldwide Volunteer in Argentina on behalf of the Methodist Church. Cameron Hume was a JPIT/House of Lords intern with the Methodist Church having studied theology. He is currently studying journalism.





## Bringing light and life to others

*The power to reject racism lies in every believer*

*We are able to be light and life to others as Christ is to us*

**T**he image that comes to mind when I hear Jesus declare he is the “light of the world” (John 8:12), is the pillar of fire that led the Israelites during their exodus through the wilderness. That divine presence, their source of light and life, continues to guide me as I train to be a minister in the High Wycombe Circuit.

My first experience of circuit ministry was the love and affirmation I received from my colleagues in ministry and members of the churches where I have pastoral responsibility. I have been blessed with a team that holds the ‘Christ-light’ for me, making me feel safe and valued. As a black woman, stationed in a predominantly white circuit, I have been warmly received and this builds on the training and experience I received at The Queens Foundation. Where the light of Christ shines, there is life and liberty and growth.

It may sound banal to say, “ministry is not easy”. But it is not. Two weeks into probation, I sat in my study (still littered with books), confused and overwhelmed asking God the questions that many probationers and perhaps even well-seasoned ministers may have asked: “Lord, what have you brought me here for? What would you have me do?”

One year on and I still ask those questions. Yet, despite doubts, challenges and disappointments, we must remember: the Lord is our light and our salvation and we are led by Christ, the light of the world.

Six months after that time, I was crying out to God to lead me through the upheaval caused by the coronavirus. Through the pandemic I have learnt that God calls us to unexpected places and undreamt-of situations. In the answer, we see the light of life at work. Taking 14 funerals in



the first eight months has not been easy. Attending an intensive care ward in London to represent a dear family to a brother who died of Covid-19 was life-changing; an unlikely gift to me, a probationer minister. It is my hope that I was a light of life to the families I journeyed with. This is part of who we are called to be. I have felt honoured and humbled to be called to offer hope and life to the bereaved. Lockdown came with challenges, but the support from Christians and non-Christians alike proves that the light of life can never be overcome by darkness. Through people's magnanimity, the Christ light has shone through desperation and hopelessness to bring life to a suffering world.

### Black Lives Matter

George Floyd's shocking death in May added gloom to the darkness of the coronavirus. The timing was no coincidence – we serve a God who works with the times and seasons. Just as many in their homes and hospital beds fought for breath, life has also been squeezed out of the lungs of people who have, for years, suffered the evil scourge of racism. Many black church members were angry. I was too. Most despaired. I did too. But in Martin Luther King, Jr's words,

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.”<sup>1</sup>

### Light, a symbol of hope

I take hope in the tea lights flickering in the dark across nations – symbols of the light of Christ giving us life and hope. The power to reject racism lies in every believer, because Christ, the light of life, lives and works in us. As Methodists, we need to keep these conversations alive; actively and honestly address all forms of injustice, including racism; and take action.

Reaction to this invisible virus has underscored our shared humanity and brought out the best in communities, which continue to support each other. The moving images of Patrick Hutchinson, a black man carrying a white brother to safety during a London protest in June spoke volumes. Kindness flourishes in unimaginable ways. That is the light of life in Christ breaking forth through his Church into the world, and we must trust in this light to teach us to love each other more.

Isaiah prophesied about the “light that will break forth like the dawn” (Isaiah 58:8). This is hopeful. As we rely on the Holy Spirit, the light and life of God's people, let us pray that together we are able to be light and life to others as Christ is to us.



LIGHT


Which intentional conversations about the light of life does Georgina's testimony prompt you to have?

<sup>1</sup> *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches* (ed. James Melvin Washington, 1986, HarperCollins)



# Taking up a new post in lockdown

## Jesus is lighting the Revd Catherine Hutton's path as she settles in Epsom



LIGHT

Which aspects of your church and circuit life do you need Jesus to transform?

*I keep looking at the light of Jesus*

**I** itinerant ministry means moving. In the Methodist Church, we normally complete a time of ministry by celebrating with our church family before moving on to the new place God has prepared, ready for our next adventure.

But due to Covid-19, usual celebrations were not possible this year, and – hand on heart – I’m still a little bit broken... Leaving my circuit without a proper celebration meant that I missed a sense of completion. There was no acknowledgement of the joy and struggle of shared experiences. We said our goodbyes remotely, without the human contact of hugs and kisses, and without hospitality. Our grief born of love and loss was stifled. Of course we met at a distance and exchanged cards and letters. But as for sitting down at table together and telling our stories – well, that did not happen.

When we arrived in Epsom, we were treated to a beautiful welcome service, but without the hugs, handshakes and cakes that are the Methodist choreography, joyfully whisking ministers from farewell to welcome.

We made our new home in a manse in



Epsom, but we have not yet had the joy of sharing it with family and friends. We have created a beautiful sitting room where house groups, prayer and other groups may meet, but it remains unused – waiting for life to begin. I feel thwarted in my plans and dreams for the new appointment. I am unable to share properly and show who I am, and the churches regret ‘not being at their best’.

However, I have learned to rely on God’s Word as: “a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105) and through this to discover God’s way, beginning by letting God free my heart to love again.

*The light of Jesus  
will illuminate  
the opportunities*



### **New opportunities in lockdown**

Crucial to starting in ministry with the wonderful people of Epsom and Cheam, is to love one another intentionally and with the love of Jesus. Then, together we look for hope. This acknowledges some deep theological truths.

Firstly, “God knew and God knows”. I realised deep in the isolation of the first lockdown that the Lord God Almighty is standing within history’s confines and also time and history are held within the palm of God’s hands. This means that our Lord God has seen this moment and fitted us for it; God who is sovereign over this uncharted time has trusted us with this moment. Therefore, I can be confident.

Secondly, when the world and its leaders don’t know what’s going on, there remains one who does. Jesus said “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) I keep looking at the light of Jesus; it is life-giving.

Then, when there is the looming darkness of a plan for which I have no blueprint, I look to Jesus and trust that he is faithful. Jesus transforms everything: lives, attitudes, activities, even churches. Jesus makes a way. So, I can trust that the light of Jesus will illuminate the opportunities.

We have found some opportunities already. We brought a ‘bitesize church’ to the Roots coffee shop in Epsom on Wednesday lunchtimes. It has a ‘pub singer in the corner’ approach, offering music, prayers and reflections. Our ‘In Loving Memory’ service took place here, and the memorial cross was later re-sited in the

church foyer for the November lockdown where it stood alight and visible to all.

In Cheam, we enjoy services on YouTube. It is a good discipline to create weekly content for church members in what can feel like a ‘pen-pal relationship’ in the digital age. Sermon scripts are available on my website, which can be printed out and distributed by the pastoral visitors.

I love my new churches (they are mine in the sense I belong to them). They are the centres for ministry over which the Light of Life is shining. The powerful light of Jesus’ love fills the space between us. The darkness of loss still creeps round the edges, but I don’t walk there. The more I step into the light of Jesus’ transforming love, the more he transforms where I am, and more importantly – who I am.

The Revd Catherine Hutton ministers to the Epsom and Cheam churches in the Sutton Circuit. Her website is [catherinehutton.com](http://catherinehutton.com)



*I wasn't prepared for the deep sense of community*



# LIGHTING up a street in worship



LIGHT

What new ways of leaving your church buildings and sharing faith is God calling you to try?

*They have continued to come out every Sunday to sing*

**Elaine Lindridge rejoices at how neighbours are meeting as 'church on the street' to worship each Sunday on their doorsteps**

**A**s Evangelism Enabler for the Newcastle-upon-Tyne District, I'm always looking for new ideas to encourage people to leave their church buildings and share faith with folk they meet every day. While lockdown has caused untold difficulties, it has also been a catalyst, getting people to think and act creatively. In the past I would not have thought singing hymns on the doorstep was culturally appropriate evangelism. But I'm humbled that the Holy Spirit works in ways that go far, far beyond our limited creativity or natural inclinations.

#### **How to mark Good Friday in lockdown?**

Last year on Good Friday, Tom Sterling, a member of Great Lumley Methodist Church in County Durham was considering how to mark the occasion in lockdown. Normally local churches gathered for an open-air witness and Tom was frustrated that it seemed this special day would pass unmarked. Then he had an idea: he could stand outside his house and play a Good Friday hymn on his euphonium. He'd been inspired by people on TV singing operatic arias from their verandas in Italy during lockdown, so why not follow suit? Wisely,



Tom alerted his neighbours by posting flyers through their doors with the words for the hymn so they could join in if they wished. To his astonishment they did exactly that – and with great enthusiasm.

You might remember that Christians were challenged to sing on their doorsteps at 10am on Easter Day. By Tom's own admission, he sounds better playing the euphonium than singing, so he decided to play the hymns on Easter Sunday morning instead. His neighbour, Kathy Bevan (who is also a Methodist member) joined in by singing the words through her portable audio system. Lots of neighbours came out to participate.

### Neighbours regularly gathering for prayer and praise

If in April you had suggested to the group of neighbours that in six months' time they'd still be meeting on their street to worship God they would never have believed you. But here's the miracle... they have continued to come out every Sunday to sing. Whatever the weather there's now a regular gathering of around 30–40 people, with many more watching on Facebook. Kathy and Tom did not plan for this, or hope for it... they simply, yet profoundly, saw what God was doing on their street and joined in with God's mission.

After Easter Sunday, singing together each week became a lovely way to connect with people and share faith. In the first few weeks, Kathy and Tom started to take song requests and enjoyed belting out some favourite hymns. They then felt challenged to include more aspects of worship including prayer, reading Scripture, a short talk and a kids' song from Doris (Tom's wife). Any initial nervousness about how people would respond to these additions

soon disappeared as week after week people still came.

Kathy says, "It's been humbling and wonderful to see people come out week after week and we conclude there must be a desire to know more about God – and really I suppose that desire must always have been there but we weren't meeting the need effectively. I can't imagine we would have seen anywhere near the same response if we'd invited our neighbours to come to a service in the church building, but because this is being church right where people are it seems to work."

I visited 'church on the street', as it's become known, a few weeks ago. I'd already watched with interest online to see what they were doing and I'd chatted to the people involved. But I wasn't prepared for the deep sense of community that has developed. On the morning I visited, there was a small table set out with a new Bible on it. The week before Tom had asked if anyone would like a Bible and a young woman called Julie contacted him to say she would. That morning she was invited to come and get her Bible and Tom prayed for her as she did so. As she walked back to her side of the street everyone burst into applause for her and wished her well. It was a truly beautiful moment and the Spirit of God was obviously moving. Music may have been an initial way for people to connect with their neighbours, but God has used that to create relationships, which enable further conversations about faith after the service.

I asked Kathy about their plan and she replied, "We don't really know where this leads, but nor do we need to, as we trust that God is in control. All we really need to do is just show up every week and do our part in God's plan."

*They saw what God was doing on their street and joined in with God's mission*



# Bringing theological **EDUCATION** out of the shadows

The Revd Andrew Harper is the Director of Global and Learning Innovation at Cliff College and the creator of TheologyX.

**The Revd Andrew Harper describes TheologyX, an online learning platform that is a Godsend for students in remote parts of the world**

**D**espite the havoc wreaked by Covid-19 on higher education, the fruits of theological reflection have never been more readily available to God's people. Within 30 seconds, one can command at one's fingertips a theological

library that dwarfs even that of history's wealthiest and most learned collectors. However, while we in the West enjoy easy and immediate access to such an embarrassment of riches, many must still make huge sacrifices to enjoy a modicum of what we take for granted.

In 2018, at the ATTEA (All Africa Theological Education by Extension Association) conference, a group of Nairobi women described the lengths to which they were forced to go just to access theological material. These women – once students themselves – were now in the business of educating others. They were also full-time mothers. Every day they would wake up, make breakfast, get the kids to school, go to work, come back, do the housework, feed the family, and put the children to bed. Once or twice a week they would also have to travel on the night bus to their local ATTEA training hub to access their written paper materials and drop off their work. They then returned home on the night bus again.





*The 'Theo' box effectively acts like a mobile Bible college*

They did this week after week. It took an enormous financial and mental toll on these women. Travelling by night was exhausting and dangerous: the women would frequently encounter violence (both physical and sexual) while travelling on the night buses. This was the cost of their theological education. And, remarkably, it was one they were willing to pay.

#### **Online library**

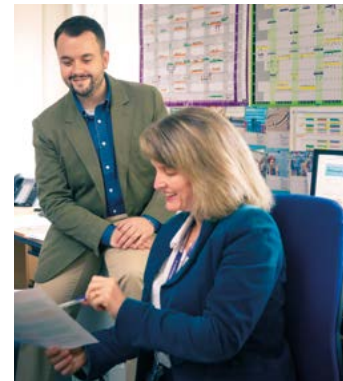
Fortunately there is a solution. With the introduction and steady expansion of TheologyX, it is now possible to provide theological education to such as those Nairobi women and in such a way that eliminates the need for a dangerous night-time commute. TheologyX delivers a safe and secure online environment in which to pursue theological learning. Based on and supported by experts in Open edX (which is used by nine of the ten highest ranked universities), TheologyX has been developed in partnership by Cliff College in Derbyshire and the Methodist Church of Great Britain.

Instead of requiring students to travel great distances to study, TheologyX facilitates theological learning in remote areas of the world. It does this via the 'Theo' box – an intranet device which creates a local digital learning environment for up to 50 students using an internal data/wi-fi connection. The Theo box effectively acts like a mobile Bible college. At the push of a button, students can gain access to a full theological library, no matter their location. They don't even need a consistent internet connection as Theo boxes can be run using mobile signal data, helping students overcome myriad financial and social barriers to learning.

#### **Bringing the light of education**

A theological student should not have to deal with darkness and deathly dangers. In keeping with our confession of faith, theology should be done in the light, for Christ himself (the subject of all theological reflection) is the "light of life" (John 8:12). TheologyX takes theological education out of the shadows of inequality and physical peril and gives students a chance to shine. Our vision is for TheologyX to become a catalyst both for the learner and the educator. For the learner, we hope to see it become a catalyst for access – as it removes geographical, technical and financial boundaries. For the educator, we hope to see it become a catalyst for genuine partnership and collaboration – not just between learning institutions located in the Global South, but also with academics and Churches based in the West. As believers in diverse situations are equipped to learn and to engage in theological reflection, we will eventually bear witness to a flow of quality teaching, research and scholarship coming out of the Global South. This stands to benefit the Methodist Church of Great Britain directly, not because of what we can offer them, but because of what they have to offer us.

Indeed, this must be an anti-colonial project by design. It is not enough just to offer help to Churches in the Global South; we must also make a conscious effort to give them agency, to prioritise individual decision-making. We will not just be better informed by such a collaboration, we will also find our lives illuminated by unique voices and experiences, such as those of the women in Nairobi.



LIGHT

**"Our Calling" encourages us all to learn as Christians. How might online learning enrich your faith?**

*Our vision is for TheologyX to become a catalyst both for the learner and the educator*



# The light of **YOUNG** lives

**Youth coordinator Ermine Mitchell says young people are inspirational and it is a privilege to enable, encourage and nurture them**

**O**ver the past four to five years I have been listening intently to that still small voice of my Lord and Saviour, calling me to somewhere I never thought I would be. I was a lay pastoral worker for just over 11 years, when I was asked to join our circuit youth team as a prayer warrior. That role changed, and I am now the Birmingham Methodist Circuit Children and Youth Coordinator for our 30-plus churches. It's a role I never thought I would have, but, it's just amazing to work with our young people of faith.

I am a firm believer that our young people are not the Church of the future but the Church of today, the present the now.... Jesus said "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them. For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14). That says it all.

I am privileged to walk the journey of faith with our children and young people. They are each on different stepping stones of faith, but they are all on the same path and heading in the same direction with the aim of having a greater understanding of their

faith, to get to know Jesus Christ, and to put their faith into practice.

Our young people have voices that need and should be heard, so we need to give them the opportunity. The young people in the Birmingham District have had their voices heard and are instrumental in worship and I pray this continues. We have a youth service once a month that is led by them. I am so inspired by their worship and by their enthusiasm to share their faith in a way that represents them. Our youth services are generally longer than the hour and it's inspiring to see how they are eager to stay on and worship. They want to stay and study Scripture and enjoy fellowship. I come away with a WOW feeling every time!

### **Inspirational youth events**

I was privileged enough to attend a weekend 3Generate event with over 30 of our young people, and I could feel God calling on my inner child to come out. Over 1,300 young people from all parts of the UK came together. It gave me another WOW feeling! Here are some comments from the young people:

*I want to be part of a Church that celebrates our young people*

“

*I enjoyed 3Gen because it allowed me to make friends and learn about God.*

”

“

*I've become closer to God and like being able to do things on my own.*

”

“

*I've felt loved and accepted by everyone including God.*

”





*My light is getting brighter so our children and young people can respond to the brightness*



As well as my work as youth coordinator, I was also invited to work for the charity The Feast, representing the Methodist Church. It's an interfaith charity that aims to bring together young people of different faiths and none. This was something new to me, but have you ever had the feeling there is a dim light within you and, as you answer, the light gets brighter? That is what I feel was, and still is, happening to me. My light is getting brighter so our children and young people can respond to the brightness. They have embraced other cultures with open arms and it is wonderful to see friendships form. They have a greater understanding of their own faith, of different faiths, and of the position of those with no faith. To listen to some of their conversations makes my hairs stand on end.

I continue to pray for our children and young people. I want to be part of a Church that sees, hears, respects and includes them. I want to be part of a Church that celebrates our young people. I want to be part of a Church where they feel they belong. I am grateful for my role in which I cannot only relive my youth, but also be a light for young people, listen to them, and enable, encourage and nurture them.

I am truly inspired by our young people. I know that church numbers are declining, but I cannot wait for our young people to become seniors and I embrace them: they are not the Church of tomorrow, they are the Church of today.

Ermine Mitchell is the Birmingham Methodist Circuit Children and Youth Coordinator.



**LIGHT**

**In what new ways is God challenging your circuit to "see, hear, respect and include" children?**



# HONEST LIGHT on Methodism

Wesley said  
no one who  
supported  
slavery could  
be a Methodist



The New Room, 'the cradle of Methodism', was built in Bristol, at the time of the slave trade. Three people with close associations describe its long opposition to racism



**Gary Best, the New Room's historical consultant, writes:** From 1987 to 2008 I was headmaster of Kingswood School and witnessed how young people drawn from over 30 different countries could develop deep friendships. The school's belief that everyone is of equal worth in the eyes of God stemmed from its founder John Wesley. He and his brother Charles had seen at first hand how horrific slavery was in the American colonies and they opposed the racist attitudes it was encouraging.

John Wesley spoke out against 'the man stealers' over 40 years before an

anti-slavery movement was created in Britain and in 1772 Charles Wesley offered sanctuary at the New Room to two escaped slaves, helping secure a legal decision to permit their return home to Africa. John then produced a remarkably influential tract called *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774, which is still in print. It made clear that black people were not 'barbarians' or 'savages' and outlined the horrors involved in the slave trade, begging the sea captains, merchants, and planters to put their conscience before their pocket:

"Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right and wrong is wrong. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, [between] cruelty and mercy.... You act the villain to enslave them.... Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature...."



Wesley said no one who supported slavery could be a Methodist and asked his

# and antislavery



preachers in America to demand liberty for black people, ignoring the future President George Washington's comment that he should keep out of politics. In the 1780s he promoted the Society for Effecting Abolition of the Slave Trade, famously launching the Bristol branch from the pulpit at the New Room, and the last letter he wrote before his death encouraged William Wilberforce to continue working for the abolition of slavery.

Early Methodism promoted educational opportunities for Africans. In 1794, for example, the New Room arranged for a former slave, Boston King, to be educated at Kingswood School. Methodist schools were created in the slave colonies, but some were burnt down by the slave owners.

The museum at the New Room includes a section on slavery and my book *Slavery and Bristol* has an account of Olaudah Equiano from 1789, recounting what it was like to be enslaved, and once freed, to be subjected to racial prejudice and be denied a voice. Only within Methodism did Equiano find a church where he could feel truly at home and he went on to found the Sons of Africa, the eighteenth-century equivalent of Black Lives Matter.

**David Worthington and Mandy Briggs are the director and education officer at the New Room. They write:**

In the heart of the museum at the New Room is a statue. It's a figure made from chains. It is not meant to depict one particular man, woman, or child, but stands

as a stark reminder that slavery was, and remains, a cruel reality. After seeing the dreadful treatment of enslaved people in Georgia, John Wesley remained opposed to slavery throughout his life. This opposition grew as he got older and collected more evidence. His views meant that he was not always popular in Bristol, where rich ship owners known as the Merchant Venturers, were heavily involved in buying and selling people and goods.

The statue of Edward Colston, put up in the city centre in 1895 to commemorate his philanthropy, was controversial for a long time. It was toppled by Black Lives Matter activists in the summer of 2020 bringing the history and issues surrounding slavery, Colston and Bristol to international attention.

At the New Room, we have always sought to tell Wesley's story, pointing to his commitment to social justice. We were able to tell the stories of both John and Charles Wesley's statues on BBC Radio Bristol straight after Colston was toppled. We run workshops and lessons for school groups exploring Wesley's opposition to the slave trade and have produced a resource for schools called *A Tale of Two Statues*, which contrasts John Wesley and Edward Colston.

If you would like to book a talk on Zoom about the history of the chapel or John Wesley's opposition to slavery, or know more about resources for schools, please email [info@newroombristol.org.uk](mailto:info@newroombristol.org.uk) or go to [www.newroombristol.org.uk](http://www.newroombristol.org.uk)



*Begging the sea captains, merchants, and planters to put their conscience before their pocket*



LIGHT

How will your church tackle the cruel reality of modern-day slavery?





# Light in prison **DARKNESS**

**Three chaplains speak of God's transforming light in their prison work**



**The Revd Bob Wilson is Free Churches Faith Advisor for Prison Chaplaincy**



**I**n John 8:12 Jesus promises life characterised by the very light that shines from his innermost being to all who follow him. What a promise! What a challenge. This was such a radical statement that the pharisees were enraged, saying words to the effect: "Who says so? ... Just you? ... That's not a valid testimony." Two thousand years later we still bear testimony to the truth of Jesus' words and the folly of the pharisees.

I have been working in prisons since 1995, and in those 25 years I have repeatedly witnessed the light of life shining from those whom we often see as being consumed by darkness. Here are just a few examples:

- I heard a violent offender in a Christian rehabilitative community say to a gentle Christian volunteer "You have helped me to learn how to talk again."
- In an inner-city prison I have seen an habitual self-harmer in tears of joy as he laughed with his group leader who couldn't play Monopoly without cheating.

- On a 12-step recovery course I heard a man in his fifties dogged by addiction all his life say finally "I can't do this on my own, I really do need help."
- In a prison chapel I have seen a man transformed by the simple act of saying the Lord's Prayer and realising for the first time what he was saying.
- In churches around the country I have seen people who have left prison and found welcome, freedom and acceptance in a way that has led them to safely live life in the fullness for which Jesus died.

The deepest truth of the Gospels is arguably the light of Jesus, the one whom the artist William Holman Hunt characterises as standing at the closed door, which has no handle and so from a prisoner's perspective is a like a cell door. When given the chance, Jesus' light does indeed invade our darkness. I have seen that light transform, bring peace, bring joy, bring hope, bring life. The light of life in the darkest places... what a promise! What a challenge.

*The deepest truth of the Gospels is arguably the light of Jesus*

## The Revd Naomi Kaiga looks after Ackworth and Upton Methodist Churches and is a part-time chaplain at HMP Wakefield.

**G**rowing up in a village in rural Kenya, we didn't have street lights. During evenings when there was moonlight, we would lie on the ground observing myriad stars in the sky. With no light pollution hindering our view, the stars and moonlight were so bright. It showed me that light shines brighter in darkness.

Someone thought I was nuts when I started volunteering as a chaplain at HMP Wakefield eight years ago, asking "Why bother to go to such horrible people?" I didn't have an answer for her and I thought I would just be attending a Bible study, never envisioning my ministry involving prison chaplaincy. The first day the coordinating chaplain took me to the wings, I was terrified. I was sure that I could never be a chaplain there, but then something in me changed: God's heart for his people was revealed to me. I was given a glimpse of how God sees these 'horrible' people. They are God's children, who are broken by life and as a result they break and hurt others. I realised that there is no darkness or brokenness that the light of Christ cannot penetrate.

I volunteered for five years before being employed as a Free Church chaplain. I thank the Methodist Church for giving me this opportunity and my churches as they support me. Serving in prison reminds me of the Methodist belief "All can be saved". Leading worship and Bible studies, listening and offering hope when someone is hopeless is a privilege and being a pastor to them is my greatest joy. My responsibilities include: pastoral visits, breaking the news of a relative's death, praying and supporting someone who is suicidal, and much more. Chaplaincy represents life and hope to many, especially those serving a life sentence. It's a joy to witness lives being changed through the transforming light of life that is Jesus Christ. Seeing these broken lives being changed is a daily reminder that light cannot be defeated by darkness.



*In the light of  
life we listen,  
care and offer  
prayers*

**Stephen Caley is the  
Methodist and Free Church  
Chaplain at HMP Warren Hill  
and HMP Hollesley Bay and  
the Young Offender  
Institution in Hollesley Bay.**



**F**or four years I have had the privilege and great joy of leading a number of HMP Hollesley Bay residents who are on licence. The theme 'light of life' comes to mind particularly when I reflect on how we would gather together in the chapel, while it was still dark, to walk to the beach for the Easter morning sunrise service. They took turns to carry a large wooden cross and erect it in the shingle beach to await the first rays of the sun rising above the North Sea, when we would proclaim "Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia." Unfortunately we were not able to make this pilgrimage

during 2020 due to Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions.

My 25 years as the Methodist and Free Church Chaplain at both Hollesley Bay and Warren Hill on the Suffolk coast is a testament to how God can call you in an unexpected direction. Despite once hearing that the "Light of Christ is not in any prison" I have proved time and time again it is not true. It is unfortunately a statement that has a negative effect on how people view chaplaincy ministry and the way in which Christ is that light of life.

Jesus – the light of life – is at work in prisons, as seen in many residents as they practise their faith and in those who come to faith during their sentence. Some residents have their own testimony and faith story and are eager to share in evening Bible Study, Alpha, and weekend worship. Sometimes a charitable gift of new clothing is requested and received. This gives prisoners practical and appreciated support, again demonstrating that the light of life is at work!

With sentencing comes a whole mix of problems for many, especially issues concerning family, bereavement and resettlement. The chaplains play an important part in supporting prisoners. In the name of Christ and the light of life we listen, care and offer prayers. Many residents ask for prayer, not only for themselves but also for their family back at home, and the lighting of a small candle is a potent symbol, enabling us to focus on the light of Christ in all situations and need.



LIGHT

How might you  
come together  
to support the  
work of your local  
prison chaplaincy?

*They are God's  
children,  
who are  
broken by life*



# Seeing CLEARLY

The Revd Dr Jonathan R Hustler says we need Christ – the light of life – to appreciate the wonders of creation

I recently had a hospital appointment because of a problem with my sight. The consultant was one of those people who inspire confidence from the moment they enter the room. He explained that I had ‘significant posterior capsular thickening’ and recommended I undergo a laser capsulotomy. Given that it was a simple procedure (if laser treatment on one’s eye can really be described as ‘simple’) he suggested that his colleague perform it there and then. I agreed; it took ten painless minutes, and, an hour later, equipped with eye drops, I was back in my study. It was a grey and drizzly afternoon.

The next morning, the weather had changed and the autumn sun shone on the garden. It was a riot of colour. I looked out at the reddening leaves, the green of the uncut grass sparkling with the last of the raindrops, the painted shed and garden furniture, the emerald colouring of the parakeets (this is North London) and the blue, black and white of the magpies. The colours all seemed brighter than I remembered them. It was as if there were

more light in the world – and as far as my right eye was concerned, of course, there was more light than there had been on the last bright morning.

Algernon Charles Swinburne was a poet and novelist in the nineteenth century who used his talent to rail against the Christian faith. One of his charges was that Christianity sucked the joy out of life, as expressed in his famous line: “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath.”

Swinburne could not have been more wrong – Christ the light of life restores the colour that is lost and lifts our hearts to rejoice in God’s creation. Sadly, there are those who hold Swinburne’s view (and sometimes churches have given them evidence for this) that the mission of the Church is to diminish rather than to increase the joys of living. Our task as Christians is not to try to argue with that but with quiet confidence to offer a personal knowledge of Jesus, the light of life. Those who accept the invitation will start to see differently – and joy and delight will follow.



*All the colours seemed brighter than I remembered*

# The Light of **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

*Churches call to reset the debt  
so all can live in fullness of life*

**We must urge government to  
end the debt and climate crises  
so all may live in the light of full  
life, says Hannah Brown**





**A**s Christians, we have a vision of life that is born out of God's declaration of all creation's potential. For life to be realised in all its fullness, we recognise we are interdependent, and when we live in true community each person has what they need not only to survive, but to thrive and to flourish.

The pandemic has caused us to see our interdependence in a different way. We have seen how the life of each one of us is affected by the decision-making of others: our neighbours, our communities, our government.

Churches all over the country play a part in creating the conditions necessary for flourishing life to be experienced by people in their local communities. Community food schemes often come with pastoral or social support. Debt advice is combined with signposting to wider wellbeing networks. When we connect with people, we seek to see them how God does – in all their potential for a full life.

However, people's flourishing can be prevented by the way that society is shaped and by a lack of resources. For example, for families trapped in poverty, 'holiday hunger' has been a looming reality. The denial of sufficient financial support to asylum seekers during the pandemic can shrink life beyond recognition.

If we seek full life for all creation, we have a role in helping people flourish in every way possible. This means engaging with the structures and systems that shape our society. We are called to encourage our leaders and policy-makers to see in each person the light of their potential, and we are called upon to help shape policies that enable this.

### **Taking action against debt**

At the start of this new year, how can we take action together to achieve this?

The number of people who are in severe problem debt due to coronavirus has almost doubled since the first lockdown began. The charity Step Change say 2.87 million are now at risk of long-term debt problems, with those on low incomes, young adults, and families with children hit hardest.

While more government support was put in place to help people who had lost their income during the pandemic, for many families this was only enough to cover the basics. Millions are still living under the shadow of ever-increasing debt, weighed

down and prevented from reaching their full potential by worry and limited choices.

In response, the Methodist Church along with partners are calling for the government to 'Reset The Debt', by creating a Jubilee Fund to buy up and pay off the debt forced upon families by the pandemic. The idea behind this is the 'theology of jubilee', a principle in the Old Testament (Leviticus 25) that ensured everyone had what they needed, and no one was trapped in poverty because of debts they accrued. The jubilee principle models the fair, interdependent and fullness of life that God desires for all people. By resetting the debt today, we have the chance to bring about system change that could be part of enabling full life for millions of people.

### **Net-zero carbon emissions**

There are many other ways to bring light. The climate crisis still remains at the forefront of our priorities – we cannot separate our understanding of full life for people from that of the planet.

In 2021, millions of pounds will fund programmes to combat rising unemployment. As this happens, can we call for opportunities that prove the value of healthy, properly paid work and contribute towards our national journey to net-zero carbon emissions, a flourishing of people and planet?

In November, the UK will host COP26, potentially one of the most significant climate conferences we will see this decade. How might we all be part of creating fair and binding international frameworks for reaching net-zero emissions and protecting the environment?

In this new year, the Church has a unique perspective to offer, embedded in our theology and our experience of relational, community-centred living. We can speak about our understanding of life that is interdependent, modelling this locally in order to be a powerful voice nationally. This isn't only an opportunity but a calling, for which we are equipped with powerful testimonies and experience of how our communities can live in the light of full life, and go from recovery to flourishing.

To find out more and to get involved with any of these initiatives visit the Joint Public Issues Team at [jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://jointpublicissues.org.uk), or follow them on Twitter @publicissues or Facebook @jointpublicissues.

*To see in each person the light of their potential*



**LIGHT**

**What commitment are you prepared to make in support of these critical initiatives?**

To find out more and to get involved with any of these initiatives visit the Joint Public Issues Team at [jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://jointpublicissues.org.uk), or follow them on Twitter @publicissues or Facebook @jointpublicissues.

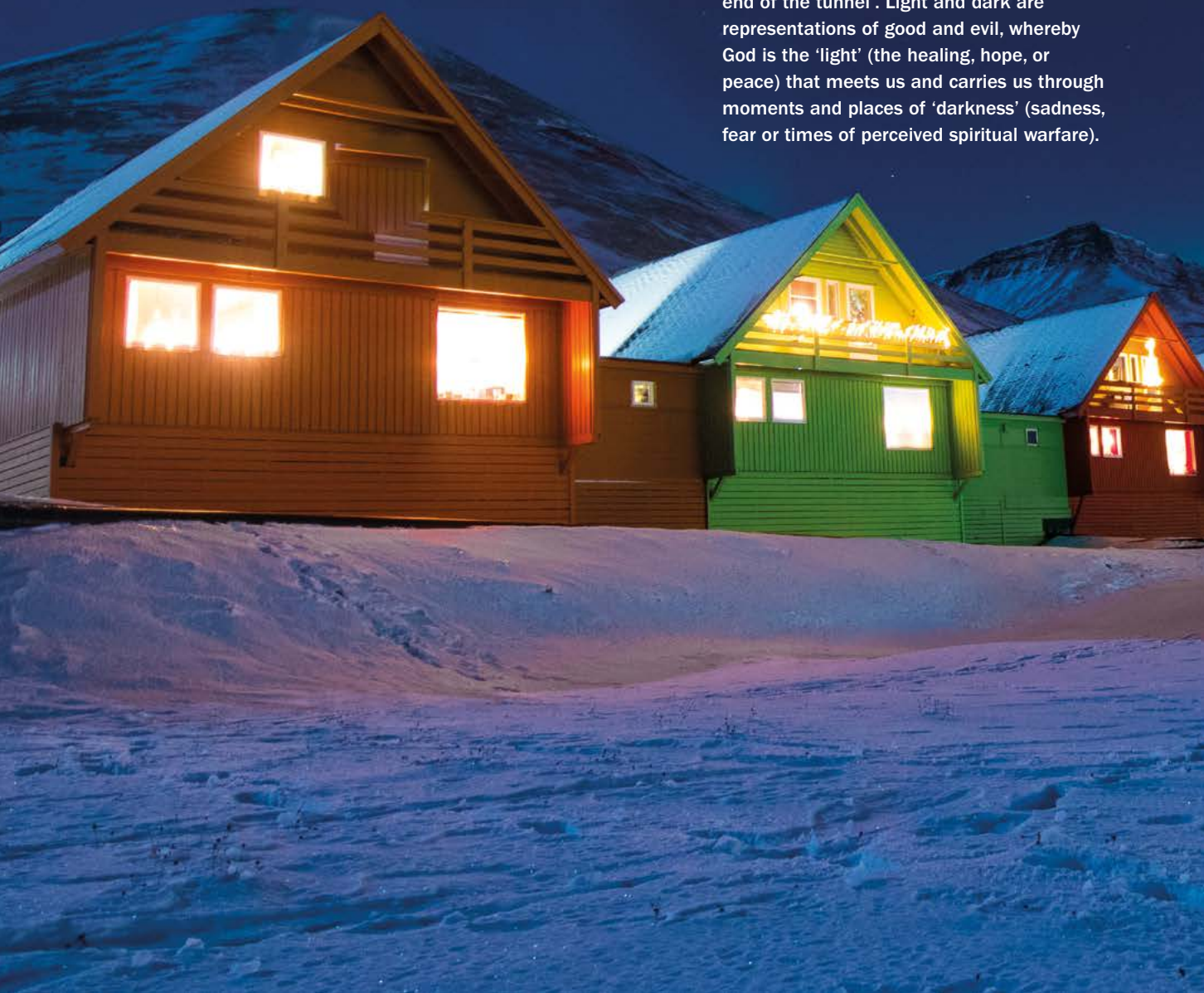
# Reflection on darkness

*Darkness and light are mutually dependent companions*

**W**e are in deep winter. Many of you will already be finding your thoughts turning longingly to the lighter spring months. But I invite you to pause a while and breathe in this season of darkness before it disappears. And spare a thought for the people of Svalbard, living deep within the Arctic Circle, who between October and February live through a 'polar night' when the sun does not show its face above the horizon. To live in darkness 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is a remarkable thing, yet the community there is a deeply spiritual one, the Church is at the heart of things. A few years ago I was in Svalbard in January, and I wondered how the metaphor of Jesus as the Light of the World sat with people for whom six months of the year is lived in almost total darkness.

I learned that it is a time when things slow down, when life is lived around the proverbial hearth and 'being' takes precedence over 'doing'. As I moved around during those dark days I realised that I had to learn to see things differently; I realised that if I wanted to see the details of things, I had to move closer in. Unlike light, which has the capacity to scatter us, darkness makes us move closer in and after six months of intense 24-hour sunlight, the long spell of constant night-time offers welcome respite and balance. And in all that, the association of darkness with fear and malevolence, which is so central to much Christian thinking, fades away.

Of course, in most forms of the English language darkness is a byword for terrible things. We know what we mean when we talk about the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel'. Light and dark are representations of good and evil, whereby God is the 'light' (the healing, hope, or peace) that meets us and carries us through moments and places of 'darkness' (sadness, fear or times of perceived spiritual warfare).



# that is God's gift

But is there another way of thinking about this? What can learn from the people who live through the polar night? Is it that God carries us through periods of what we would describe as 'darkness', times when we feel alone or afraid? Or, could it be that God is the darkness? Could it be that in those times of stress and loss, God is offering us physical darkness as a gift, a place of hibernation in which to hide or regenerate? In this way of thinking, the darkness is not a cause or a symptom of our pain, but rather is a way through it, a sign of God's being with us and offering us time and space to recover. We know that darkness is necessary for life – in the womb, in the earth. The absence of light is necessary for life to take hold. This is alluded to in Scripture.

Jesus is born at night, he shows his most human side in Gethsemane at night, and rises within the pitch darkness of a sealed tomb – from the dark emerges new life. The account in Genesis of the creation of the world imagines the fundamental state of being as one of darkness. It is an account of the creation of a balanced universe. God creates light but chooses to keep the darkness in equal measure to the light. Darkness and light are mutually dependent companions, both necessary for life, both capable of leading to death. Even in John's

Gospel, from which the most enduring and influential Christian metaphor emerges, that of Christ as the 'Light of the World', exciting things happen once the light has faded! Think about Nicodemus, a learned scholar who comes to Jesus after sundown to seek answers and to expand his mind. A traditional interpretation of that text holds the darkness of the night as symbolic of Nicodemus' ignorance, contrasting with the 'light' revealed in Jesus' discourse. However, the physical darkness serves Nicodemus well, setting him off on a journey in which we see him letting go of a purely rational way of thinking and embracing the more mystical path of Jesus.

May the Blessing of God,  
Who is Darkness,  
Love,  
and Light,  
Enfold us each day and each night,  
Now and always,  
Amen.

*We know that darkness is necessary for life – in the womb, in the earth*



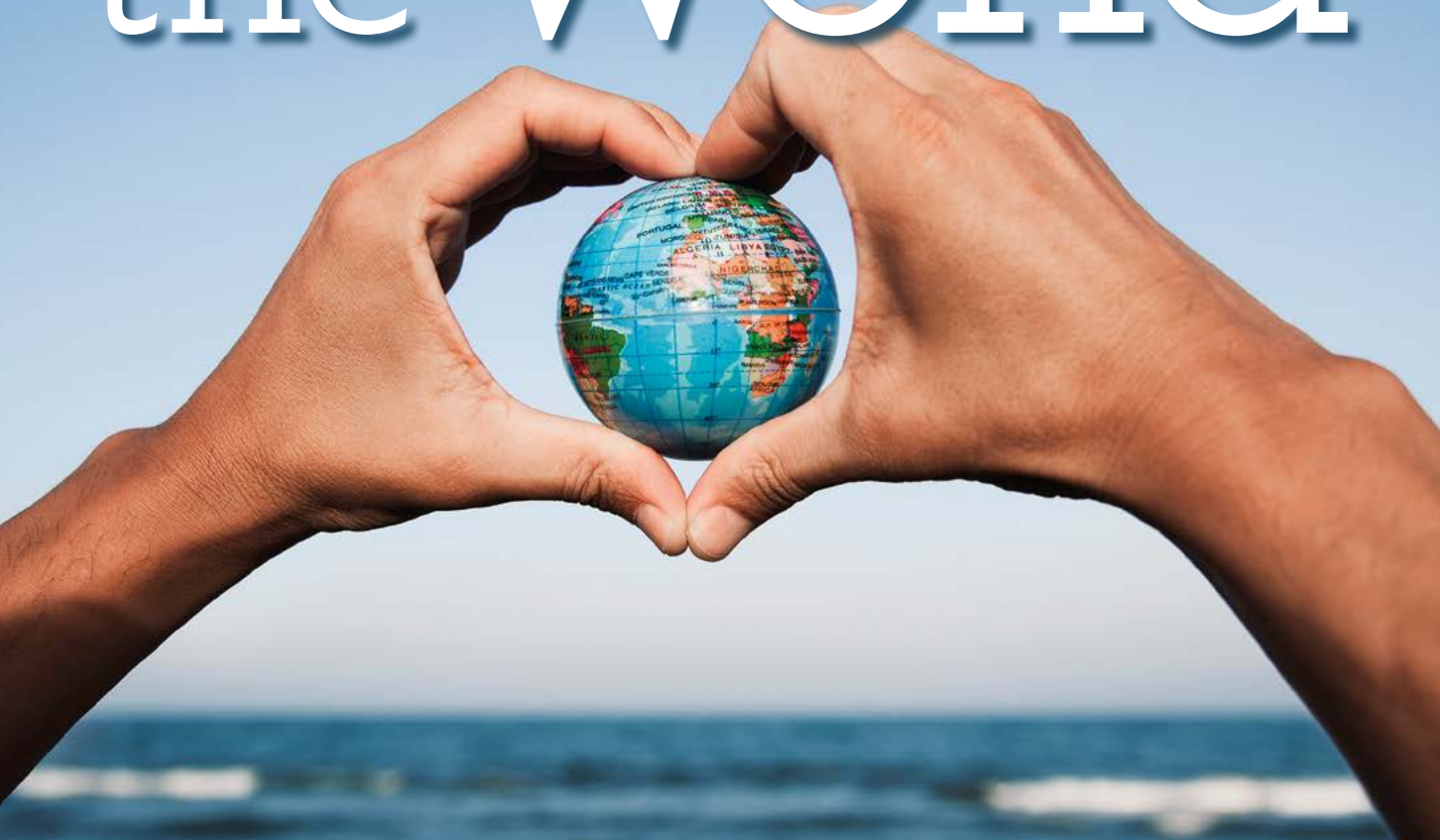
The Revd Cathy Bird is the superintendent minister in the Manchester and Stockport Circuit and author of *The Divine Heart of Darkness: Finding God in the Shadows* (Sacristy Press, 2017).



Methodist Women  
in Britain 2011-2021

**EASTER  
OFFERING  
2021**

# Into all the world



**Your local Easter Offering Service is written and prepared by Methodist Women in Britain on behalf of the World Mission Fund.**

This act of worship enables the Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland to give to the work of our 65 Partner Churches overseas.

You can donate directly to the World Mission Fund by going to [www.justgiving.co.uk/mcfworldmission](http://www.justgiving.co.uk/mcfworldmission) or cheques can be sent to Fundraising, The Methodist Church, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR.  
Email: [fundraising@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:fundraising@methodistchurch.org.uk)

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