

THE connexion

Inspiring stories from the Methodist Church



KINDLE A FLAME

The Methodist Church





David Perry
Editor
blog.visualtheology.uk

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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You can't start a fire without a spark.
Bruce Springsteen

After seven years this is my last issue as freelance Editor of *the connexion* magazine, as from issue 30 that role is being taken 'in house' and will be fulfilled by a member of the Communications team.

When I was asked to consider becoming Editor of *the connexion* I agreed on one condition, that the magazine would have mission and evangelism as its focus. Given the all-pervading narrative of decline that overshadowed our common life it was essential that the Church woke up to the amazing stories of what God's Holy Spirit was doing all across the life of the Connexion. Here was a vibrant counter-narrative of faith, hope and love transforming lives, so it was vital that such stories were told to encourage and enthuse the Church to dare to do likewise.

Looking back it seems to me that a quiet reformation has been taking place; as our traditional institutional Sunday-service focussed Church has struggled to connect with the missing generations, God has been finding other missional ways of igniting faith, even through the darkest days of the pandemic. These stories are at the heart of the magazine because each and every one has its genesis in God's passion to kindle flames of love in our hearts in the darkest of times.

Bruce Springsteen, in his greatest hit 'Dancing in the Dark', makes a theologically astute observation when he writes: "You can't start a fire without a spark". Such divine sparks of inspiration fuel every reformation of the Church, just as they ignite every act of mission and evangelism. And today the sparks are flying.

Even as the embers of the old ways are becoming dimmer and less radiant, the breath of the Holy Spirit is blowing white hot across our common life to fan the flames of faith and send showers of hope-igniting sparks right across the Church and beyond. This issue of the magazine leaves us in no doubt that this is our truth. I hope and pray that it sparks your imagination and kindles a flame of hope in the darkness for you.

Wishing you every blessing.

Love and peace, David

THE Connexion

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The Revd Nicola Langton-Miller (see pages 14-15)

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The Methodist Church

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Methodists for Ukraine

As the war in Ukraine continues, so does the need to provide safety for those fleeing the conflict. Thousands are still waiting to be offered sanctuary in the UK. If you are able to commit to hosting a family for a minimum of six months, the Methodist Church is partnering with Citizens UK's Communities for Ukraine Scheme to offer support. You can find full details on the Methodist Church website or contact the Methodists for Ukraine Officer, Matt Ceaser. ceaserm@methodistchurch.org.uk

Youth President visit to South Korea

Each year, the Methodist Youth President undertakes an overseas visit in partnership with the Global Relationships team. In October 2022, James Carver went to South Korea. During his time there, James worshipped with the Korean Methodist Church, learned about Korean heritage and went to the demilitarised zone. James commented "Visiting South

Korea was an amazing experience which I will remember for the rest of my life. I especially enjoyed visiting various churches, including one with a 24/7 prayer room and 5am services, and was in awe of the work of the early Methodist missionaries from America, and the Methodist presence now."

Eco Church

More Methodist churches than ever before are signing up to the Eco Church Award Scheme operated by A Rocha UK. Compared to the previous year, 70% more churches participated in the scheme in the 12 months to June 2022, with 94 churches receiving a bronze award, 28 a silver award, and one (Emmanuel United Reformed/Methodist Church in Bungay in the East Anglia District) the gold award. There are now more than 640 Methodist churches and Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) registered for Eco Church, with four churches having achieved gold.



**THINK
PIECE**

Kindle a flame of sacred love in our hearts

As the cost of living crisis rages, how might we set ablaze a Wesleyan flame of social justice in people's hearts? Paul Morrison and Deacon Eunice Attwood share their thoughts.



A roaring passion that feels like Wesley's description of 'flames of sacred love'.

Eunice: During the last 18 months, in every online seminar we have heard heart-wrenching stories from people working alongside those experiencing poverty and destitution. Each story has communicated something of a burning anger, and a roaring passion that feels like Wesley's description of 'flames of sacred love'.

Paul: Absolutely. People know it is simply wrong that poverty and destitution are allowed to grow. They feel real compassion and anger when they see more and more people turning up at food banks and having to turn down food because they don't have the means to heat it; or they have spent the day chatting to people whose reality is stockpiling candles and blankets for winter.

Eunice: Why are things so tough?

Paul: The quick answer is as a nation we allowed them to become tough. A decade that saw employment levels, income and wealth all increase, also saw poverty increase and the number living with the harshest form of poverty – destitution – rise from hundreds of thousands to 2.5 million. Policy choices, especially, but not exclusively, around the benefit system were key in diverting money away from the least well-off.

Eunice: We talk about justice and evangelism being gospel partners; we say speaking of our faith and living out justice go hand in hand. Jesus challenged the systems that resulted in

the exploitation of people in poverty, alongside speaking of God's love and desire to be in a relationship with God. What would it look like for God's sacred love to be kindled and set ablaze in our hearts in this crisis?

Paul: For me, I ask, do I really believe the poorest are equally created in God's image? Because if I do, I will bother to have a cup of tea and listen; I will learn from their opinions and expertise. Most importantly – and what I most love about the Church at the Margins' vision – that means working with people, not working for or ministering to them.

Eunice: Yes, exactly. The vision of Church at the Margins is to nurture new Christian communities among economically marginalised people. It's about becoming a community with people, nurturing friendships where everyone can experience the love of God.

Paul: I have spent a decade trying to change the world with graphs, illustrating the injustices we see. But it is utterly clear to me that relationships and sharing our stories are what will bring the change we need. (That may also explain why the Bible contains so few pie charts.) We understand the world through stories and relationships and, for me, the biggest reason poverty is tolerated, is that the public and even the Church exclude the stories of the poorest.

Eunice: Stories change people. Relationships change people. The media often promotes the idea that people struggling financially are lazy or cannot manage their money. We know this is not true. People on low incomes are often experts in juggling their finances, and some of the most resilient people you could ever meet.

Paul: Saying it's laziness makes people feel better about the injustice, and better about their

own privilege, but I can draw you a thousand graphs showing why it is nonsense. A cup of tea with a few people at a food bank would convince you just as well.

Eunice: One of the persistent messages of the Bible is 'there is no good news without justice, and no justice without good news.' What does good news look like for economic justice?

Paul: There are two difficult truths we need to hold on to. The first is that this winter looks bleak for many, and we need to be alongside people and acknowledge that. The second truth is that there is hope. It's hope that comes from knowing that you are loved and valued even when you feel blamed and vilified. But also, it's hope that comes from knowing that in a wealthy country like ours mass poverty is not necessary; the tide can turn if we want it to. As more people struggle day to day and can no longer see hope, one of our jobs as Christians is to keep hope alive and ready for when it can fuel real change and end the injustice that is poverty.

Eunice: When we look at all the challenges people are facing it would be easy to feel overwhelmed. We need to remember daily God transforms despair to hope. God ignites the flames of sacred love in our hearts, and only God can give us the strength and courage to face the truth as we respond to the injustice and sin of poverty.

O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return,
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up the gift in me –

Ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat,
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.

Charles Wesley (StF 564)



How could
God's hope for
people struggling
financially be put
into action within
your church and
wider community?

You can discover more about the vision for Church at the Margins at methodist.org.uk/churchatthemargins

To find out more about the work of JPIT on poverty, visit jpit.uk/issues/poverty-and-equality

Paul Morrison is the Policy Advisor for Poverty and Inequality in the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT). **Deacon Eunice Attwood** is the Church at the Margins Officer in the Evangelism and Growth Team.

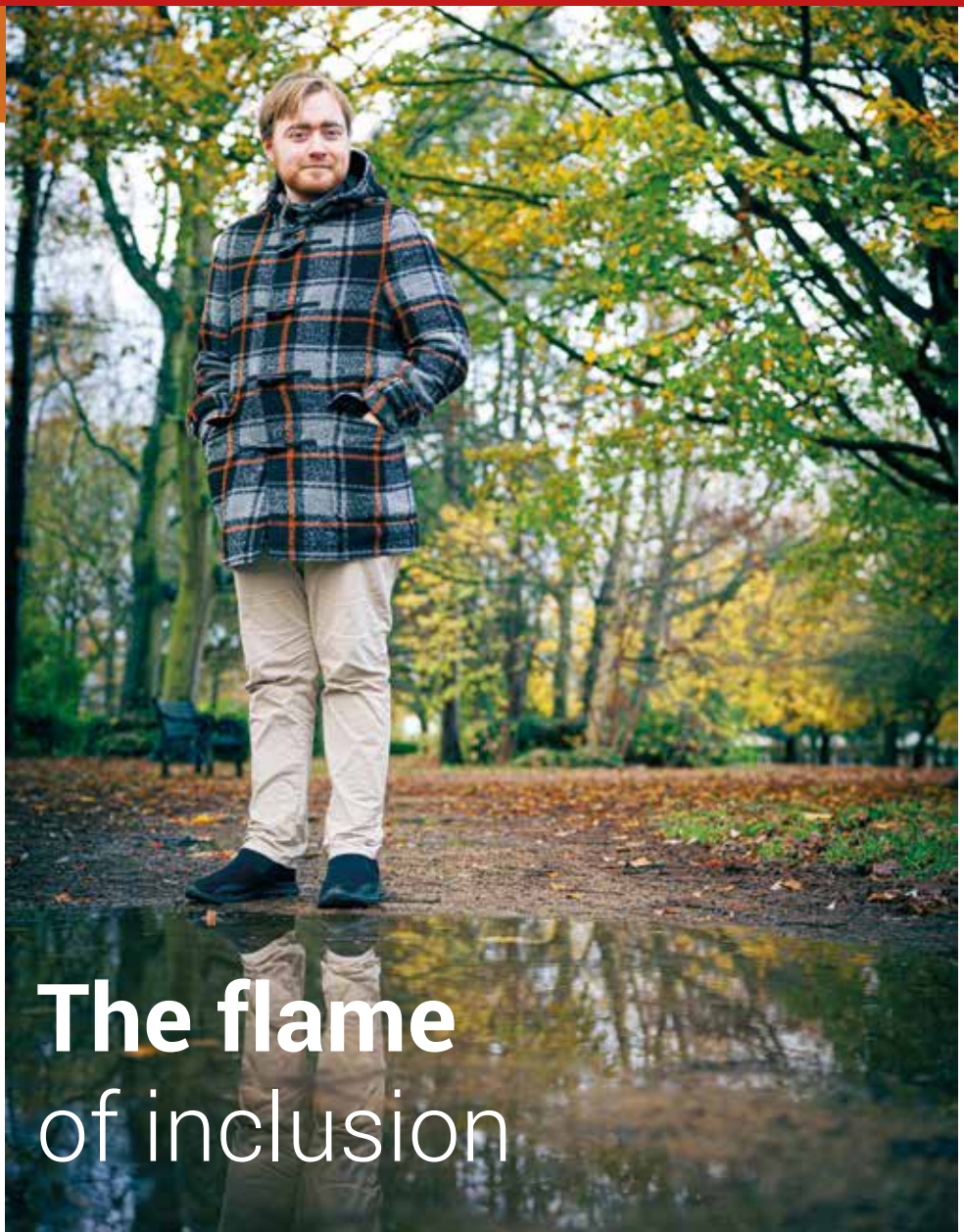
James Carver is the Methodist Youth President 2022/2023.



If we do not support everyone, we are a club instead of a Church.



What does this article inspire you to ask for?



The flame of inclusion

Youth President James Carver describes what it was like to grow up with ADHD and autistic traits and how churches can welcome and accommodate people with neurodiverse conditions.

Growing up with a neurodiverse condition is an interesting aspect of my life. As a child, I could tell I was different, but was it my weird hair, my interest in creating presentations on the Tudors, or my ability to tell (no) good jokes? Well, yes to all of these, but mostly it was my undiagnosed neurodiverse conditions. These affect my ability to focus, regulate emotions, understand social cues, and do maths. A childhood memory that stuck with me was the first time I had to put my name on the 'bad side' of the

board. I had created a 'full-scale' replica of the Eiffel Tower out of sheets of paper. As far as I was concerned, I was being creative, but from my teacher's point of view, I was wasting paper.

During my Youth President year, I am working towards raising awareness and understanding of neurodiversity in the Church and how the Church can support people with conditions similar to mine. Please remember that neurodiverse conditions affect people differently. There are both positive and negative aspects, and the former need to be celebrated.



What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity has two definitions. The first describes the variations in thoughts, beliefs and talents that we have because of our different upbringing and life experiences. The second, and far more interesting definition describes differences in brain chemistry that cause some individuals to perceive the world differently to others. In short, our background causes the first diversity and our biology causes the second. This second definition is what I'm talking about today and includes conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and many more.

Here is a question for you to reflect on: why is it important that the Church supports individuals who live with neurodiverse conditions? For me, the answer is simple, it's because God welcomes all people. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is teaching at a gathering of disciples and Pharisees. He says "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed." (14:13) This is one of many occasions when God's preferential bias for those on the margins is revealed, and there are many other Bible passages teaching inclusion and unity in the Church regardless of race, age, sexuality or disability. In any family, every member has their own talents and needs. Similarly, in the Church, each member has their own needs and must be supported along their faith journey. If we do not support everyone, we are a club instead of a Church.

Moreover, if neurodiverse people are fully able to engage in the life of the Church, we can share with you fresh perspectives on church life and practice. We can bring our gifts to the table: people with ADHD are often incredibly creative and can be extremely good problem-solvers, while people with autism often have great attention to detail and focus.

How to support neurodiverse people

Supporting people who live with a neurodiverse condition and come to church is straightforward. Below are four steps to create a supportive and enriching environment.

1 Understand and accept It is important to understand that most churches are likely already to have people with neurodiverse conditions in their congregations. They might have different ways of working from others, and struggle every day because of their conditions. Please accept us for who we are and ensure that we are not excluded.

2 Equip us Most of the time, equipment and methods to include people with neurodiverse conditions are very simple. It might be helpful, for example, to provide coloured acetate overlays for text (to improve readability) or to have shorter, interactive sermons to help those with shorter attention spans. It's best to set out equipment before your service or meeting, instead of waiting for the individual with the neurodiverse condition to have to ask for them, making accommodations a natural part of church life.

3 Provide safe spaces Over half of people living with autism experience bullying in their lifetime and it's similar for people with other conditions. These events often make people 'mask' themselves, which is where they change their behaviour to disguise their condition in order to feel safe. The Church can be a precious space for people to feel accepted and be themselves.

4 Ask us A common mistake when interacting with neurodiverse people is talking to their carers or family members about support. Although this is usually well meant, it is extremely disenfranchising. It cuts people out of conversations about their own needs, in which they are the experts. Don't be afraid to ask us directly about what would help us the most.

Neurodiverse conditions affect people every second of every day and, as a Church, we need to not only be welcoming, but also accommodating, for all people who enter God's doors.



A flame has already been kindled: God is already at work, and sometimes we just need to name that and rejoice.



God's fire in the Lakes

In her first year as a superintendent, how is the Revd Grace Cauldwell joining in with God's plan to kindle a flame?

In my first few weeks in the South Lakes Circuit, I was asked to reflect on "your vision and enthusiasm as a new superintendent, with the theme 'kindle a flame'". What a challenge! Especially when there is so much wisdom and vision in our Connexion already. So I'd like to begin with a question: what is your vision? I believe God speaks to each of us whether we believe we are 'holy and important' or not, and together we can muddle through, seeking God's plan one step at a time.

I've never been much of a one for long-distance vision. On my ordination retreat, I wandered round a hill clouded in fog and thought "Yep, this is what ministry and life feel like". In stationing I was asked "They want a strategic thinker, is that you?" To which my response was a vague "Ummm...". Because in a

post-pandemic world I'm not sure we can have long-term vision and five-year strategies. I'm not sure we can be definite about where we will be next week, let alone next year.

Does that sound bleak? I hope not, because I've learnt God's plans are better than ours. Much better. Scripture talks about God's word being 'the lamp to our feet', and I doubt it means a 100,000 megawatt bulb. Instead it's about following God's leading in flickering candlelight, where we're likely to trip over our own feet.

So what is my vision for the South Lakes Circuit? My first response is to chat with a few folk who might have good ideas, as vision is something we do together. I know it's not my job to bring the vision, or to make everything happen. I suspect much of my task is about relationships. As Methodists we love

conferring (why have one meeting when we can have three?). And yet if we make them only about business, we are missing the point. Getting together should be a joy and a delight, a chance to spend time with our church family, to love and learn from one another.

My first impressions

I've arrived in a beautiful circuit, filled with beautiful people, and I want to spend time with them, hear what they are passionate about and ask "How can you use that passion for God?" I want to listen as they worry about their children's future and wonder "What does God want us to do to make it better?"

I see a system bogged down in bureaucracy, with almost as many trustees as we have members, with people feeling trapped and fearful, unable to put down roles they detest because they fear it means 'the end'. I want to ask "If Jesus comes to bring life in all its fullness what are we doing, or dropping, to live full and rich lives together?"

Jesus talks of a city on a hill that can't be hidden. Here in the Lakes we know all about hills, but rather less about cities. But this circuit feels like a string of fairy lights strung out among those hills. Here are chapels and churches offering radical hospitality, worshipping creatively, giving up buildings to better serve Jesus and their community, opening their doors to foodbanks, joining community choirs instead of starting their own, and making lunch for the lonely. I see a myriad of small gestures that show whole life discipleship.

My role

So what's my task as a superintendent? In part it is to prioritise relationships over regulations, to model living life in all its fullness, and to give all the permission I can, to all the people I can, to live their lives with all the fullness they can! A flame has already been kindled: God is already at work, and sometimes we just need to name that and rejoice. We are people in community, not institutions. We are called to follow Jesus, not to keep the wheels on at any cost.

Some days my priority is to get the paperwork done, so someone else can cook a community lunch. Other days I get my spinning wheel out at our heritage chapel



Here are chapels and churches offering radical hospitality, worshipping creatively, giving up buildings to better serve Jesus.

and chat to tourists as they pass through. Sometimes I preach on 'A Methodist Way of Life', encouraging congregations to find their next focus, and sometimes I have the privilege of helping someone discern their particular calling. There are also times when I just head to the lake and swim with non-church friends, because life in all its fullness means celebrating everything we do as an opportunity for discipleship together.

The Revd Grace Cauldwell is the Superintendent of the South Lakes Circuit.



If Jesus comes to bring life in all its fullness, what are we doing, or dropping, to live full and rich lives together?

Kindling a mission flame

Just as Jesus was passionate, the Revd Chris Briggs says we should also be on fire for God.



Any passion for mission and evangelism comes from passion for Jesus.



The Revd Chris Briggs is the District Mission Enabler for the Nottingham and Derby District.

I remember once waking to the news of a large nearby Methodist church going up in flames overnight. Something very different was going on when what seemed to be 'tongues of fire' rested on the followers of Jesus in Acts Chapter 2, but the principle of fire touching God's people and places can resonate powerfully. Even the sadness of a church going up in flames need not obscure the way we should all be earnestly praying for the Church to be 'on fire'. As one hymn goes 'O God of burning cleansing flame, send the fire'. The followers of Jesus had passion and enthusiasm because the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire pushed them outwards to be witnesses of Jesus "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

In these challenging times when there is so much instability and uncertainty in the world, how might we recognise a flame kindled within us which opens us to the Holy Spirit and enables us to take the good news into the world? Since the earliest days of my Christian life, following a commitment I made to Jesus aged 16, I have had an enthusiasm and passion for mission and evangelism. This was not something carefully thought through, it just seemed important to share my faith with others.

On fire for Jesus

Where did my passion for mission come from? When I look inward and ask that question, I realise it was not passion for mission. Rather it was passion for Jesus. I think Jesus is great. Jesus loves me and I want to return that love. It is life-transforming in a way that nothing else can be. Maybe that sounds glib and sanctimonious, but any passion for mission and evangelism, as far as I can discern, comes from passion for Jesus, for who he is and what he has done. Everything flows from that. Jesus is our unique selling point (USP). I understand of course that we are not salespeople, but it is the uniqueness of Jesus that is the most powerful, exciting, awesome and incredible thing we have. When we are open to Jesus connecting with our lives and filling us with the same Holy Spirit that touched the disciples' heads with tongues of fire then we will be irresistibly impelled to move outwards, desiring to introduce others to Jesus.

I am not selling a policy, a strategy or a programme. These things have their place,



but in my view they can never replace people full of passion for Jesus. Ultimately that is all we need. It is not about the latest word, phrase, theology or meme. It's all about Jesus and only about Jesus. It is crucially important to engage with great topics and themes of society, but it is the introduction to Jesus that makes the difference.

Righteous passion

Jesus was passionate. He showed anger in a righteous way, confronted hypocrisy, was not afraid to cry, acted radically, loved extravagantly – not in a soppy 'anything goes' way, but with a fiery love that would offer all he was and who he was for us. It is this Jesus who I want to tell others about. It is this Jesus who I see reflected in, for example, my work with young evangelists, on district missions, and in missional prayer groups.

Yes, I have passion for Jesus and I can therefore do nothing other than to mission and evangelise. I am convinced that, in sharing Jesus, lives will change and the world too. I am excited about that, and I recall the impact and difference Jesus made:

- in the eyes of the man whose partner died on Christmas Eve and who came to church and gave himself to Jesus in prayer
- in the 'yes to Jesus' of the young woman who had no Christian background but who felt released from sin
- in the voice of the young man in a Christian hospitality tent, who had been determined to end his life that day but who felt drawn many miles and found God acted to bring the help he needed
- in the lives of men in prison finding real freedom
- in the prayerful healing of the woman who was close to death.

The passion, the flame, that needs lighting across the Church is passion for Jesus.



He showed anger in a righteous way, confronted hypocrisy, was not afraid to cry, acted radically, loved extravagantly.



**KINDLE A
FLAME**

What might a renewed passion for Jesus ignite in your context?

Richard Oppong-Boateng is the Young Evangelism Officer at Cliff College.



“Why are you a Christian sir?”

Igniting young people's faith

Richard Oppong-Boateng desires to kindle a flame of faith in young people so they may know true self worth.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to work within a school as a pastoral manager. One day in a history lesson, the students were learning how the Jewish people during the Second World War were forced to wear the Star of David to show their ethnicity. During the lesson I was able to explain who King David was and what the star represented. One student asked why I knew so much about King David. I told him that I'm a Christian and that I had read about David in the Old Testament in the Bible. This led one of the students to ask me a question that almost caught me off guard. "Why are you a Christian sir?"

The class fell quiet, and all eyes were fixed on me. I said: "Because I've seen the massive

difference that it's made in my life!" This encounter led to many more faith conversations with students from that history class.

Made in God's image

For me, becoming a Christian at 16 made all the difference to my life, stopping me from being a failure and just another statistic. The challenges, both personal and academic, that I faced growing up, left me with a lack of self-worth and a lack of hope for the future. However, in encountering Jesus, I was given a reason to hope beyond what I could see and a reason to value myself. This value is not based on the car that I drive or the amount of money that I have. It's based on the fact that I'm made in the image of God.



Becoming a Christian at 16 made all the difference to my life, stopping me from being a failure.



You see, I didn't become a Christian because it was a trendy thing to do. It was my lifeline. It was the reason I aspired to get more from life and it gave me a sense of value, sure in the knowledge that Jesus values me to the point that he would die for me.

John 10:10 comes to mind: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it to the full." I can honestly say that since becoming a Christian, I have experienced life, and life to the full.

This is the reason why I am so passionate about young people coming to know Jesus, growing in faith, and sharing it with others. For some of them, it could be the reason they move from being just a statistic, achieving very little in their lives, to becoming all that God has created them to be.

Young people need to hear about Christ

In my work with young people, one of the issues that I find comes up time after time is self-worth. Young people are constantly bombarded with messages about how they should look, what they should think, and what they should own. If they don't fit into 'the norm'

(whatever that is) they can be ostracised. There are other issues that affect their self-worth including anxiety and stress, the cost-of-living crisis, family conflict and more – the list goes on and on. Now more than ever it is time for our young people to know the good news about Jesus Christ, and the fact that he has come to give life – and life to the full.

As a Church, we need the energy, the imagination, creativity and ingenuity that young people bring. I have been so blessed and have learnt so much from working with young people. I've been so privileged to walk alongside young people as they set out on their own faith journey and to see them use their gifts to bless the Church and the world.

My hope is that as you read this, it will kindle a fire in you personally. I hope that you will play a role (whether big or small) in helping the young people in your life to come to know Christ and to help their faith to grow. In sharing your faith with a young person, you could be offering the lifeline they are crying out for. I know for me that this was the case and my faith was a lifeline. The good news about Jesus' life, death, resurrection and return is for all of us – young people included. Let's play our part in ensuring that they are valued in our church communities and have the opportunity to meet with King Jesus, the one who changes everything.



How can you help young people come to faith in Christ?



In sharing your faith with a young person, you could be offering the lifeline they are crying out for.

Want to know more?

Would you like to explore evangelism with young people in your church?

Cliff College has a resource I can share with you. Please email me at r.oppong-boateng@cliffcollege.ac.uk



Often in day-to-day conversations it becomes evident that God is at work.



Sparks of faith



We are called as disciples of Jesus to nurture those sparks of faith.

In the fourth year of her first appointment, the Revd Nicola Langton-Miller reflects on kindling flames of sacred love.

For over a decade, mission and evangelism have been a key part of my ministry as a presbyter and a lay worker. A line from the Wesley hymn 'O Thou who camest from above' runs: "Jesus, confirm my heart's desire to work and speak and

think for thee." Having felt a sense of calling at the age of 11, I continued to push doors and seek God's will in my life. This led me to work for the Wirral Methodist Circuit from 2008 to 2019. During my time there, I began a project called The Hope Journey, in which churches are trained to work with their local primary schools and create different religious education experiences throughout the year. This work continues today, with several thousand children attending churches each year right across the North West of England.

I find it valuable to refer to mission as 'seeing what God is doing and joining in'. This phrase is largely attributed to the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and I feel is a perfect way to explain mission and evangelism. Mission doesn't have to be daunting. It is about looking to see where the Holy Spirit is already at work and seeking guidance on how to join in.



Often in day-to-day conversations it becomes evident that God is at work. Dropping off my children at school, I might be stopped by a parent for advice on an issue. Or sometimes boys will ask me a question about faith that takes me aback and I am left thinking about something I had not considered before.

Empowering others

Leadership in church doesn't always mean leading from the front. It doesn't have to be standing in a pulpit that makes you an evangelist. It is the small conversations when you least expect them that often have the most impact. As I walk away, I often think "Yeah, OK God, I hear you." Increasingly I find that inspiring and empowering others is an incredible way of seeing God at work.

I became chaplain of a local Boys' Brigade company before being called to the Methodist ministry and through this role I have felt God's Spirit at work. I continue to support the work of this organisation, both at battalion and national level, and I hugely value whenever I'm given the opportunity to share my faith with others and support those in roles of leadership. In the words of the Wesley hymn, I am "Ready for all thy perfect will, my acts of faith and love repeat."

Thinking outside the box

I have always been the type of person who thinks outside the box. Sometimes I think so far outside it, I'm not even sure where the box is anymore. But being prepared to be innovative has over many years led to amazing encounters with others and in turn with God.

During lockdown due to Covid-19 we were unable to hold our usual harvest service at Wellspring Methodist Church in Congleton, Cheshire, which is one of the four churches that I support. Instead of giving up, I arranged for one of the farmers from one of my other churches to bring a tractor and trailer and, taking care to keep socially distanced, we travelled around the local housing estate collecting food donations for our local food bank. It was so successful that it became an annual event after the pandemic.

Nativity and Easter trails around the local estate as well as 'Lego church' have encouraged engagements with local families who would not normally attend church.

Giving knitted angels and Christmas decorations to members of the community who don't have many opportunities for conversation has also provided ways to meet people within our communities.



Spark of love

Another line from the same Wesley hymn runs: "Kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart!" It only takes a spark to start a fire, literally and metaphorically. I know that from first-hand experience, unfortunately, as in one of the chapels I support the organ caught fire and once the flames took hold it was quite a challenge to stop them.

We are called as disciples of Jesus to nurture those sparks of faith, to fan the flames, to encourage growth and to join in with the fire (metaphorically speaking of course!). John Wesley himself called us to be 'altogether Christians' not 'almost Christians'.

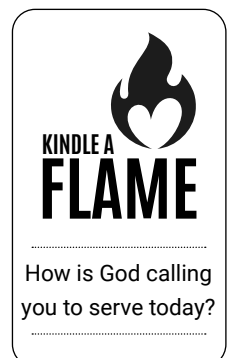
Life is not easy, and it can be challenging to share the good news of Jesus when we are experiencing trials and tribulations ourselves. Supporting fellow Christians in church and in other ways is so valuable. I can honestly say that I wouldn't be where I am today without the support of my family and many Christian friends. I ask you to seriously consider how God is calling you to serve today wherever you live. Most of all, may I suggest that you are open to the Holy Spirit and that you are ready for the amazing things that are yet to come!



The Revd Nicola Langton-Miller is a presbyter in the Dane and Trent Circuit.



I find it valuable to refer to mission as 'seeing what God is doing and joining in'.





Kindling the flame of Christian community

Like making a fire, creating a vibrant Christian community takes preparation, time and care, say Abi Jarvis and the Revd Andy Fishburne.

If you've ever tried to light a fire, you know it doesn't happen instantaneously. First, you need to find the right materials: a match, a fire lighter and some kindling. Then you need to arrange the materials so that the structure enables the air to flow and the initial flame to spread. All the pieces are now in place, but nothing is happening yet. So you light the fire lighter and watch as the first pieces catch fire, then perhaps you blow in air or shift some wood around to spread the flame. Finally, the flames spread and you have your fire. But even then, it will take time to become hot enough to warm you up or toast some marshmallows. The effort is worth it in the end though, for the sense of joy, warmth, light and excitement that a fire can bring.

Do any of those stages feel like your Christian journey just now? Perhaps the pieces are in place – regular Sunday services, Bible by the bed – but nothing seems to be happening. Or you might be testing different things to find the right practices and habits

that will bring your faith to life. Maybe you're in that moment where everything is new and exciting, and you can't wait to see what happens next. Or perhaps you're sitting relaxing, basking in God's love and continuing to tend to the flames to keep your faith growing and deepening. Just as building a fire is a process, being a follower of Jesus isn't a static thing. While God's love for us never changes, our response to that love changes day to day as we journey through life.

Getting a fire started

Sometimes we need some help in kindling a fire. That's why community is so important: meeting with others on Sundays, in midweek groups, at work and at the shops. A lot of the work we do in the Evangelism and Growth team at the Methodist Church is to help local churches. We want to spark ideas so that you are able to be a creative, faithful presence in your community.

'A Methodist Way of Life' isn't anything new: practices such as prayer and evangelism have



We want to spark ideas so that you are able to be a creative, faithful presence.

been part of the Christian tradition since it was founded. And the Wesleys birthed our movement by encouraging Methodists to be, well, *methodical* as they sought to live out the 'Means of Grace': acts of piety and acts of mercy. But sometimes we need to light a new fire under old practices, and our new discipleship framework (which you can find at Methodist.org.uk/discipleship) is helping Methodist communities rediscover and commit to these ancient practices, as individuals and as churches.

Youth inspiration and flame-kindling pilot

3Generate is the children and youth assembly of the Methodist Church. At its meeting in October we encouraged the young people present to tune in to God and choose up to three of the 12 Methodist Way of Life practices, which could be things they felt passionate about, or wanted to get better at, or use to explore God. Some of the young people of South Chadderton Methodist Church shared the commitments they'd chosen with their church afterwards. They encouraged the rest of the Church to "listen [to what God is saying] and do it". Their words resonated with us; we believe you can't wait for someone else to build the fire for you!

As part of our flame-kindling, we are working with several communities across the UK to pilot activities and resources that will help churches and pioneer groups become better disciples and encourage a thriving culture of Jesus-followers living out a Methodist Way of Life. This will not be a step-by-step guide, but 'a starter pack of kindling and matches' (guidance and activities) for local churches to use as they build a fire that works for their community.

Circuit initiatives

Some lay leaders and ministers caught some early sparks, so to speak, at a series of Reimagining Discipleship days, the Superintendents' Conferences, and the Methodist Conference. They have each 'kindled the flame' in different ways that best suits their neighbourhood, for example:

- Castle Eden Circuit is exploring which commitments could be catalysts for renewal and growth in their various churches.
- The Nene Valley Circuit and Northampton District is running a New Places for New



People FEAST (Friends Exploring And Sharing Together) pilot. The Revd Kim Shorley is looking at ways this might be a focus to form new small groups.

- Northampton Methodist Church has several different sites. It is considering how 'A Methodist Way of Life' can bring a unifying identity and vision, creating one single community.

Building a thriving fire

In your church, whether you're looking to rekindle a fire that's gone out, you're building a new fire pit to start a new fire, or you're looking for new kindling to add to the thriving bonfire that's still going strong, we encourage you to explore 'A Methodist Way of Life' with your community, and let us know what your fire looks like. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Explore the commitments of 'A Methodist Way of Life' in a church service or midweek group. Which commitment does each person gravitate towards? Is there one they feel particularly gifted in, or passionate



You can't wait for someone else to build the fire for you!





about? How can these vocations be celebrated and shared with others?

- Our discipleship journey is guided by the Holy Spirit, God within us. Listen to God's voice. Where might the Spirit be leading you, as an individual? Is it to explore a new commitment, or greater depths in something you're already passionate about? Talk about this with someone else, so that you are accountable to one another.
- Is there a particular commitment that God is encouraging your church to focus on in the season ahead? Could you explore this together? Are there people on the outskirts of your church (for example neighbours or people who come occasionally to services) who you could include in these discussions?



We encourage you to explore 'A Methodist Way of Life' with your community.



The Revd Andy Fishburne and Abi Jarvis are Discipleship and Faith Formation Officers in the Evangelism and Growth team.



Listen to what God is saying and do it. What is stopping you?

Find out more

To explore 'A Methodist Way of Life', visit Methodist.org.uk/discipleship. Further news of the pilot project about 'kindling a flame' in churches will be released over the next year by the Evangelism and Growth team. You can visit the Methodist Church website to sign up to receive their newsletter to hear stories and find out about events. And look out for the new discipleship pathway toolkit coming in 2023/2024.

God's light in our darkness



As Methodists, we don't accept the ills of the world, but kindle a flame to light the way to God, says the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler.

Recently, we had a series of power outages in our house. As I stumbled out of bed half-awake for the fourth time in one night, I found the torch's batteries were failing. Nevertheless, even this very dim light was enough to enable me to see and to move. Sometimes, a tiny light can be all that is needed to open the way to a different future.

Around the time that I was ordained *The Methodist Prayer Handbook* included a saying from the Indian theologian and poet Samuel Rayan: "A candle-light is a protest at midnight; it is a non-conformist; it says to the darkness 'I beg to differ'." Those words have stayed with me for the three decades I have been ministering in the Methodist Church. They powerfully express what we are called to do and to be. Against forbidding and all-encompassing darkness, a candle light might seem small and fragile, but it is transformative.

I beg to differ

In the UK now, Methodist communities are a small proportion of the local population but are transformative as the tiny light that says "I beg to differ". Circuits that offer a welcome to refugees kindle a flame in a culture of suspicion and beg to differ. Those who represent us in global contexts kindle a flame in the darkness of rising nationalism and beg to differ. Schools whose staff go beyond the call of duty to support children in deprived areas kindle a flame in the prevailing narrow and competitive view of education and beg to differ. Methodists who work for reconciliation kindle a flame where division is endemic and beg to differ. Churches with food banks or warm spaces kindle a flame in the darkness of poverty and inequality and beg to differ. We do these things (as do all whose stories are in this issue of *the connexion*) because a Palestinian Jew with a dying prayer that his enemies might be forgiven kindled a flame in the darkness of hatred. Our stories are part of his godly non-conformity.

The Revd
Dr Jonathan R Hustler
is Secretary of
the Conference.



The tiny light that says "I beg to differ".



A Palestinian Jew with a dying prayer that his enemies might be forgiven kindled a flame in the darkness of hatred.



In what fresh ways
can your circuit
beg to differ?

Gentian Ndreu, Precious Sweta and James Barr, Wesley Hotels



Hospitality is at the heart of our faith.



When a building becomes a **blessing** not a bane

The upper half of a London church has been repurposed as an ethically run hotel, welcoming visitors and providing much needed employment, say the Revd Tim Bradshaw, James Barr and Richard Wills.

Wesley Camden Town Hotel in London is an imaginative new collaboration between the Connexion, the Camden Town church congregation, and the Wesley Hotel in Euston to keep the Wesley flame alive in the heart of the vibrant Camden community.

The flame of hospitality is at the heart of our faith. It permeates our Scriptures, whether it is Abraham welcoming strangers or Jesus being welcomed as a guest. Inviting strangers in is not without risk and accepting hospitality may make us feel vulnerable since the host is usually in control. It requires trust. It demands love.

The Camden Town Hotel is the Methodist Council's second hotel. The first is the Wesley Euston Hotel, which is run through Methodist

International Centre Limited (MICL). It was originally a hostel for overseas students needing a safe and trusted place in London. However, as students sought more modern, purpose-built accommodation, rooms were let to other people and it became a hotel.

Taking care of assets

Good stewardship is an important facet of our faith. We have a duty, as trustees certainly, but as Christians in any case, to honour the gifts handed down to us. As we look around the Connexion, we see many buildings that are thought of as liabilities rather than assets. Many are old and need major maintenance, or they are simply not configured for contemporary use. It is all too easy to sell

them off, only to see developers exploit their potential. We should not squander our inheritance. We may not need the buildings as they are, but they can be put to some other use, providing money for mission.

The Wesley Camden Town Hotel is in the upper half of the Camden Town Methodist Church. The congregation has retained the lower half of the building as the church area. The Camden Town congregation were courageous in letting go of what they had and allowing the Methodist Council to take over trusteeship.

Our Methodist visions and values are the cornerstones of The Wesley hotels. We embrace all people irrespective of race, gender, disability, medical condition, or other needs and give back where it is needed. We follow our moral and ethical convictions by doing the right thing in all circumstances even if no one is watching. The hotels are named after the founder of the Methodist Church, who taught us to have a servant's heart, which fits the ethos of running a hotel. John Wesley said: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, To all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

A vibrant future

As an important economic centre and tourist destination, London has global appeal and is one of the most visited cities. There is strong demand for rooms, resulting in extremely robust trading performance. Demand in the London Borough of Camden for hotel rooms looks set to increase further with corporate companies moving into the borough.

In Camden Town, it is expected that people will come to stay on business as the corporate market picks up. Further, Camden is a strong leisure destination at weekends, ensuring high room occupancy, especially at popular times of the year. This means that the hotel is an investment that will generate income far greater than could be expected if the money was simply put on deposit with a bank.

The building is built to BREEAM standards (the leading environmental standard) and has retained many of the exterior features. Even though it's not listed, it is important to steward it properly as it is within the Camden Town conservation area and has a great history dating back to the 1820s.

In summary, the development has:

- ensured the future of the Methodist building in the heart of Camden Town
- allowed the congregation to focus on worship and mission in the community
- created employment opportunities
- created a new revenue stream
- built community engagement.

It is a pioneering venture, but from John Wesley to the present day, the Methodist Church has always strived for social justice. The Wesley Hotels are businesses in a competitive world, yet they pay the real living wage. They face the reality of competition and survival but conduct their affairs ethically. So, when it comes to arguing for fairness in employment or commerce, the Methodist Church can be authentic and authoritative when speaking truth to power. We can not only say 'this is what should be done' but also 'this is the way to do it.'



We should not squander our inheritance.



James Barr and Richard Wills are General Manager and Chair of the Board of the Methodist International Centre Limited. The Revd Tim Bradshaw is the Superintendent Minister of the Islington and Camden Circuit. To find out more about the Wesley Hotels, visit thewesley.co.uk

The flame of care and inclusion



In my ministry as an HIV chaplain and pharmacist I am called to share God's love and 'lighten the dark'.

The Revd Heather Leake Date, works with HIV patients and describes the context that kindled the flame of her ministry.

What does 'kindle a flame' mean to me? Immediately I think of Charles Wesley's hymn "O thou who camest from above". It is both a prayer and a mission statement, which resonates profoundly with my faith. God's love, so generously given to us, is to be shared with others, and we affirm our commitment to work, speak and think as disciples of Jesus. I also think of the Iona chant "Kindle a flame to lighten the dark and take all fear away", which is both a comfort and a call to action.

In my ministry as an HIV chaplain and pharmacist I am called to share God's love and 'lighten the dark' by journeying with people in what is sometimes called a 'ministry of presence'. It is impossible not to become aware of the injustices that some people have endured, or still face, and that awareness demands a response. As the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Social justice and pharmacy

Social justice issues were prominent during my formative years in the Church. In the 1980s, I learned about Fair Trade, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the campaigns to cancel the unpayable debts faced by many low-income countries. I was inspired by those in my church family who preached and campaigned on these issues, whose faith was clearly grounded in reality, and who engaged with the wider world beyond our small town. This environment nurtured my faith and I became convinced that love and justice were at the heart of the gospel message.

As a pharmacist, I was first attracted to



working in the HIV specialty by the academic and clinical challenges. It was a new, complex and largely still unknown illness, with medical treatment aimed at managing unusual infections and relieving symptoms. However, a deeper reason to stay in the specialty were the people: the staff and patients. It was a privilege to become part of a close-knit multidisciplinary team where everyone truly cared and 'went the extra mile'. It was even more humbling to be with so many folk (some, like me, only in their mid-20s) who were enduring significant physical and mental health complications, as well as multiple bereavements, and often supporting friends or partners who were ill too.

Prejudice and heart break

In the 1990s friends and unmarried partners were not legally able to be next of kin if a blood relative was contactable (and same-sex partners could not be married or be in a civil partnership). And so we sometimes witnessed the injustice of partners and friends who had cared for someone with HIV for years suddenly being ousted by parents who had previously ostracised their son (usually because he was gay) and making funeral arrangements that excluded those who had actually looked after him. On the other hand, I also knew a devoted mother who crossed continents to care for her son and I'm sure she kept him alive far longer than just medical care could manage. However, sadly the former scenario was far more common than the latter.

At that time newspaper stories about HIV or AIDS mostly used stigmatising language, betraying ignorance, fear and prejudice, which fuelled discrimination. Christians and healthcare workers were not immune to those prejudices, but there were also shining examples of people drawn to caring for or supporting people with HIV/AIDS.

People often made a distinction between 'innocent victims' (those who had acquired HIV from blood transfusions) and everyone else, who were deemed to have 'brought it on themselves'. However I discovered people's lives were often messy and complex, and that frequently abuse, rejection and religion had



contributed to the choices they made and the paths they had taken.

This is the context in which the flame of my ministry was kindled.

I am not the only HIV chaplain in the UK, nor the only Christian (or even Methodist) HIV pharmacist, and I'm just one of many who want to challenge injustice, care compassionately and tackle health inequalities. However I may be unique in combining all these elements. My passion for my work in HIV remains undimmed after more than 30 years, and it remains an immense privilege to journey with people as their HIV chaplain.



People's lives were often messy and complex, and frequently abuse, rejection and religion had contributed to the choices they made.

Images taken at World Aids Day candlelight vigil, Brighton.



KINDLE A FLAME

Thinking of combatting prejudice, what does 'kindle a flame' now mean to you?

The Revd Heather Leake Date is a Methodist minister in the Sussex Ecumenical HIV Chaplaincy and the Consultant Pharmacist for HIV and Sexual Health at the Brighton & Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust.

The Revd Dr James N Tebbutt is the Chair of the Cumbria District.



A partnership that ignites hope and vision

The Revd Dr James Tebbutt describes a visit to the Methodist Church in Argentina, finding people lit up with God's fire and committed to those in greatest need.



IEMA's symbol is a cross, with the Pentecost flame to one side.

For some 20 years the Cumbria District of the Methodist Church in Britain and the Iglesia Evangélica Metodista Argentina (IEMA, the Methodist Church of Argentina) have enjoyed a twinning partnership. There have been many visits each way by members, ministers and young people, nurtured on the Cumbrian side by a district partnership group.

IEMA's symbol is a cross, with the Pentecost flame to one side and a map of Argentina on the other. I am the Chair of the Cumbria District and it was evident when I first arrived in Cumbria that through the partnership's mutual learning and encouragement, a flame had been kindled which has had a profound impact on those involved. I became the latest to be blessed by the opportunity to visit Argentina when, as the British representative in October 2022, I attended IEMA's biennial Asamblea in Buenos Aires.

Argentinian Asamblea

This meeting is the equivalent of our Conference. Representatives warmly welcomed me, as they themselves gathered for the first time since the upheaval and losses of the Covid-19 pandemic. Together we celebrated the Asamblea's theme: 'Jesus Christ: the grace that transforms, the hope that frees'.

IEMA's concern for the world underpins their priorities, which range from worrying about the financial inequalities in society, to expressing solidarity with indigenous peoples. They are concerned about challenging gender violence and the patriarchal power structures in society and in their Church (as we are in our own Church), and are calling for female economic emancipation. They also support with great love and warmth a foster home for children in care, which I was briefly able to visit.

The underpinning worship at the Asamblea was inspirational. Here was a mature Christian faith, rooted in an Arminian and Wesleyan sense of God's love for all, involving a personal experience of forgiveness and joy, but with a deep commitment to caring for the vulnerable, showing a Latin liberation theology's bias to the poor.

Worship was expressed through prayers and songs that succinctly communicated the gospel, through music that could be gentle and deeply moving, or full of vigorous joy, accompanied by a gathered choir, able musicians, and the congregation's movement, clapping and heartfelt singing. It was not a simplistic emotional 'high'; here was a movement of the Spirit, in height and depth, committed to those in greatest need, with a vitality and kindled flame, which could inspire us in the British Church.

Similar but different

There were parallels with our Conference, including receiving reports, honouring those who had died, and the bishop giving an address. Yet there were also differences, including the use of 'Comisiones'. These are committees drawn from the membership of the Asamblea, each with a particular mandate. It gives greater policy-making responsibilities to the ordinary members of the Asamblea for recommending priorities and decisions for action, contrasting with the pre-prepared resolutions that in the British Conference we are largely invited to endorse. As a smaller body, this approach is maybe more feasible, as also their greater informality and even agreement to change voting rules mid-stream. 'The world did not end' with this approach, inviting trust. It made me think that greater flexibility has its place and virtue.

There was vigorous debate throughout, but also a commitment to unity, symbolically illustrated by two opposing parties arguing from the same microphone, with their arms around each other! The commitment to unity could also be seen in the election of the bishop, which lasted many rounds before the existing bishop, Pastor Américo Jara Reyes, was re-elected. Perhaps underlying this was a confusion about how best to face and be led in view of the challenges confronting the Church. Like us in the UK, the Argentinians face the challenge of declining and ageing



A deep commitment to caring for the vulnerable, showing a Latin liberation theology's bias to the poor.

congregations, and economic challenges, which for them extended to not even buying more paper because of increased costs.

Nevertheless, in worship we made commitments to unity and the gospel. We each took a small paper flame and placed it beside a central cross to make a larger flame, reflecting IEMA's logo and symbolising our commitment to the redemptive purposes of the gospel, whatever the challenges. Given their evident commitment to working out their faith in practice, surely God's Spirit will continue to be kindled both in and through them. It will transform them and others through Christ's grace to bring a freeing hope to those who, in an unjust world, are most in need. May we be equally inspired!



Reading about this creative partnership, what have divine sparks ignited in your imagination?

Reflection



I'm a firestarter!

Whether your faith is a quiet constant flame or a dramatic blaze, we can all ignite fires for Christ, argues the Revd Dr Iain Ballard.

I am the son of a coal miner whose pay and pension included sacks of coal, which we used for heating. One of my earliest memories is watching my mother start a fire. It's a relatively simple process, beginning with cleaning the grate to make room for the new fire. You place some scrunched-up newspaper at the bottom with kindling (small pieces of wood) followed by a few pieces of coal. At this point you may have everything ready, but you don't yet have a fire. You need a spark to set the paper alight. If you've prepared well, it will soon be a roaring inferno. But it can cool and go out too: one Christmas my grandfather took a piece of coal out of the fire and put it on the hearth. Quickly it stopped glowing and before long it had cooled down.

Today we don't have a coal fire, most manses use gas or electric for heating, but I'm still a firestarter. I still love making a fire, both sparking a physical flame for heat and a flame of faith in people's hearts.

Laying the groundwork

I believe that the beginning of faith looks something like starting fire. We need to clean the grate, cleaning our hearts and lives, making room for the Holy Spirit. Then we lay the groundwork. Our spiritual journeys are much more personal than the lighting of a physical fire but often consist of those activities of discipleship such as reading Scripture, praying, meeting with other Christians and worshipping God. These all prepare us for the spark of the Holy Spirit which will ignite the fire, taking us from being spiritually dead to being alive in Christ. Once the fire is lit we need to keep on adding fuel so that we continue to burn, brighter and brighter.

For some the fire of faith was lit long before they can remember. It's a constant flame rather like a pilot light and has always been there. Then there are those for whom the fire begins with an explosion of faith, rather like the one Paul had on the road to Damascus. These people often have a great story or testimony to

tell. As a Church we need to value both types of person, for neither is more important nor is one closer to God.

As you read this, you will know your own experience of the fire of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you are someone who has had a quiet life-long faith or perhaps you remember an explosion of faith one day when you suddenly realised that God loves you. Or maybe you are reading this believing that you have never truly known the love of God. If that is you, pray, asking God to set your heart on fire. Know, as you pray, the Church prays with you.

Being alight isn't the end of the fire-starting process. We need to root ourselves in communities of faith, otherwise the fire can quickly cool and go out.

Called to be fire-starters

In the Church we are called to start fires. This requires us to not only be alight but to find those things that make us burn inside: things we are passionate about, which give us drive and energy. We need to turn these fires into action as we join in the building of Christ's kingdom. This is achieved through mission and evangelism. Mission is using our flame to warm the heart, mind and soul of those we meet. Evangelism is setting their hearts on fire! While God provides the spark, we can prepare the way and tend the fire once it is lit.

Imagine a Church so passionate about discipleship, mission and evangelism that it's truly on fire for God. This is what the early Methodists were like and I believe what God is calling us to be today. We are called to throw off the things that drag us away from the Spirit; to get rid of the old ash and blow on the embers so the fire comes back to life; and to fuel the fire so it spreads to the world around us.

We should not forget our heritage. Our ancestors had passion for God, passion for justice, passion for mission and passion for evangelism. I believe I'm called to be a firestarter. I also believe that you too can ignite fires. Let's set this world on fire for Christ.



The Revd Dr Iain Ballard is the Superintendent of the South Warwickshire Circuit.



While God provides the spark, we prepare the way and tend the fire once it is lit.



One of the most important roles of the Church is to be people who start fires.

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Live later life well