

Issue 18 • Spring 2020

The **Methodist** Church 

the connexion

Letting go



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



David Perry
Editor

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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Write *the connexion*, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR

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"Modern Britons simply aren't enormously used to the idea of sacrifice for the supposed collective good."

Gaby Hinsliff, writing in *The Guardian*
(28 February 2020)

Sacrifice is a word that doesn't have much traction nowadays. In a 'me-first' culture, at first glance being sacrificial can seem to run counter to the flow, and look like a rather odd and baffling outlier. For instance, it's so much easier to enjoy Easter eggs in a 'meaning-lite' way than it is to dwell upon the weighty sacrificial significance of the Cross on Good Friday. Yet both for individuals and nation states, the climate emergency and coronavirus are challenging the luxury of such a selfish outlook.

For all the indications to the contrary, being sacrificial seems hard-wired into human nature. Sacrificial moments of 'letting go' are often when we see ourselves at our best. It's when the generosity and courage of ordinary people shine like beacons of hope. The Bible affirms that we are made in the image of God, and the God of sacrificial self-giving love calls us to live from the heart of this truth. It is to this insight that Jesus leads us so determinedly through Holy Week.

I'd like to make an analogy inspired by the resurgence of analogue film among younger generations of photographers: the pathway to Good Friday is the film upon which the wonderful drama of Easter Day is exposed. The two are inseparable. Indeed Jesus makes a point of telling would-be disciples to load up with this very film if they are to capture and inhabit the meaning and purpose of his ministry. Nothing else will do. It's the only option he offers. He tells his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Letting go into God's self-giving love is to let go of all that inhibits us from experiencing new life in Jesus. When he says "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), he means it. Letting go allows this new life to be, and for the image of Easter to become gloriously apparent. Through sacrificial love, Our Calling is to be a Church and a people of resurrection and life in a Good Friday world.

Love and peace,
David

the connexion

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Independent celebrants
Sue Draper
and Ruby Beech
(page 12)

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The Methodist Church

Methodist Church House,
25 Marylebone Road,
London NW1 5JR

Tel: 020 7486 5502

Email: enquiries@methodistchurch.org.uk

Web: www.methodist.org.uk

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Highlights



6 Letting go into trust



8 Spanish lesson in letting go



10 From loss to letting go



15 Letting go: a release from ego and false self



16 Following Jesus' example to let go



24 Thy Kingdom Come – Pray for Five

Thy Kingdom Come

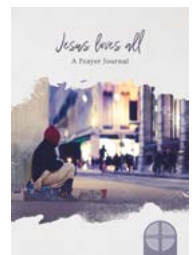
This ecumenical global prayer movement invites all Christians to pray between Ascension and Pentecost for more people to come to know Jesus.

Prepare to take part from 21-31 May and use the enclosed prayer journal *Jesus loves all*, written by Methodist Youth President, Thelma Commey.

You can order more copies from www.methodistpublishing.org.uk

Join this wave of prayer on your own, in your group, as a church. Register your involvement, download the app (for Apple or Android) and find other useful, resources at

www.thykingdomcome.global



Climate Emergency – Responding to the Conference

The Methodist Church is actively engaged in questions around the responsibility of oil and gas companies in relation to climate change. In 2017, the Methodist Conference asked for this area to be evaluated and for decisions on investment to be made in 2020. The Joint Advisory Committee on the Ethics of Investment (JACEI) will make public its conclusions before the 2020 Methodist Conference. On Monday 29 June, at a fringe meeting of the Methodist Conference, representatives of the JACEI and the Central Finance Board of the Methodist Church will discuss the findings and answer questions.

Church at the Margins Officer

Deacon Eunice Attwood has been designated as the Church at the Margins Officer, a new position in the Evangelism and Growth team, to build on the biblical connection between evangelism and social justice.

This strategic role is part of the Church's ongoing work to reaffirm *Our Calling*.

Eunice Attwood brings over 20 years' experience of ordained diaconal ministry, including city- and town-centred ministry amongst marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Eunice commented: "In light of increasing economic poverty and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, we need to embrace the commitment to be a Church at the margins led by those at the margins, demonstrating God's love revealed in Jesus Christ for all people."



THINK
PIECE

LETTING GO

of our complacency

*Jesus’
thirstiness is a
cry of solidarity*

The Revd Dr Raj Bharat Patta, presbyter in the United Stockport Methodist Circuit, says we can only help the world when we let go of complacency

At Easter time, Christians reflect on the Cross of Jesus Christ and seek its relevance for the world. In a time of rapid climate change, we are called to let go of our human greed and to care for God’s creation, which today is bruised and battered due to humanity’s selfishness. In such a context, the words of Jesus from the Cross, particularly when he cries out “I thirst” (John 19:28), resonate today with vulnerable communities in the majority world who bear the brunt of climate change. Plagued by drought, they are calling on powerful people to let go of their dominance over creation and the powerless. In the context of Gnosticism, to which John addresses his gospel, the divine was understood to be transcendent, to be far above all physical pain and needs. When

John records how Jesus was thirsty, he breaks with the idea that Jesus was above physical need. Saying that Jesus, the Son of God, cried out for a drink of water was groundbreaking. It affirmed that Jesus died on the Cross thirsty. His shout for a drink bridged the gap between the divine being and the fully human Jesus. We see Jesus on his Cross identifying with thirsty people throughout the world and a thirsty creation. People reading John’s Gospel might have been perplexed. Jesus had already been introduced as ‘living waters’, so how could he become thirsty? Can a living spring be drained out? Can perennial waters dry away? These would have been some of the questions that John’s audience might have had. But if Jesus were above pain or thirst, his incarnation would not have been





Our church communities are called to be springs of new hope

real. On the contrary, Jesus expressed his real human need. Neither the sour vinegar offered by the crowd around the Cross nor the tears of heaven could quench Jesus' thirst. He died thirsty.

Life-giving water

Jesus' thirstiness is a cry of solidarity with the thirsty earth and with those who literally and metaphorically need water.

It is a cry of solidarity with all those dry rivers and with all those enduring drought. Jesus' cry is also a call to quench thirst of different types. When he says that he thirsts, Jesus is warning death and drought that they will be defeated very soon, for showers of new life are to rain in his resurrection. When he says that he thirsts, Jesus is also calling greedy people to repent, for much thirst throughout the world is created by them.

In the context of climate emergency today, when much of the world is suffering from drought, this cry of Jesus from the Cross challenges us to address thirst and those who are thirsty. The call for us as a Church is to engage in caring for our creation. The season of Lent calls us to repent of our human greed and save our creation.

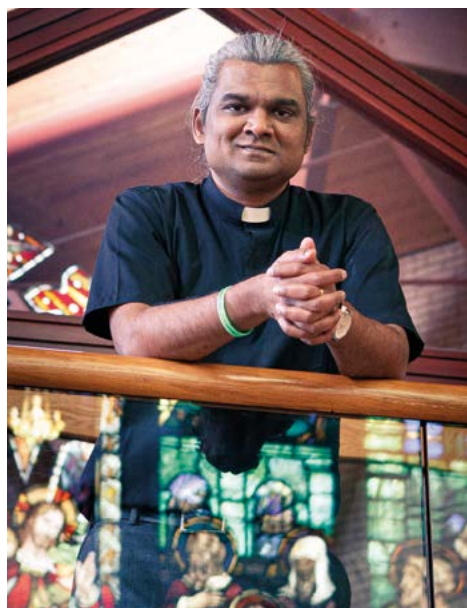
Springs of new hope

Although Jesus died thirsty on the Cross, God raised him back to life. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples and invited them to breakfast, where he inspired them with hope and confidence. As a Church, the call for us is to let go of our complacency and learn humility so that we can build just and inclusive communities and work to address issues such as climate change, poverty, homelessness, and class and gender discrimination.

We, as a Church, are called to become community hubs where vulnerable people can find a welcoming space and hospitality. At Easter, our church communities are called to be springs of new hope for all the thirsty and suffering people around us. We are called to quench the thirst of vulnerable communities and to care for the world. In pursuit of this, let justice flow down like a never-ending stream that is clear, pure and life-giving. May we become the tributaries of justice and life to all those in need. Let us awake to be the showers of life.

Letting go of our complacency often involves recognising the many times we have rejected our Saviour. We have all turned away from Jesus, assuming we could handle things on our own. But Jesus still longs to draw us in. This Easter time, let us reflect on how we can exchange our pride for his crucifixion, and strive to follow him faithfully.

I wish you all a blessed Easter.



**LETTING GO
Question**

How is your church being called to let go of complacency and turn back to Jesus?



Letting go into trust



As Director of Methodist Formation, The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, the Revd Dr Jane Craske appreciates how ministerial training involves letting go of the familiar and being invited into the new

Ministerial training is a journey of discernment

A student minister came to talk to me a few weeks ago. It was just after her visit to the circuit with which she had been matched in initial stationing. She asked if she would be receiving something equivalent to an 'offer letter', so that she could let her employer know what was happening when she resigned from her current post. We talked about the letter of understanding which her circuit should prepare, but that clearly didn't quite fit the bill. She went away reflecting on the distinction we'd uncovered between her expectation as an employee and what was happening in the Church's processes

of stationing. She came back a day later saying that she had realised this was one more step on her journey of letting go and continuing to trust God and the Church.

This happened just after I had been asked to write this article, on the theme of 'letting go'. In initial ministerial training and formation, there are potentially so many experiences of letting go.

Changing communities

From the beginning of the induction programme for new student ministers at Queen's, we begin talking about the changes they will experience. They let go

of their previous close relationship to the particular Methodist church where they were a member – and that home church has to let go of them to some extent, which may be very hard. The change from membership being held in a local church to membership being held connexionally is a signal of a shift in relationship with the Church, common to all Methodists in training and often different from their Anglican peers.

Some Methodist students at Queen's have moved to Birmingham, a few with families. They may have let go of a previous home, employment, and much that was familiar. Anxiety and excitement are both in evidence. For others, the situation is very different as they come to Queen's either for part of the week (same home base, but having let go of previous employment and other roles), or for short periods of residence (same home base, same employment). For them, some aspects of letting go are yet to come. The communities they are part of, at Queen's and in other places, are vital in supporting them at such times.

A journey into...

Ministerial training is an 'in-between' time. A new relationship to the Church has begun, but one of the hardest things we name at the beginning of the course is that this is still a continuing journey of discernment. The end is not as certain as we might like it to be. Gifts and graces, dispositions and aptitude are still being tested and assessed, right up until the Church confirms the decision to ordain someone. That can cause anxiety for some student ministers and probationers. For others it is liberating to be reminded that the way is not fixed, but open.

Just as significant is how initial formation can affect someone's relationship with God,



their sense of the Christian faith, and their understanding of the Church. And that's where it's important to talk not so much about 'letting go of' as 'letting go into...'. If we hold on so tight that we can't let go of one thing, our hands will never be open enough or empty enough to receive and take hold of the gifts that God has for us. New perspectives can be built on to previous understandings, but for most of us there is at some point a sense of unpacking past ideas in order to find out how to re-pack, or leave behind, or add creatively to what we will then take with us. We let go into the ongoing experience of life-long learning and discipleship – as we have done before as followers of Jesus.

Always there is a mixture of holding on and letting go, of being held safe, and of being drawn into the uncertainty and excitement of the new. God holds us and invites us on. The way is deep and rich, sometimes chaotic and always potentially creative. We are called to learn day by day what it is to trust in God.

LETTING GO Question

Where in your life is God inviting you to let go and trust?

We let go into discipleship as followers of Jesus



SPANISH

lesson in letting go

The Revd Mark Slaney,
Chair of the Scotland
and Shetland Districts,
says when we let go,
we make room for new
possibilities



My Scottish adventure began in May 2018. It was the day of my interview for the role of Chair of the Scotland and Shetland Districts. Having offered my best, I was driving north to the Moray Coast when I received a telephone call informing me that the Nomination Committee wanted to forward my name to the Conference. I was shocked and delighted at the same time.

Spanish pilgrimage

Before I could spend much time in my new post, Spain beckoned. In July 2018, I walked over 600 km (373 miles) from Bilbao to Santiago de Compostela along the Camino Del Norte, the northern coastal pilgrim way. I'd never been to Spain before. On day one in Bilbao, I wandered around, trying to make sense of the city streets with my basic map, until I found a brass cockleshell embedded in the pavement outside a church. This was the day I discovered that pilgrimage really is a faith journey. I found a sign and set off in the direction it pointed to somewhere I did not know. I trusted that there would be another sign, when I needed to change direction or take a new path. My job was to be present and attentive, looking for the signs, paying equal attention to both my inner and outer journeys.

I was walking with a purpose to a named but unknown destination. I was also walking with an 'anger stick'.

In preparation for the pilgrimage, I remembered an Inuit tradition. When someone in the community is enraged, they take an anger stick (a pilgrim's staff, if you will) and march until the anger is walked out of their system. They plant the stick in the ground as a measure, a way of saying, "Look! That's how angry I was". Then they turn around and walk home. I made an anger stick and took it with me. My intention was to walk to Santiago and leave it at the door of the cathedral, or maybe sneak it inside and lay it at the altar.

Letting go of my anger stick

I started walking on 29 June and finished 29 July. But I laid down my staff on the 18th day. My pilgrim's diary explains why. "Around 8am I came across a little church at a junction and stopped to have a look. When it came to picking up the stick to go, I heard, 'You could leave that here'. I could but it's become really helpful walking up and down hills. It's meant to go to

Santiago – the pilgrimage's end. I heard the voice again saying, 'You can leave your anger stick here'. In the end, I did. I chose to leave it propped up against the door. I wonder how many Inuits do the same? I felt lighter as I walked away. Is this a lesson in laying down and letting go?"

Back home, reflecting on my pilgrimage, I remembered Jesus saying: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." (John 10: 17–18 NRSV)

Letting go to make way for progress

Methodists face this question: what can we lay down and what does that make room for?

Across Scotland, we are letting go to make room for new initiatives. Anniesland Methodist Church has let go of a beloved building in order to build new homes for others, as well as a new community and worship space. Methodists in Blairgowrie let go of their building and have become more visible, meeting in a community café. Dundee, Kirkcaldy and Shettleston Methodists are wrestling with similar callings.

In Dumfries, Dunbar, Livingston, Granton, Grahamston, Montrose and Rosyth, Methodists have let go of autonomy and are sharing mission, ministry, resources and worship with ecumenical partners. In Lerwick, Shetland, a change in ministry meant the Salvation Army had to lay down a key project, but Shetland Methodists picked it up. 'Food for the Way', a regular lunch group, became a district project and, like a seed planted in good soil, it is flourishing, bringing ministry to the vulnerable, broken and addicted.

I made an anger stick and took it with me

LETTING GO Question

What will you lay down and what will that make room for?

You could leave that here





From **LOSS** to letting go

LETTING GO Question

What is God saying to you through Ann's story?

I've had to learn to start letting go

Through the tragedy of losing her husband in an industrial accident, the Revd Ann Lett of the Lincolnshire District has had to learn to let God carry her

When I received the request to write my testimony, particularly how I felt when I lost my husband, I was rather reticent. But God reminded me of a text I'd read that morning from Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight".

Married life

Pete and I met in 1985 and married in 1987, with Pete spending the majority of our married life in the Royal Air Force. In the early 1990s, he witnessed a trauma he could not forget, and in 1998 was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In 2017 he took early retirement. Money was tight, but as I said, "I could do without 'stuff', but couldn't do without him". Retiring meant he spent more time

volunteering at a local windmill, helping to renovate it to its former glory, and in doing so his mental health improved tremendously. His engineering experience meant he was working on the mechanical side of the windmill: to install a Ruston engine in order to turn a hurst frame, which allowed milling without wind. Pete delighted in this challenge and on the morning of 25 February 2018, was running the engine through a final test phase before attaching it to the hurst frame.

Unfortunately, Pete's clothing caught on the crankshaft of the engine and pulled him up and over the flywheel. He suffered an open skull fracture.

That was the day, for myself and my two daughters, when our world fell apart, and my relationship with God changed. For a while, at least until the funeral (which was nearly a month after Pete's death), I

claimed my faith was getting me through. But after the funeral...

Turning my back on God

I remember going to a Sunday morning service, and after the first hymn, had to walk out. I couldn't sing praises to God, I couldn't speak to God, I didn't want to hear Scripture. I can see I turned my back on God and grieved the only way I knew how. I became insular, there were days I just couldn't get dressed, even waking up was a huge effort. In April, I went off duty with a doctor's sick note – for a year. As 2018 ended, I knew I couldn't remain off duty for ever, and so I started talking to my Superintendent and Chair of District about returning to work. However, the more I thought about it, the more anxious I became; as every time I'd seen a member of one of my churches, they took me back to 25 February. The love and care I received from the Circuit and District was wonderful, but how could I minister to those, who had so generously ministered to me?

In December, my Chair of District asked if I would be prepared to move circuits earlier than planned, for a neighbouring circuit had a space. I admitted I couldn't pray, but would trust that God was in it somewhere, and agreed to move. The pressure of having to return to duty the following September was increasing, so I booked myself a five-day retreat. I knew this was make or break time. I would either come away with an element of faith restored, or I would have to come away from ministry all together.

Faith restored

One retreat night, I got into an emotional mess. I cried out to God to take my grief away. It was far too heavy for me. I sensed God saying, "At last. I've been trying to help you all this time, but you've been determined to carry it yourself." The following morning, I woke and felt so much better. In worship, I was able to pray to God and for the first time in nearly a year, I was able to sing praises. I felt my faith restored.

The summer was a difficult time of packing boxes. Pete had a workshop with all his tools, and it was hard knowing what to do with them. In the house, I'd find a little thing that just overwhelmed me, but

January's experience with God stayed with me, and I knew that even though I would find myself consumed with grief again, it was fleeting. It wasn't all consuming like it had been.

I suppose what I've had to learn is to start letting go, which isn't easy. This Easter, my first on duty since losing Pete, will be a challenge. I tend to get emotional on Good Friday, when I reflect on what Christ did for me on the Cross, and so as I try to work out what the Easter story means for me as a widow, I have to trust that God will be with me.

It is my hope if you are in a similar situation, that you also find God is with you, and has never left you – but just wants you to turn around and see God face to face.

I have to trust that God will be with me



CELEBRATE

letting go

LETTING GO Question

In what new ways can you as a person of faith engage creatively with those who don't want 'religion'?

God is always present



Sue Draper and Ruby Beech reflect on their work as independent celebrants, helping people without a faith commitment to let go

Sue: Ruby, this is your sixth year now. What first drew you to become a celebrant?

Ruby: I hadn't really heard of celebrants until I was asked by someone I used to work with if I would be the celebrant for his wedding ceremony in Mykonos. He and his partner had been together for 19 years when the law changed allowing them to marry. Around the same time, I read an article about a celebrant and resigned my job as an HR director to do the training, including for funerals. I knew I could get meaningful ceremonies through the Church for different aspects of my life. But I have friends who wouldn't feel the same. I felt everyone should be able to have ceremonies that are meaningful for them.

Sue: That's so important – I made a big career change from engineering consultancy to train as a local preacher and I spent two years working part-time for a church. After that, I knew I wanted to work more with people outside or on the fringes of church looking for meaning. I'd had the privilege of sharing in funerals, weddings and I had led a baptism service. I knew you were a celebrant – and it all came together on a short course introducing counselling skills. I remember we met for a chat. I trained, started with funerals and pretty much stayed with them.

Ruby: How does your faith inform your professional practice?

Sue: All people are loved by God and somehow made in God's image, and all

Christians are called to love others as themselves. Those basics underpin my work and I'll always pray for the families privately. For the services, depending on the family, I'll draw on a range of liturgies, readings and prayers, and adapt them to suit. I know we both like the creative writing of Ruth Burgess.

Ruby: And for me God is always present – even in non-religious ceremonies. A family may want to honour the faith of their family member but not want to get involved with a church. When Christians are celebrants there is the opportunity to discuss faith in ways that may seem less threatening. And some of those conversations are quite stretching for me!

Sue: And which values shape your engagement with bereaved families?

Ruby: Every person is unique so I work to make sure a funeral reflects and honours the life of the person who died, as well as giving comfort to the families. Of course there is a big difference between the celebration of a 95-year-old life well lived and that of a baby who has died at a few days old. Also, not everyone who dies was greatly loved or has lived their life well, and finding positive yet truthful content for a ceremony can be a challenge, as can pleasing families with a mix of views. Families trust us with very personal information and it is important to honour that trust.

Sue: Yes, the family always comes first. It's all about what they want, so I listen and offer suggestions to guide them. I'm always respectful of their views and beliefs, and those of the deceased – sometimes their views are similar to mine and other times very different, but it's irrelevant really. Confidentiality, trust and integrity are very



important to me, and I find families do open up about all sorts of deep and difficult things that may need 'writing around' very carefully so as to help them say goodbye appropriately.

Ruby: So what's most satisfying for you about being a celebrant?

Sue: When the family share a hug with me and say something like, "It was perfect, exactly what we wanted. Mum would've loved you." That's so humbling, and I thank God for the gifts and opportunities to have made a difficult day a little bit easier. Sometimes during the visit, the family talks about what might be beyond death and I'm able to talk to them about love, grace, hope and faith in ways that fit in with where I think they're at. Occasionally I can offer to pray with the family, which is a huge privilege, when they didn't want 'religion'.

Ruby: I am thrilled to be alongside people at so many milestone moments – weddings, naming children, renaming adults, vow renewals as well as funerals and memorials. I love that more people are open to considering ways to make a funeral ceremony personal – from giving everyone a tea bag and a small cake as they leave ("because mum would do that") to playing the tune indicating time is up from *Countdown* as the crematorium curtains close. It can also be an opportunity for witness when people ask what I believe. But most of all, enabling people to say goodbye in a way that is most helpful to them is really satisfying.

Opposite is a beautiful and inclusive poem for a cremation that Sue and Ruby like to use.



Into the freedom of wind and sunshine

We let you go

Into the dance of the stars and the planets

We let you go

Into the wind's breath and the hands of the Star-maker

We let you go

We love you, we miss you, we want you to be happy

Go safely, go dancing, go running home...

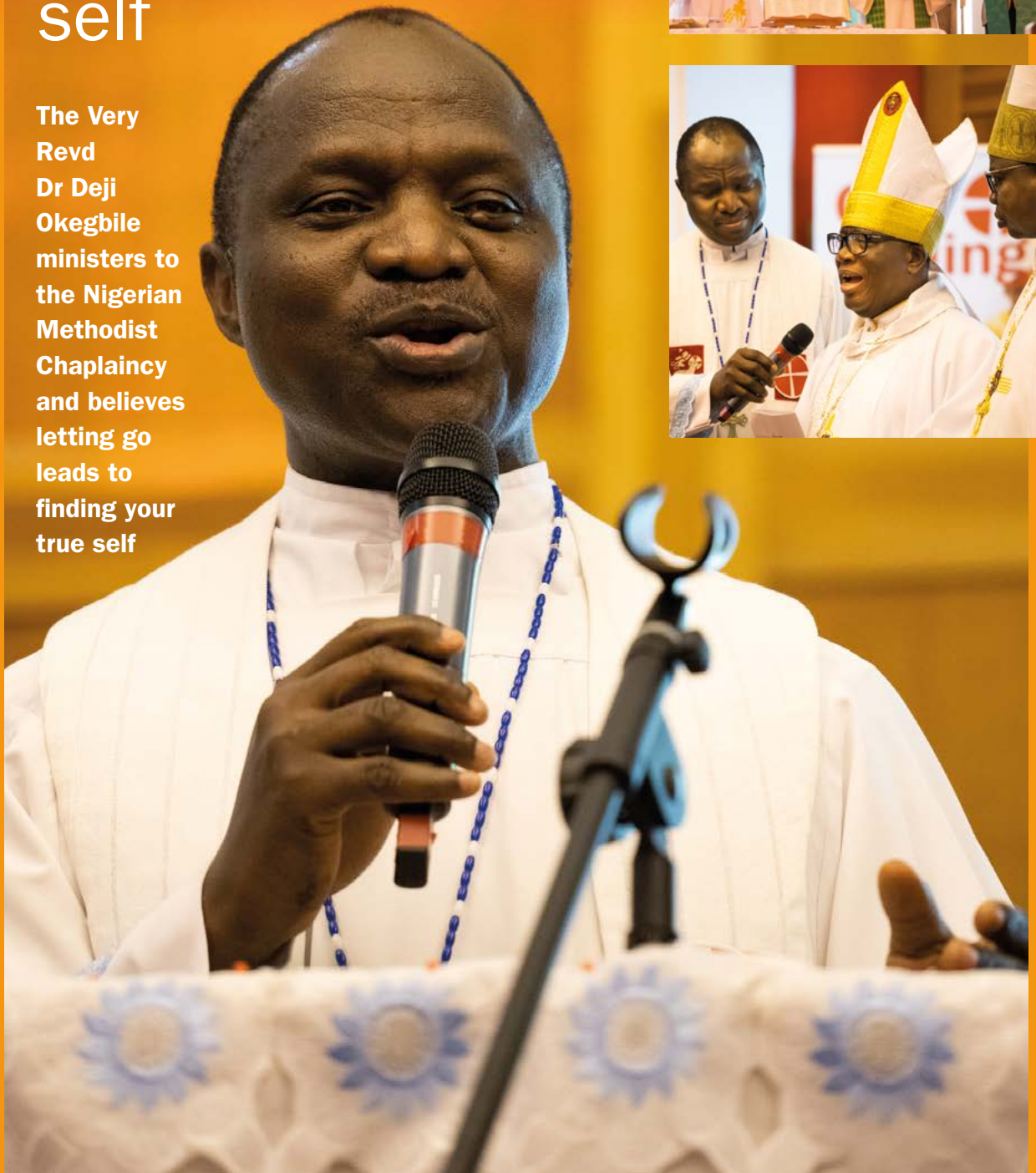
Ruth Burgess *Saying Goodbye*, 2013, Wild Goose Publications. Used with permission.

Thanks to the Derby City Council staff at Markeaton Crematorium.

Every person is unique

Letting go: a release from ego and false self

The Very
Revd
Dr Deji
Okegbile
ministers to
the Nigerian
Methodist
Chaplaincy
and believes
letting go
leads to
finding your
true self



My ministry through the Nigerian Methodist Chaplaincy seeks a renewed partnership between the Methodist Church in Nigeria and the Methodist Church in Britain. It is about letting go to find missional integration, renewal and growth. Since the partnership's inauguration on Pentecost Sunday, 8 June 2014, we are continually inspired by Jesus' encounter with Mary at the Resurrection, which he said was the cure for spiritual and physical death (John 20:11-18). This inspires us to let go of false self, or ego. Although Mary was not in the same darkness of the grave as Lazarus, she was in the darkness of mourning, frustration and loss. Mary's recognition of Christ was hindered by several factors she was reluctant to relinquish, including her preoccupation with her past. Easter inspires us not to be preoccupied with the empty tomb of religious or home familiarity. The Chaplaincy's remit is not to be limited by human calculation, ego, or racial and denominational factors, but to encourage a personal encounter with the Risen Lord.

Your true self is a diamond

What does 'letting go' mean, especially in terms of God's mission? Author Richard Rohr in one of his books points us to the dynamics of Good Friday and Easter. The Easter story starts with Jesus' personal sacrifice and Rohr says we need "Courage as Christians to let go of our fear and journey hopefully with God, as well as living with loss." In his book *Immortal Diamond: the Search for Our True Self* Rohr likens searching for our true being to mining for a diamond. He reminds us of the urgency to let go of our ego or 'false self' and the challenges that involves. According to Rohr: "The healthy inner authority of the True Self can now be balanced by a more objective outer authority of Scripture and mature Tradition. To not let go of our False Self



... is precisely what it means to be stuck, trapped, and addicted to yourself."

The 'false self' of Mary – her past familiarity with Jesus – almost got in her way. Because she was preoccupied with her own thoughts and not expecting to see Jesus, she did not recognise him until he called her by name. At that point, her authentic 'true self', known and in union with God, responded to him. The message is that whether we are far from home or at home, we as individuals and as a Church must focus on letting go of our egos to find our true selves and leave behind the seductions of today's secular culture. Easter is a good time to do this. In the words of author Joyce Pharo, Easter faith inspires us "in clearing away of the cobwebs which our faith somehow manages to accumulate."

Our Easter faith reminds us of our true Methodist identity or true self, which is like a diamond, buried deep within us. It is formed despite the intense pressure of our lives and needs to be discovered and separated from our ego. In a sense, our true self must, like Jesus, be resurrected, and that process involves transformation.

In the Nigerian Methodist Chaplaincy, we believe there is more to our identity than our home, sex, wealth, colour, and even education. We believe that letting go is about finding your true self. It is about going into the tomb with Jesus and allowing your false self or ego to die. For the Nigerian Chaplaincy, letting go in the Spirit of Easter is about releasing ourselves from our egos in order for our true selves to emerge for effective mission and church growth.

You can find The Very Revd Dr Deji Okegbile's blog at dejiokegbile.com

LETTING GO
Question
How might your church let go of fear and journey hopefully with God?



Our true self is like a diamond buried deep within us

The Nigerian Methodist Chaplaincy is an important bridge between two cultures in Britain. Here are some testimonials.

"Having the Nigerian Methodist Chaplaincy breathes new life into my being as a Christian and a Nigerian Methodist. I am able to worship in my cultural way and also enjoy the warmth of British Methodism, thus enjoying the best of both worlds."

Caroline Ogunisola

The Chaplaincy gives me and my family a sense of belonging as a Nigerian Methodist within the British Methodists."

Dapo Bammeke

"I value the Chaplaincy because it brought all us Nigerian-born-and-bred Methodists together in unity of purpose and mission within the Methodist Church in Britain."

Dame Susan Solanke

FOLLOWING

Jesus' example to let go

Probationer deacon Rebekah-Joy Spinks says let's remember the Resurrection and not fear letting go

There was a great deal that Jesus had to relinquish

LETTING GO Question

Where do you see God 'stirring stuff up' and inviting you to join in?

In the words of the hymn "And can it be, that I should gain?" Jesus "emptied Himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race". (StF 345)

We sing these words with great passion. The poignance of Jesus self-giving, pouring out and sacrificial letting go is not lost on us at Eastertide.

The ethic of sacrifice from Philippians 2, although problematic (we still cannot agree on what it is, exactly, that Jesus 'poured out'), was part of the pattern Jesus had followed all his life. It is seen in the giving up of his divine majesty and taking on

human form; through his servant ministry, exemplified in the washing of his disciples' feet; to the garden, where his obedience won out against his – understandable – fear of all he had to endure at Golgotha.

Christ's letting go

In the garden where Jesus prayed on Maundy Thursday, there was a great deal that Jesus had to relinquish so that God's counter-intuitive victory might be won.

Jesus let go of his dignity. He was mocked and shamed and given over to public humiliation in the death of the vilest criminal. He let go of the sanctity of his

Our hope is in Easter morning

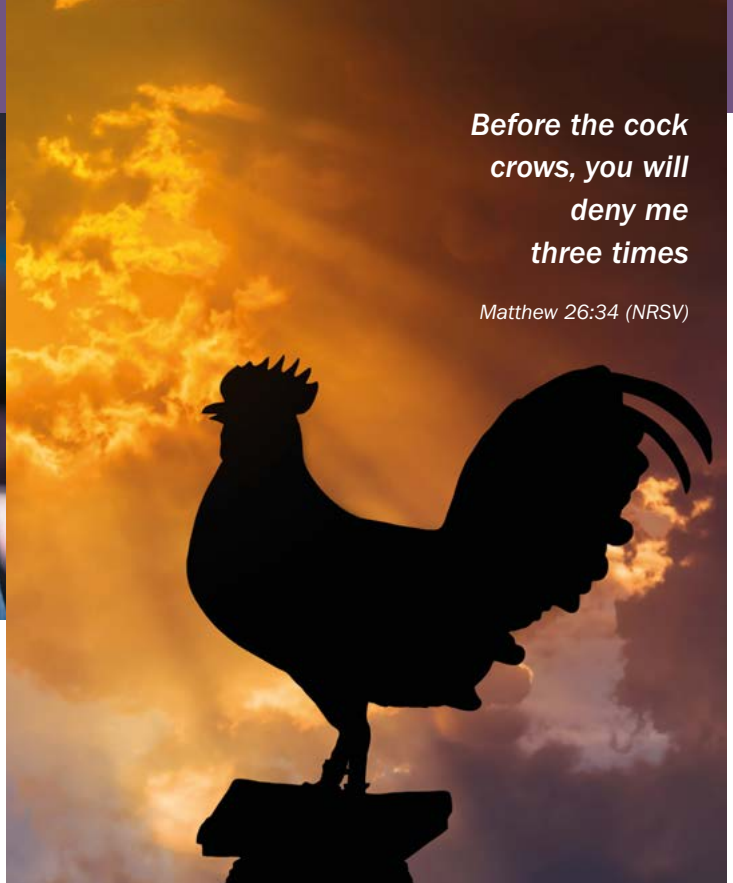
'The Empty Tomb' by Richard Bavin. One of the works in the Methodist Modern Art Collection





*Before the cock
crows, you will
deny me
three times*

Matthew 26:34 (NRSV)



body, which was given over for torture. No human or angel knows what Jesus let go of in the moment of forsaking, when all the sin of the world was heaped on his broken body and God's Holy-Self had to endure what wayward humanity could not.

Jesus also let go of physical human companionship. Jesus in that garden prayerfully placed the care of his disciples into the hands of Holy Father God, knowing that he would not relate to them in the same way again. Jesus showed great tenderness in considering the future of his mother, Mary, as he hung dying on the cross, and later again with Mary Magdalene, when he signified that the nature of their companionship must change and she had to let him go.

Letting go to receive blessings

As a probationer deacon, I know there is debate around where we might need to let go in order to engage with the mission that God has given us – to make disciples. We are, understandably, afraid of the sacrifices we must make; we grieve for precious things that we are challenged to relinquish. But we are a Resurrection people.

In the narrative of decline that has endured in the Methodist Church, we have grown afraid of failure. This is the first thing we must consciously let go of. In pioneering mission, many of our attempts will fail before we find the optimum combination that connects the Gospel relevantly with the culture and context where we are joining in with God.

We must embrace a robust theology around failure. Ours is the God of Jacob, the God of screw-ups. Our Church is built on the rock Simon Peter, whose indomitable spirit

caused him to leap ahead and trip over his own feet time and time again, climaxing in the thrice-denial of Christ. To all earthly onlookers, the hero of the Easter saga appeared to fail, nailed to a cross, and yet this turned out to be the greatest victory of all.

Our failures are, counter-intuitively, part of the makeup of mission. It is hard to let go of the familiar trappings, patterns, and cadence of church; our favourite terminology, our beloved metaphors, our lumbering structures, our too-many buildings. Harder still, we fear that the new investment of our energies and resources into the places where God is stirring stuff up might also fail. Then we become paralysed. We start to cling onto the old patterns with greater determination, unable to risk all on a fearful, uncertain future. We are like Peter, who seeing his Lord arrested and put on trial, could see no future, only his failure, so ran away.

Our hope is in Easter morning. It is in the resurrected Jesus who keeps the truth and promises of old and makes all things new; who forgives failures and restores fallen disciples. He gives us a part to play, a part written just for us in the next scene of the new day. Jesus is already there, inviting us to join in. In the words of Wesley's hymn: "Tis mercy all, immense and free; for, O my God, it found out me."



Getting into **GOD'S FUTURE:** the Nidd Valley Circuit experience



Superintendent of Nidd Valley Methodist Circuit, the Revd Ben Clowes, describes letting go of old ways to follow God's path to the future

Change is inevitable and can actually be exciting

Harrogate and Knaresborough are two very different Yorkshire towns and the Nidd Valley Circuit was formed when their circuits merged in 2012. I have been its superintendent since September 2017. We have focused on seeking God's vision and becoming genuine Christians in the communities we serve. In recent years, our circuit has spent a considerable amount of time in creating a vision of the future. It is certainly a very exciting place to be in ministry.



The Nidd Valley Circuit has 14 churches and we are passionate to promote each church community and to encourage them to be the best that God has called them to be. Following the Yorkshire North & East District's policy of *Flourishing Missional Communities*, all 14 are flourishing. They are very different: in fact one of our staff team recently described the circuit as being rather like a multi-pack of crisps! We want our churches to be authentic. If a church's style is 'a five Wesley hymn sandwich', that is to be celebrated. If a church is more contemporary, then let's see, as a circuit, how we can enable them to flourish.

This concept has helped us as a circuit to seek to work a little differently. We have very clearly put 'team' at our heart. We have been able to resource our villages (which range from small rural communities to suburban villages) with a presbyter who rejoices in spending time encouraging these special places to flourish. It is our circuit policy to appoint at least one local pastor for every two churches by 2025. Clair, our first local pastor, began work in August 2019 and is already making a huge impact in two of my churches, and we are working towards a town centre diaconal appointment in the coming years.

Flourishing missional communities

Has all this been plain sailing? Absolutely not! Change is always dislocating and along



the journey people have been suspicious of our statement about having 14 flourishing missional communities, thinking we are trying to close some churches. People have found the concept of changing from a very section-based ministry to working with different churches a challenge.

We have worked hard to help everyone see there is no ulterior motive and we want to support initiatives in all our churches. For example, we support Kearby, our wonderful little chapel in a field high above Wharfedale, as they seek to open their doors to community use. We support the amazing work at Hampsthwaite, where they have begun a dementia café and run 'Open the Book', a project offering primary school children the chance to hear Bible stories. We also want to work with the amazing gardeners at Woodlands whose community garden has seen a great connection with the neighbouring school and an intergenerational breakfast club, which feeds pensioners every Friday morning and also children who would otherwise arrive at school without breakfast. It achieves all



this using food that supermarkets would otherwise send to landfill.

We also support initiatives in our towns. When the UCI World Road Cycling Championship finished at Harrogate in September 2019, Harlow Hill, Wesley and Trinity all became hubs for reaching out to volunteers and visitors. As a circuit, we also want to join with others and at Wesley and Gracious Street we are working with the Harrogate Homeless Project and Resurrected Bites Café. We're keen to work ecumenically as we do in Pannal on initiatives such as 'crumpet church'. The list goes on.

Buying in to God's future plan

Ultimately as a circuit team we have sought to change the narrative. We are not seeking to stop decline by focusing on what we think the future holds for us as a circuit. Instead are trying to ally ourselves with God's future plan. Speaking about all the great things our churches are doing is part of this. There will be many more twists and turns along the way but in a recent circuit meeting, it was hugely humbling to hear churches speaking of how they can see we have a prayerful approach to all we are trying to do. As we move forward with God, I think it is fair to say that although change continues to be dislocating, we are beginning to accept that it is also inevitable, and even exciting as we seek to follow God's path.

We want our churches to be authentic

LETTING GO Question

How is God changing the narrative where you are?



Underneath It All helping submariners' families **LET GO**



**Phil Maltby,
Methodist
Forces Board
Project Officer,
describes a
unique book
bringing comfort
to naval families**

Methodist presbyter, the Revd Mark Mander, reflects that for a Royal Navy chaplain the phrase 'letting go' is poignant. When a ship or submarine leaves its home port to embark upon a patrol, the order 'let loose all lines' instructs sailors to slacken the ropes holding the vessel to the jetty wall and bring them onboard so the ship or submarine is free to sail off on her mission.

In 2016, as a relatively new naval chaplain, Mark set sail on his first submarine patrol. Talking about it, he said: "As the command 'let loose all lines' was given and the submarine was underway, I and my shipmates had no idea where the patrol would take us and how long we would be away from our homes and family. Shortly after setting sail, the submarine dived. At that moment, the reality of being separated and unable to contact loved ones was keenly felt by everyone on board. And we were aware that just as we felt the emotions evoked by separation, so too did our families who were at home."

Letting go in faith

In one sense, 'letting go' for submariners and their loved ones is an act of faith. They

commit, trust, and rest upon the promise that at an unspecified time in the future, they will be reunited with their families as the submarine rises from the depths of the ocean and comes up once more alongside the jetty wall at its home port.

As a Christian minister, Mark notes: "The symbolism of a submarine patrol, leaving the wall, diving, patrolling, and – ultimately – surfacing and experiencing a homecoming, points us towards the hope of the Resurrection. Yet while I appreciate the symbolism, such connections do not readily occur to the majority of submariners. Therefore, as a chaplain, I am continually on the look out to find other, more practical ways of sharing God's love."

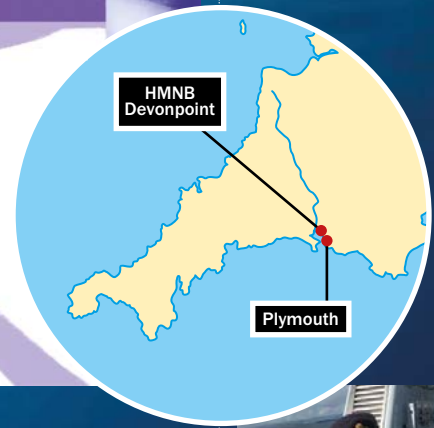
While he was working in the United States, Mark came across a unique story written for families by a submariner's wife called *Underneath It All: A Submarine Bedtime Story*. He immediately knew that this was something that would help the UK submariner community. Having earned his 'dolphins'¹, he knew something of the challenges that they faced. Long periods of isolation away from family and friends are commonplace. Oftentimes this leaves submariners' children wondering why their parent is away, and why they are unable to communicate with them during a deployment. This type of questioning becomes particularly acute at important family times such as birthdays and Christmas, and it can leave the other parent or family members sometimes struggling to know how to respond.

Methodists sponsor a UK edition

Mark decided to approach the Methodist Church to see whether they would fund the chaplaincy teams to distribute copies of the book to submariners' families at HMNB



¹ The Submarine Badge, which consists of the QE11 commissioning crown sited above a fouled anchor supported on each side by heraldic dolphins. The badge is of gilt and may be worn by all RN qualified submarine personnel.



Clyde and HMNB Devonport, the main naval bases used by the UK Submarine Service. He received a generous response. Mark says: “I was delighted to find that not only was the Methodist Church willing to fund copies of the

book, they offered to make a version that was 100% authentic to the UK Submarine Service.”

The UK version of the book was produced with the help of the Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF). New illustrations were commissioned, depicting landscapes and details familiar to British families and the UK Submarine Service. This has ensured that the book is accepted by the submariner community. The text is warm and reassuring in tone, and even allows the family to personalise the story as it leaves spaces for the correct pronouns and the relationship between the submariner and their child (eg ‘Dad’ or ‘Mum’).

It includes the *Submariners’ Prayer*, which asks God to guide vessels deep beneath the surface. Mark says: “It was important that the book helped to explain to children what submariners do. As it ends with the *Submariner’s Prayer*, it reassures families that God is caring for their loved one in ways that they are not able to.”

Reassuring and well received

The response to *Underneath It All* has been overwhelmingly positive.



The Revd Mark Mander



Letting go for submariners and their families is an act of faith



One submariner wrote: “As a serving submariner, the worry is always how the children cope when I am not there. This book has been a massive help for myself and the children while I’m on deployment. It is the only book we know of based on a submariner family. My wife reads this book while I’m away to help the children understand where I am and why. Thank you to all involved in the production of this book.”

The Revd Dr Chrissie Howe is Secretary of the Methodist Forces Board. When the special edition of *Underneath It All* was launched, she said: “For many of us it is hard to conceive that our loved ones could be gone for extended periods of time with no communication in either direction, yet that is what a submariner’s family faces on our behalf. This beautiful book aims to reassure families that God sees and cares for our loved ones, no matter where they are. Our deep gratitude goes to the men and women of the armed forces for all they do for us, and their families. The Methodist Church is



pleased to support our partners in the Naval Chaplaincy Service with this resource.”

Aggie Weston is a charity providing pastoral support to serving members of the Royal Navy and their families. In February 2020 a pastoral worker at HM Naval Base Clyde wrote: “The overall feeling has been that the book has been long awaited and is much appreciated. Several have remarked on how their serving spouse has been impressed by the attention to detail in the illustrations which have helped them to explain to their children in a more meaningful way where they work. They have been really appreciative of the work that has gone into making this book. It has been really lovely for us to be able to pass on this gift to our families and to see the comfort and encouragement it’s brought during those difficult times of separation. So thank you MFB!”

LETTING GO Question

What generous gift can the church give to your community?

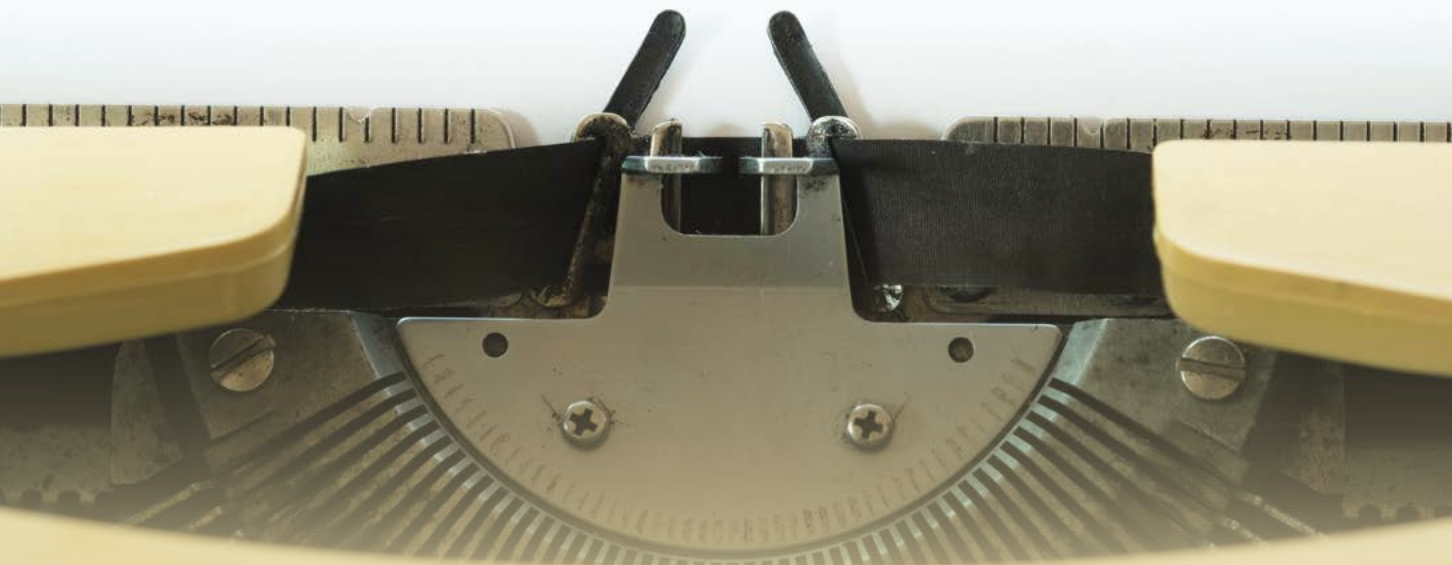
“We have been waiting for something like this for so long, thank you” (submariner)

“Amazing! This will make life a lot easier. It will help kids understand why we go away and what we do.” (submariner)

“This book is what we have needed for so long! Thank you” (submariner)

“My husband is back now, but this really helped the children when he was away! I got really tearful when I read the prayer.” (submariner’s wife)

"TIME TO SAY GOODBYE"



GROWING UP by letting go

The Revd Dr Jonathan R Hustler, Secretary of the Conference, recognises that letting go can be painful

I think I saw *Toy Story 3* in the wrong year, which is why there were times when my eyes were moist. Our daughter was 16, and we were starting to realise that the day when she moved into the next stage of life was drawing near, as we watched the story of Andy (the boy who owns the eponymous toys) heading off to college. He has not played with his toys for years, and most have gone, except for the key characters.

The film reminds us that in order to move on to the new we need to let go of the things of the past, which is perfectly normal and natural. However, it means saying goodbye and that can be hard. In different ways, the toy characters exhibit attitudes to avoid or deny the reality of moving on: one

resists change out of loyalty; one wants to leave rather than face being hurt; one is simply determined to get back to happier times. But there can be no going back – and the end of the film sees Andy handing over what had once been so precious to him.

Growing up necessitates letting go. In *Alive in God*, Timothy Radcliffe OP reflects on this: "We love by giving space, even bearing the pain of the other distancing themselves from us, a common experience for parents of teenagers."¹ Hence the tears at *Toy Story 3*.

Many of our conversations in the Church over recent years have necessarily been about what we might have to stop doing in order to focus on 'Our Calling'. Our calling is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ – who let go of everything for us. Is this a moment when God is calling us to a fuller realisation of that truth and a new stage of maturity as God's people called Methodist, a moment whose fullness we will only realise through the sometimes painful processes of letting go?



Is God calling us to a new stage of maturity?

1. © Timothy Radcliffe OP, 2019, *Alive in God*, Continuum Publishing, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Thy Kingdom Come – Pray for Five

5

**Rachel Wakefield
says letting go
of old habits
to pray for five
people can reap
amazing rewards**

Have you ever wondered how you might make a difference to someone's life? If you would like to help lead them to Christ, praying for them might just be the thing to do. But then again, you probably know that already. As Christians we know that prayer is a fundamental part of what we do, and yet sometimes it is also the hardest.

To pray on a regular basis for people

might mean letting go of old habits or overcoming inhibitions. Maybe you worry about finding the right words, or remembering all the people you have promised to pray for. Perhaps you feel that it is too hard to find a good time or a place to pray properly. If these challenges seem familiar to you, we may be able to help.

The Methodist Church is delighted once again to be part of 'Thy Kingdom Come' – an ecumenical prayer initiative set up by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. We are each invited to pray daily for five people during the 11 days between Ascension and Pentecost (21–31 May 2020). By focusing on just five individuals, we hope that the habit of prayer will become an easy one to develop. We also hope it will be a fruitful time when those we are praying for encounter God.

How to access help

There are plenty of resources to help you. Methodist Thy Kingdom Come (TKC) Champions throughout the country will be on hand to support and run local events.

You can also download the Thy Kingdom Come app (available for both Apple and Android devices). Add the names of those you have committed to pray for and the app will remind you to pray. The app also features Bible readings, reflections, prayers, films and podcasts to inspire and lead you through each day.

The power of prayer

During the 11 days of Thy Kingdom Come, it is hoped that everyone who takes part will:

- deepen their own relationship with Jesus Christ
- pray for five friends or family members to come to faith in Jesus
- pray for the empowerment of the Spirit so we are effective in our witness.





You'll be one of thousands praying for others

The Archbishop of York, the Most Revd Dr John Sentamu discovered first-hand how praying for someone can bring them to Jesus. You can watch his film on the Thy Kingdom Come website where he explains what happened in 2019. He says: "I prayed for people, five people, in Thy Kingdom Come last year. And I was most astounded when two people came to Christ. And they wrote to me to tell me, but I hadn't told them that I was praying for them. This was so amazing."

So, in the 11 days of Thy Kingdom Come will you find five people? Pray for them, maybe on the hour, every hour. You're going to be surprised at how your own prayer life actually becomes a joy and a delight. One of the amazing things is that if you decide to take part, you join people around the world. Thy Kingdom Come is a global initiative and you'll be one of thousands praying for others.

On the right are three inspiring tales from last year.

Please join us in praying for others this May. We pray that not only they will meet Jesus, but that all of our prayer lives will be enriched as we deepen our own relationship with God. Please tell us your stories of how God has been working through your prayers and we can share them with others.

1

In 2019, 30,000 people across 124 churches in Sri Lanka prayed using the 'Pray for Five' cards, culminating with a beacon service on Pentecost Sunday that included a sharing of testimonies.

2

In Texas, a women's Bible study group knotted leather wristbands to remind them of each person they were praying for.

3

In the UK, Catherine is a big fan of tea, drinking at least five cups a day. So she bought herself a Thy Kingdom Come mug and each time she sat down to drink a cup, she prayed for one of her five people. Why not join Catherine? You can buy the mug and other resources here: <https://www.cpo.org.uk/thykingdomcome>

LETTING GO
Question

Which 5 people are you going to pray for?

Email Rachel at tkc@methodistchurch.org.uk
Thy Kingdom Come takes place 21–31 May 2020.
Visit www.thykingdomcome.global



Reflection

Deacon Joy Everingham shares a very personal reflection on the meaning of letting go

On the university campus where I serve as a chaplain, I'm privileged to lead a support group for transgender people.

A few months ago, I was asked by a member of the group "Why on earth would you want to become a minister in the Church?" I totally understood her position. The Church, on the whole, has not been very supportive of the LGBTQI+ community.

I explained about 'calling', God's strange and inexplicable pull toward ordination. No matter how hard I ignored and tried to sabotage my calling, it remained. I had no choice but to let go and follow wherever God was leading me. The student's answer floored me. She said, "I completely get it, it's just like being trans." And she was right, it is.

Before this, I had never really considered that my journey to ordination closely mirrored my gender transition. Believe me, I never wanted to be transgender. I fought for most of my life to be 'a normal boy' and battled against my femininity to the point of having a mental breakdown. For me, the fear and shame of being seen for who I am was nearly too much to bear. And here's the problem. Most of us question our purpose in the world, asking "Why am I here?" But far fewer ask "What am I?" That is a devastating question, one fuelled by shame, leading to another question: "Did God make a mistake with me?"

Traditional Christian teaching and theology never really gave me the tools to answer this question. The Bible tells us (Genesis 1:27) that God created humankind in God's own image, male and female. You are either one or the other; it's simple. Our theology seems to fail us when it comes to people who are intersex or transgender. Yet we have this wonderful extra creation story in the second chapter of Genesis when God makes the first human (presumably in God's image), a person that encompasses all that is male and female. A human that God later divides into two: "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23).

For trans and intersex people this is a wonderful image. The first human was intersex, encompassing all that is masculine and feminine and made in the image of God. Not to mention that the second human seems to be transgender! From the beginning, God built into the whole of creation a beautiful diversity of living things, fearfully and wonderfully made. Humankind was made in the gender-full image of God.

The psychiatrist Carl Jung postulated a theory that everyone encompasses masculinity and femininity within their being. I think he was correct when he wrote in his journal *Red Book* "Humankind is masculine and feminine, not just man or woman. You can hardly say of your soul what sex it is."

And the New Testament is littered with trans language and transformation. Jesus begins his ministry with: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent [*transform your mind*] and believe the Good News (Matthew 3:2)!" Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop, he spoke of rebirth to receive life in all its fullness, and to top it off he died and was resurrected.

I have often joked that when Jesus said that we needed to be 'born again', I took his words a bit too literally. But this is not far from the truth. My own journey, my 'calling' to let go of my maleness, to become vulnerable, and be transformed into something new, has given me life in all its fullness.

It is often said that trans people are 'born in the wrong body', but this would imply God had made a mistake. I don't believe this. My body is mine, it has been good to me over my life. My gender dysphoria lay in the sad truth that no one was able to see the real me. I was trapped in a world that saw me as male, when my innermost being was female. And I think Jesus gets this. In Luke 7:44 when Jesus says to Simon "Do you see this woman?" he knew that Simon only saw what was on the outside. But Jesus sees more than our past deeds, he sees through our pretence and faux personas and says (John 8:32) "the truth will make you free." Annoyingly, Jesus was right, it does.

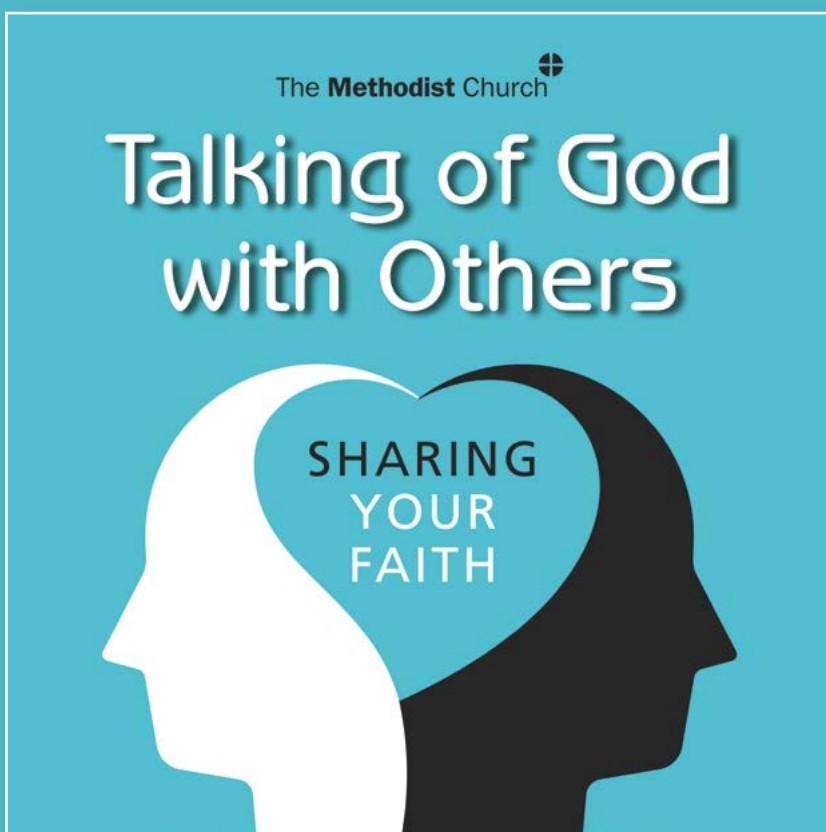
Joy Everingham is a deacon and works with students and young adults at St Peter's Methodist Church in Canterbury. She is also a chaplain at the University of Kent and Christ Church University, ministering to students.

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