Close encounters of a Christian kind this Advent!

Encounters is the name of the Advent Challenge this year. It begins on Sunday 1st December. It is a short Advent journey through the bible exploring the different ways and places in which we might encounter God. Weekly titles are Laughter and Tears, Dreams and Deserts, Stars and Angels.

Canon John Kiddle, Director of Mission in the Diocese, said: “God meets us in the reality of our lives. However we would describe them – busy, complex, lonely, happy, content or empty – God is there and can be found. As we do so, we grow in the faith, hope and love that transforms our lives and the world. If you haven’t done so in previous years, why not sign up for the Challenge this Advent? It’s easy to do so. It will make a difference. Bring a bit of faith, hope and love to your life this year. It begins on Sunday 1st December.

Bishop Paul says post a real card this Christmas

The Bishop of Hertford has backed a campaign calling for people to send real Christmas cards this year. The campaign, launched by Traidcraft, challenges the growing culture of sending Christmas greetings through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Sending e-cards can also reduce charities’ revenue from sales of charity Christmas cards. Bishop Paul said: “I love technology and social media and I use it a lot. But it can be a bit impersonal and frankly sometimes a bit cold. It’s so important to remember that human connection and reaching out to one another is a basic human need. That’s why I think at Christmas nowadays something has been lost by the trend either to send no cards, or e-cards or a group email. Sometimes traditional is good, so why not write cards and deliver some of them yourself? Because it’s not just the card, but it’s that one to one connection – pastorally, there’s nothing better than hand delivering a card. It’s such a gift to the giver as well as to the receiver.”

A recent survey conducted by Royal Mail found that 80 per cent of people would rather receive a card than a festive message via social media; that 80 per cent of people would rather receive a card. It’s such a gift to the giver as well as to the receiver.

Traidcraft added: “Putting up a single card at the back of church or in the office for everyone to sign, or posting a greeting on Facebook sometimes works well. But if everyone did this, then some people would have an empty mantelpiece at Christmas – just imagine how that would make you feel. A charity Christmas card says so much more.” It is estimated that £50m is raised for good causes through the sales of charity Christmas cards each year. Traidcraft added: “Putting up a single card at the back of church or in the office for everyone to sign, or posting a greeting on Facebook sometimes works well. But if everyone did this, then some people would have an empty mantelpiece at Christmas – just imagine how that would make you feel. A charity Christmas card says so much more.” It is estimated that £50m is raised for good causes through the sales of charity Christmas cards each year. Traidcraft is a leading producer of charity cards.
Bishop writes... The Gift of Life

A few weeks ago I paid an official visit to the Luton and Dunstable University Hospital.

It is always fascinating to hear of the major advances that are being made in treatment of disease. But what stayed with me on this occasion was my conversation with Jagtar Singh, one of the hospital’s non-executive directors. He has a passion for encouraging people to sign up on the Donor Register, pointing out that when people die they can transform the life expectancy of others by donating their organs. Many people suffer from debilitating conditions, languishing on waiting lists, simply because there are no suitable organs available.

After my visit a friend brought to my attention a website which tells the true story of Gaynor Taylor who lost both her son and her husband in a short space of time. Richard was only 23 when he died in a car accident and then her husband, John, died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Both men had signed up on the NHS Organ Donor Register.

Gaynor said, ‘It’s such a devastating time when you lose someone, but I did find it comforting, as did John when Richard died, knowing that as did John when Richard died, knowing that their organs would be helping others live.’ Since then she has campaigned to raise awareness of the difference that organ donation can make to the lives of others.

For many centuries Christians were concerned about the proper burial of bodies because it was believed that on the Day of Judgement everyone would literally crawl out of their graves to meet the Lord. This understanding lies behind the traditional custom of burying people with their feet pointing east, so they would be facing in the right direction when Jesus appeared. People recalled from being cremated because they were worried they would not have a body on the Day of Judgement. Similar anxieties may fuel the reluctance of some Christians to consider organ donation.

In recent centuries we have come to see that God’s plans and purposes are not limited by such literal interpretations of the Bible. We do not worry about the fate of people who have been injured in this life or who have lost a limb because we believe that God’s resurrection power is greater than our limited human understanding. How much less should we worry if we donate our organs in order to help people who are suffering?

As a result of my visit to Luton and Dunstable University Hospital I have dug out my faded donor card which has lurked in my wallet for the past twenty years, and I am now registered on the website at http://www.organdonation.nhs.uk/.

Christmas is the season for giving and receiving gifts – a practice inspired by the greatest gift of all: God’s gift of his Son for the salvation of the world. Will you consider signing up on the Organ Donor Register this Christmas? It could be the most generous gift you ever make.

Life and death issues at Luton & Dunstable

The Bishop of St Albans visited Luton and Dunstable Hospital on 28th October and saw at first hand the life-enhancing care of the hospital’s new £5.5 million Cardiac Centre which brings diagnostic services for heart care to the population served by the hospital. He said: ‘In a time when resources are scarce, real tribute should be paid to the staff of the hospital and to the Trust for their vision and determination in getting this provision. It is a sign of people working with all their heart and mind and strength for the good of the community.’

The Bishop visited Accident and Emergency, the Cardiac Centre, the Patient Experience Centre and then took part in a discussion on dementia care and end of life issues in the Hospital Chaplaincy, where nursing and chaplaincy staff came together.

During the discussion, the Bishop learnt about ways in which the care of dementia patients has been aided by the one-to-one specialist care by nurses and volunteers. Discussing the care of end of life patients, the Bishop heard how the hospital devoted significant resources to end of life care and the demands of making this work for patients so that they received support and comfort. He also discussed the Liverpool Care Pathway and the way that clinical staff are currently supporting those who are in the final stages of their life. The Bishop observed: ‘As a society we have become too afraid of talking about death and facing the truth that we will all die sometime. Perhaps openness about death is another value that we need, not just in hospitals. Lack of reality about death is not just bad for us at the end of our own lives, it can have consequences for society if it make us put off big decisions like organ donation.’
Could St Albans become a ‘Living Wage’ diocese?

A vote passed at October’s meeting of the Diocesan Synod could be a step towards St Albans becoming the first diocese in the Church of England to align itself with the policy of paying a living wage by becoming an accredited living wage employer.

Andy Walton of the Contextual Theology Centre came to give Synod a presentation about the Living Wage.

Where does the idea of a living wage come from?

Synod unanimously passed a motion in favour of the Living Wage. The motion on the Diocesan Board of Finance to explore the practicability of the Diocese of St Albans becoming an accredited living wage employer and encourages parishes and other church bodies in the Diocese to pay at least the living wage. The Living Wage is set to cover the basic needs of an average person in today’s society, assuming that they are working a 35 hour week. The minimum wage for the UK is £8.55 per hour. The Living Wage for London is £9.55 per hour and for the rest of the UK is £7.45. These Living Wage rates will have been revised on 4th November 2013, early in Living Wage Week.

The Living Wage offers a win-win opportunity for those willing to embrace it. For employees, particularly those with families, the living wage makes a real difference in what they can afford to meet the basic needs of themselves and their children. For employers, professional surveys have found that for a significant majority of businesses, paying the living wage has improved productivity and customer satisfaction, as well as reducing absenteeism and staff turnover.

Accredited Living Wage employers pay at least the Living Wage to all their directly employed staff (with an exception for interns) and ensure that workers performing contracted out work on the employer’s premises under medium and long term contracts (eg, cleaning, catering) also receive the living wage at least from the next renewal of the contract. Over 400 employers, including major financial institutions, professional firms, public sector employers and charities are already accredited. In group work and in the debate on the motion, Synod members:

- highlighted the strong theological and moral case for the Living Wage
- urged the DBF to become an accredited Living Wage employer, provided no insurmountable practical obstacles are found
- asked the Diocese to give moral and practical encouragement to parishes to pay the Living Wage
- encouraged all Christians to raise the Living Wage idea with their own employers, where they are not already paying it.

Further information on the Living Wage can be found on the Living Wage Foundation website (www.livingwage.org.uk), in a background paper prepared for General Synod (http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1571700/gs%201882b%20-%20living%20wage%20pm.pdf) or from the Diocesan Board for Church and Society office.

What is the minimum income standard?

- The income needed to have minimum acceptable standard of living.
- Based on social consensus.
- Calculated from a “basket” of goods and services.
- “Needs”, not “wants”: not an “aspirational” living standard.

What Living Wage represents:

- Baseline below which households cannot generally afford an acceptable living standard, even if working full time.
- Standard for social participation, not just survival: “Food and shelter keep you alive, but that’s not living”.
- Benchmark reflecting social values, which will change over time reflecting changes in society.

Why act now?

Research in October 2012 found:

- 1 in 5 employees are paid less than the Living Wage
- That equates to 4.82 million people
- Inequality is now at its highest level since 1930s
- Paying a Living Wage is one of the key tools in tackling inequality & driving local economic recovery.

Decision to retain God in Scout promise welcomed

The Church of England has given a national welcome to the Scout movement’s decision to keep a “Duty to God” in its core promise and to introduce an additional alternative promise for those without a religious faith.

The Rt Revd. Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, and the Church’s lead Bishop on work with Young People said: “I very much welcome this announcement by the Scout movement that God stays in the Promise. I particularly welcome the opportunity we have been given to contribute to this consultation and support the outcome which ensures that a duty to God remains in the core Scout Promise.

In enabling people of all faiths and none to affirm their beliefs through an additional alternative promise, the Scout movement has demonstrated that it is both possible, and I would argue preferable, to affirm the importance of spiritual life and not to restrict meaning to arbitrary self-definition. As the last census demonstrated the importance of spiritual life and not to restrict meaning to religious belief.

For many years the rich relationship between Scouts and the Church of England has borne fruit in the lives of generations of young men and more recently young women.

We share with the Scouting movement the aim to enable young people to interact with others, gain confidence and have the opportunity to reach their full potential. From the thousands of volunteers from churches who work as leaders and enables through to the hosting of groups in Church premises throughout the country, I am confident that our relationship the Scouting movement will continue to flourish.”

The Revd Richard Winslade, Rector of Maulden, is ‘H.Q. Volunteer’ for the Scout Movement and has worked with a multi faith team looking at Spiritual development. Locally, he is District Commissioner of Ampthill and Woburn, a role he shares with his wife. Richard said: “I think the Scout Association has made a good, well thought out decision to create an alternative promise which the members least feel able to make the existing promises which all include a reference to God.”

The Scout Association continues to be committed to developing young people 6-25 to achieve their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potentials.

Over 60 years of retirement housing...

With supported housing, nursing and dementia care, the Church of England Pensions Board provides security and peace of mind in retirement to those who have given their lives towards helping others in the name of Christ, including Clergy Widows and Licensed Lay Workers.

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Bishop Paul and Steve Hollinghurst are two of the local contributors to ‘Messy Church Theology’ a new book by noted theologian George Lings.

George is Director of Research for Church Army’s Research Unit, which for over a decade has been at work discerning the evolving mission of the church. The book explores the significance of Messy Church for the wider church. Currently the subject of much debate, Messy Church is nonetheless a growing and popular movement.

Ruth Pyke, Children’s work adviser for the diocese explains, “Messy Church has been a huge point of growth in making contact with people of all ages. One dad recently said to me about his Messy Church at St John’s Watford, “I can’t think of a better place to be on a Saturday morning”. The challenge is, as always, to enable people like that dad to grow deeper in faith and discipleship; to encounter a church which is welcoming and caring and which can provide him with the means to learn more about the faith, engage in meaningful worship and to be part of a living vibrant Christian community. I am confident that Messy Church can do this, and I welcome the chance to support churches in establishing Messy Churches.” Available from http://www.bronline.org.uk/9780857461711/

‘Don’t read this book unless you are willing to be challenged and unsettled about your faith and the way that it is possible for Christians to make an impact on society today...’ says Bishop.

Book on ‘Deeper meanings of Christmas’ affirms that Christmas starts with Christ


Social Entreprenr as well as parish priest, the Revd Chris Beales, in his 170 page book Practising Jesus, draws on his long experience to address many topical and pressing issues facing the world today. Youth unemployment, inter-faith relations, working in Afghanistan, engaging with Governments and politicians, businesses and community groups all come under scrutiny as Chris brings his faith and values to bear on what is happening in Britain and the world. The challenge, as he sees it, is not just to practise faithfully but to bring about real, positive, lasting change. This requires clear analysis and energetic efforts to make things happen. It requires working in collaboration with all sorts of other people and organisations. It requires stickability in the face of apathy and opposition. Practising Jesus. Rainmaker Books, ISBN 978-1-909863-00-2 £12.99 (+£2 P & P)

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Credit Unions - changing lives

The Church to help create ethical bank

The Church of England’s plans to create a bank which focuses on the ‘highest ethical standards’ is said to be progressing well. The branch network of failed bank Royal Bank of Scotland is being bought by a consortium led by the Church Commissioners and will revive the brand name, Williams and Glyns Bank. Andreas Whittam Smith, First Estates Commissioner, said: “The Church Commissioners are excited to have the opportunity to be involved in creating a U.K. challenger bank operating to the highest ethical standards and giving consumers more choice.

Church Commissioners are excited to have the opportunity to invest in an exciting opportunity for the benefit of the serving and retired clergy, bishops, cathedrals and the wide work of the Church of England throughout the country especially in areas of need and opportunity.”

The Foodbank according to a St Nicholas, Elstree’s Worship Group

A Borehamwood food bank was first suggested by the leader of Community Action Hertsmere early in 2012. Hertsmere Together - the Local Strategic Partnership commissioned a feasibility study which saw a real need. The Trussell Trust model was recommended.

Elstree & Borehamwood Christian Council was offered a grant by Hertsmere Borough Council to set it up. A member of St Teresa’s Catholic Church offered a container as a storeroom and office and after some months of negotiation, with the Planning Department, permission was given. The foodbank opened its doors last Easter at St Teresa’s. Trustees and volunteers are drawn from the local churches, but the foodbank serves the whole community and helpers and donors also come from other faiths and none.

The operation is now running smoothly. Food is provided by individual donors via collection points, several at churches and synagogues. Collection days are staged at local supermarkets. Shoppers are given a leaflet on the way in with a list of items needed to add to their trolley. These are collected on the way out. A typical haul after two days is over 1500 kg.

In the first 6 months, over 700 ‘portions’ of food have been issued, each providing 3 meals per day for 3 days – over 6 tonnes in all. It’s a balanced diet of tinned or packet food, all ‘in date’, plus basic toiletries and household items. Fresh food is sometimes also available, e.g. from the Allotment Society! Vouchers are issued to needy people or families by over 20 local professionals and organisations, e.g. Health Visitors, Citizens Advice, Job Centre and the Housing Associations.

When clients arrive, they are met bywelcomers and offered refreshments. This gives an opportunity for a chat and a listening ear. Our team do not offer advice but will signpost people to other agencies for appropriate help. Many come embarrassed and down-hearted but always leave in a much more positive frame of mind. The greatest need is due to benefit delays, out of benefits or sanctions. Some are in debt or on low wages. Some are homeless and we now have special packs for them.

Free meals are served during the school holidays to hard-pressed families. It is good to see hungry children eat whatever is put in front of them! An application for a grant for this has been made to the Lloyds Bank Community Fund. We plan to work more closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau and become an outpost for them so that together, targeted help can be given to clients.

Our good core team are developing their skills. We would love to do more but it all takes time and energy and needs lots of volunteers and donors. But we are spreading the word throughout the borough, particularly through the faith communities and Hertsmere Forum of Faiths. This is a very diverse area. It is good to see so many different people working together so generously against local poverty, which previously we hardly knew existed.”

Bishop Paul meets Credit Union client Matamsanqa Nkwane and puts his own money on the table. Pictured with Bishop Paul are Geoff Martin and Tony Bailey (CEO of Hertsavers).

Bishop Paul, was one of 41 Bishops marking International Credit Union Day on 17th October.

He did so by investing £50 of his own money to join Hertsavers Credit Union during a visit to Hertsavers’ Hatfield branch.

To mark the day, the Archbishop of Canterbury said via a video on the social network, Instagram: ‘Let’s begin to make a difference to how families can finance themselves in this country – join and support a credit union’. The Church of England is also following up the initiative on Credit Unions with two printed leaflets which can be downloaded. There is a 4-page briefing note (produced with Church Urban Fund) and an A5 information leaflet. See: http://bit.ly/17wT7xl (briefing note) http://bit.ly/16wg3a (A5 leaflet)

Bishop Paul hopes that his visit will encourage people to follow him in joining their local credit union. With eleven credit unions known in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, there is one near almost everyone.

He said: “People who are in financial difficulty can all too easily be ripped off just because they’re poor. Credit unions aim to fix that. In credit unions we have something that benefits the lender and the borrower because they really are all in it together.

“I was happy to have joined the 200 million users of credit unions worldwide by joining Hertsavers on International Credit Union Day.

“In the past we used to have a proud tradition of mutual financial institutions in this country – the building societies. Credit unions aim to recapture some of that spirit. With more active participants, I’m sure they will do just that.”

Bishop Paul wants to encourage church members to consider not just saving with them, but borrowing from them for small loans. That, he says, will help the credit unions to balance the riskier loans on their book, which could help keep more people away from semi-permanent indebtedness to payday lenders.

During the visit, Bishop Paul met Hertsavers CEO, Tony Bailey, who acquainted him more with the Credit Union Movement in general and Hertsavers in particular.

Hertsavers has over 1300 members, living or working across Hertfordshire. Mr Bailey was delighted to have welcomed Bishop Paul to his credit union.

He said: “Joining Hertsavers as a member really showed his desire to support and promote the credit union movement. Christmas is often a stressful time for our members. If you need to borrow please avoid high cost lenders and speak to your local credit union.”

While Bishop Paul was there, three clients came in. One, pictured, was Matamsanqa Nkwane. She said that she had been a member for three to four years and had become a member through Christ Church Oxtles Methodist Church. She said her family saved and borrowed for her sister’s medical education through the credit union and added, “It’s changed our lives.”

Hertsavers has a lower default rate than the banks – and an example of what they offer is given by the two very different loans they talked about – one for £50 to someone with no money for necessities, the other for £7000, to someone wanting to consolidate debts. More regular reliable savers will help them offer more loans to the first kind of client who struggles and is a bit riskier.

How can we help you?
Bishop visits safe place

Bedford Counselling Centre, which provides affordable counselling for the community, was delighted to welcome The Bishop of Bedford, the Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, for a recent inspection and visit.

Although now established on Foster Hill Road, the service began in 1981 in St Paul’s Church, part of an initiative of Bishop Robert Runcie, then Bishop of St Albans, to provide pastoral support to the community. The leading tutor and counsellor was Rev Canon Dr Peter Liddell, who took up the post at the request of Bishop Runcie.

It was the first service of its kind in the town - a safe, confidential place for people to discuss problems and anxieties. Over the next seven years, demand grew until it became clear that bigger premises were needed. After a brief spell in Elmstone Lodge, part of St Bede’s School on Bromham Road, a more suitable building became available on Foster Hill Road - the premises of Cyril Bates, known to local people as a school uniform shop. Thanks to Local Authority funding, a local authority grant and donations from local supporters, the building was bought, renovated and extended to provide several counselling rooms, a training room, staff room and administrative offices.

Although no longer part of St Paul’s, the Centre retains its charitable ethos, and aims to offer counselling to everyone in need, regardless of income. There is a funding scheme to help people who can’t afford to pay. Depression, anxiety and relationship difficulties are common reasons for seeking therapy, but counselling can also help with lack of self-confidence, bereavement, relationship break-ups, post-natal depression, eating disorders, phobias or job loss. As Bishop Richard commented, ‘Support for mental health is of increasing importance in today’s society. With services being cut, Bedford is fortunate to have a professionally-run centre like this, with its own purpose-built building in the centre of town.’

* Anyone interested in either counselling should call 01234 348077, email bedfordadmin@bfc.dcu.co.uk, or visit bedfordcounselling.co.uk.

Luton’s Faith Leaders’ Get Together at Bishop’s Lodge

“In 40 years that I have stayed in Luton, this is the first time that I have had a personal invitation from a Bishop” said Abul Hussain, President of Luton’s Bury Park Jamia Mosque.

In continuing with his efforts of establishing positive relations with Luton’s faith communities, Bishop Richard Atkinson invited nearly 35 leaders from different faiths to an informal buffet supper on Thursday 3rd October at 6.30pm at Bishop’s Lodge, Cardington. It was indeed a gathering, the first of its kind. All shared the warmth of fellowship and friendly conversations, which encouraged new relationships.

“Bishop Richard Atkinson has been working hard, ever since he arrived here from Leicester a year ago”, said David Jonathan, Co-ordinator of GRASSROOTS, a Christian ecumenical charity working in Luton with Churches and other faiths, in partnership with Luton Council of Faiths.

Emphasising the need for such gatherings and appreciating Bishop Richard’s kind gesture, Allama Oazi Abdul Aziz Chishti (Senior Imam and director of the Jamia Islamia Ghausia Mosque on Westbourne Road in Luton), said, “It is great to have such a positive leadership. We hope this first step will not be the last one, but it will start a new chapter in our journey of building good community relations.”

There were Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish & Bahai friends present at the evening. Chief Constable of the Bedfordshire Police, Colette Paul, while meeting with all said, “Luton’s dynamic and multicultural buzz is one of the reasons I opted for service in Bedfordshire Police. And tonight, having met everyone, I feel I did make the right choice.”

Change of Captain at Airport Chaplaincy

The Revd Michael Banfield (pictured above with his wife, Linda Banfield) has retired as Co-ordinating Chaplain at Luton Airport after holding the post for 18 years.

Among Michael’s many achievements have been the development and dedication of the present Airport Chapel in 2000 and the opening of a Multi-Faith Airside Prayer Room, only the second of its kind in the UK, when opened in January 2010.

Olyn Jones, Managing Director, London Luton Airport commented, “Michael has been a great asset to the Airport and I think I speak for the whole airport community when I offer my heartfelt thanks to Michael for his enthusiastic and dedicated service over his many years at London Luton.”

Reverend Michael Banfield said “It has been the most privileged and enjoyable ministry of 18 years that any Chaplain could have. Ministering to such a friendly, diverse and receptive community that is also a family and all serving the most wonderful industry of aviation.”

John Scott, CEO of Workplace Matters expressed his gratitude for the fine work that Michael has undertaken and said “The airport chaplaincy has provided a caring service for airport staff and the travelling public for many years and WM are committed to building on this success.”

He also looks forward to the future under the new Chaplain, Canon Liz Hughes. London Luton Airport is just one of the many workplaces to which WM provides chaplaincy services. Its chaplains operate within the emergency services - in police stations, among fire and ambulance teams, in manufacturing industry; (e.g Vauxhall Motors in Luton; in the town centre environment, and along the Grand Union Canal.

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Change of Captain at Airport Chaplaincy
The Bible really is coming to a screen very near you

Maker’s greatest hope is to attract “a new generation of viewers”

During December, Channel 5 television will screen the ten-hour long mini-series which was a surprise hit across the Atlantic when screened earlier this year on The History Channel. It consists of five episodes: ‘Beginnings’, ‘Homeland’, ‘Hope’, ‘Mission’, ‘Passion’.

The series drew over 13 million viewers, beating hit shows such as American Idol. The maker of the series, Mark Burnett, is reported as saying: “I think it’s the underpinning of the greatest storytelling in the history of the world. It’s very likely to be the biggest thing I’ve worked on in my life, and seen by more people than all my other shows put together.”

He added that drawing a new generation to see it was his greatest hope.

As well as drawing acclaim from church leaders, it is interesting to see the acclamation from less expected quarters.

Channel 5’s Head of Acquisitions, Marie-Claire Dunlop, said: “The show has been nothing short of a sensation, watched by millions of people across the world. To have it on Channel 5 is incredibly exciting - these are stories that can’t fail to draw you in.”

Anyone fearing that a lavishly hyped US production might be culturally inappropriate might be reassured by the news that Robert Powell noted for playing Jesus in Franco Zeffirelli’s ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, made in 1977, will narrate the British-screened version.

As we went to press, transmission dates were unavailable for the series, but will be in December.

Resources to download and buy

Resources to help groups and individuals who want to engage with the stories and themes in the Bible further are being made available through the Damaris Trust.

There is also a Facebook page and a Twitter account for those who want to engage in the online conversation that it is hoped the series will encourage.

See: www.facebook.com/thebibleuk and: Twitter: @thebibleuk
C: www.thebibleuk.org

When a Stevenage couple travelled to Dorset to visit the church where they were going to marry, they heard about Christian Aid and challenged their minister to do a ten-hour abseil to raise funds for some of the world’s poorest communities.

David Oakman, the groom, said that he would sign up to have a go even though he was not fond of heights. Bride-to-be Deborah Mansfield enrolled him anyway.

David said: “It’s a great cause, and joining in the community abseil to raise funds for people in need around the world seems like a great idea.”

The abseil became quite a pre-nuptial occasion when Deborah and Dave travelled down from Hertfordshire on the day, along with Maisie, their 11-month-old Bichon (pictured with them above) and both sets of parents.

Ecumenical Youth Camp, Anyone?

Here’s a pre-prepared, practical idea for parishes to try at Christmas, which comes via Gill Newman. Gill is married to the Bishop of Stepney, Adrian Newman. Gill has been incredibly active in raising awareness of the Syrian crisis.

Earlier this year Gill had the privilege of visiting a refugee camp in Northern Syria to help distribute aid to thousands of people who had fled there.

She says “Being there, seeing with your own eyes and meeting the people who have been affected by this appalling and brutal conflict brings home the reality of a situation as nothing else can. Since returning, I have been involved in trying to raise greater awareness of and funding for the vast humanitarian need.

That is why I am pleased to have been asked by UNICEF to help publicise a new project in churches.”

‘Sing for Syria’ is the name of a new project launched by UNICEF. UNICEF is a wonderfully simple idea: with Christmas approaching there will be lots of opportunities to sing and UNICEF is inviting people to raise their voices for the children of Syria. There are lots of different ways in which churches can get involved from organising a concert, to going carol singing or simply giving the collection from a pre-arranged Carol Service. However the money is raised, it really is desperately needed.

Shelley Pigott, UNICEF’s Head of Public Fundraising, says in an open letter: “More than 4 million Syrian children are presently in need of humanitarian aid as a result of this terrible crisis. They have lost loved ones, homes and schools and now there is a new threat to their lives - the freezing winter is fast approaching. Children are already fragile as a result of this horrific conflict. They desperately need warm clothing and blankets to protect them from the extreme cold.

Right now, our resources are at breaking point. Without extra funding we may have to scale back on some life-saving work. We need your help to reach every child who needs us.”

More information about the project and details of how to register can be found on UNICEF’s website at: http://www.unicef.org.uk/Fundraise/ fundraise-emergency-appeal/Sing-for-Syria/
Gilead trustee Phil Cana cuts the ribbon on opening day

MY GILEAD EXPERIENCE

"Unlocking People... Releasing Potential" - that’s the strapline that sums up much of what Gilead is all about. Trevor is just one of many who have found freedom and a new direction in life through Gilead’s residential rehab programme; this is his story in his own words:

I first heard of Gilead Foundation in 2011, at a time when my life was falling apart due to my alcohol addiction.

I was at war with my mother in South London and just living to drink. Help was offered from family, friends and the local Council; but I only paid these offers lip service as I just wanted to drink. Home life was falling apart and my mother was suffering beyond belief. Every time she went out she never knew what state she would find me in when she returned.

My brother started looking on the internet for a rehab that might suit me, as my family thought this was the only way forward; I found Gilead Foundations.

In April 2011, in fear and desperation, I started on the programme, which is very structured but also flexible to allow students to grow. In the first weeks I was given experience in all the jobs around the farm and in the community as a whole. I tried nearly every job on offer but in the end volunteered for maintenance as here I felt my practical skills could be the most use.

The programme is not all about work - there is also the whole therapy side. This is mainly the Genesis programme, group work and one to one support. The info on this course says: “Genesis Process relapse prevention integrates Biblical principles, proven relapse prevention techniques, cognitive therapy principles, and the latest scientific research regarding the impact of neurochemistry on human behavior to help individuals change not only behaviours, but core belief systems that cause them to relapse”.

I did not find the Genesis process easy. It was hard and I felt like giving it up on a number of occasions. But I had plenty of support around me, not only staff but also my peers who were further through the programme than me. Normally I have a tendency to try and work through issues by myself, not really wanting to admit I was struggling. But one day, chatting to new good friends, I asked a simple question and admitted that I was struggling - I totally got so much help that the issue was almost sorted there and then.

During my first 20 weeks I realised that our pastor, Ian Samuel, spoke about things that were missing in my life. This concerned me and after talking to others I decided to give my life to the Lord. At the end of a Sunday service Ian invited anyone who would like to give their life to the Lord to come to the front for prayer. Up to this point I was a back row church-goer, sitting at the back so no one could involve me. This was one big step - now I had to go forward in front of the whole community.

After a while, I was baptised, along with two fellow students, one Sunday morning in what must have been the coldest stream on Dartmoor. This was the start of the next great transformation in my life. Now I have an assurance that I am not alone in my struggle through life.

When I was nearly at the end of the programme I was seeking guidance about the future. My feeling was to stay on as a Trainee Staff Member for at least another year and after speaking to Ian he agreed that he would have me. So yet again, through prayer and talking to the relevant people, the Lord has led me forward.

I have been accepted as a Trainee Staff Member and been asked to oversee the completion of the first of three purpose-built accommodation blocks. This was a major step forward for me as the trust put in me would be the first time I would not have alcohol to fall back on. It’s a bit scary as to where God might lead me in the future. Wherever that is, after my time at Gilead my life is in a much better place now than it was a few years ago.
3rd December - Enjoy this lovely village church at its best - enjoy - vote for the best.

St Mary’s Church, Chipperfield. Christmas Tree Festival on Saturday 7th December 12noon to 3p.m, 5pm and 7pm on Saturday 8th December. Tickets £5 available on the door (accompanied children free).

St Mary’s Church, Hertford. Christmas Carol on 2nd December at 7.30 pm. Please support our Christmas Appeal for Cancer Hair Care and decorate it for their cause.

St Mary’s Church, Datchworth, SG3 6RG. Christmas Tree Festival on Saturday 7th December. Tickets £5 – £7.50, on sale or from the Box Office on 01525 222283.

St Mary’s Church, Bedford. MK40 2PF. www.standrewwsbeds.org Saturday 1 February 2014 6.30pm The King’s Men Concert In aid of Epilepsy (Epilepsy Society) £5. Tickets via the Box Office: 01234 365232.

St. Mary’s Church, Kempston. MK43 8LU. A fantastic and traditional Christmas Concert with Kempston School 4th Form Band, Kempston Wind Band, Kempston Girls Choir, Kempston Boys Choir and local Brass Band. £8, £9.50, £11 concs. £4.50 for students. £5 on the door.

St Mary’s Church, Ashwell. Ashwell Christmas Fair will be held in aid of St George of England Church, Toddington. Christmas Tree Festival on Saturday 7th December 12noon to 5pm. Tickets £4, £5, £6, £7.50.

St. Nicholas Church, Barton-le-Clay, Bedfordshire. Our 12th annual Christmas Tree Festival takes place on 30th November & 1st December, 11.30am – 6pm Saturday & Sunday 11.30am-5pm Sunday. Come and view our beautifully decorated trees in our beautiful church. Refreshments available. For details call Duncan on 01525 838034.

St. James’s Church Bushey. Christmas events: Advent Carol Service, Sunday 1st December 4pm. Carols by Candlelight with music from pupils from Purcell School, Sunday 8th December at 6.30pm. Christmas Tree Festival Thursday 12th-Saturday 15th December open 10am – 5pm (Further details: 020 8950 6844). Service of Nine Lessons & Carols, 4pm on Sunday 22nd December.

St Mary’s Church Maulden. Winter candlelit carol service in aid of Macmillan Cancer Care. £3 on the door.

St Mary’s Church, Hertford. Christmas Carol on 2nd December at 7.30 pm. Tickets £7 (E5 concessions) at the door. Children free with accompanying adult.

St. Paul’s Church, Bedford. Christmas Tree Festival runs from 4th – 8th December. £10 per person, with a discount for a group of 6. Refreshments will be available.

St. Paul’s Church, Chipperfield. Service of Lessons and Carols with choir and orchestra, Monday 23rd December at 7.30pm.

St Mary’s Church Walkern, Christmas Tree Festival on Friday 6th December (7-9pm) with Pate & Plonk, Saturday 7th December (7-9pm). Light refreshments all day.

Courses & Drama

Borehamwood Baptist Church, Furzehill, WD6 2DF. Quorum Singers of St Albans are putting on a ‘Nearly Christmas’ Concert on November 30th at 7.30 pm. It includes James Whitbourn’s A Christmas Carol, which the traditional movements of the Mass are set to the tunes of Christmas carols. Admission free, donations requested for Borehamwood foodbank. Contact Hugh (07973 300480) for more information.

St Mary the Virgin & All Saints Potters Bar. Lunchtime recitals starting 12.30pm and lasting 40 minutes. Light lunches available before and after on 23rd December - Asling Maguire - Oboe.

St Andrews Church, Biggleswade. Announcing an Advent Concert on Saturday 7th December at 7.30pm to be presented by St Augustine’s Chamber Choir Cambridge, Conductor Philip Mead & Organist Alexander Knight. Supporting Biggleswade Bells Appeal.

St Mary’s Church, Luton. Luton Choral Society presents Schubert Mass in G, Finzi 7th, 10am – 4.30pm. Admission: adults £6, children £3.50. Tickets via the Box Office: 01582 547474 or online www.lutonchoirsociety.org.uk.

St. Leonard’s Church Rushden. Christmas Concert by Village Voices on Saturday 7th December at 7.30pm. Tickets £5 available on the door and include seasonal interval refreshments.

St. John’s Church SG4 7PB. Christmas Concert on Saturday 7th December at 7pm given by the Orpheus Choir of North Hertfordshire, conductor Anne-Marie Hetherington. The programme includes North Hertfordshire, conductor Anne-Marie Concert on 23rd & 24th December by The Friends of St Helen’s Church, Whittlestead. The lovely Ephiphany-tide one-act opera ‘Amahl and the Night Visitors’ by Gian Carlo Menotti is a community project hosted by The Friends of St Helen’s Church, Whittlestead. Performances making full use of the beautiful Grade I listed church at 7.30 pm on 9th and 10th January, 5pm and 7pm on Saturday 11th January. Tickets from j.golesworthy@virginmedia.com. 01582 627209.

St. Mary’s Eaton Bray, New Year Concert. 23rd December. Ticket £5 available on the door.

St. Mary’s Church, Bedford. MK40 2PF. www.standrewwsbeds.org Saturday 1 February 2014 6.30pm The King’s Men Concert in aid of Epilepsy Society £5. Tickets via the Box Office: 01234 365232.

St. Andrew’s Church, Bedford. MK40 2PF. www.standrewwsbeds.org Saturday 1 February 2014 6.30pm The King’s Men Concert in aid of Epilepsy Society £5. Tickets via the Box Office: 01234 365232.
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Christmas is coming,  
As if we didn't know,  
So apart from all the turkey,  
And hopes that it'll snow,  
We may have time to wonder,  
And ponder 'what's it mean?'  
It's more than trees and presents,  
It's a gift, to you, and me.

Those few anonymously penned lines could get us thinking of why we do the whole Christmas thing anyway, and a quick glance at the content of some of the adverts in this Christmas feature may help to take us a few steps further. As well as the joys of family life, gathering together to worship and celebrate the birth of our Saviour, Christmas can be a time to think of others. In fact, it’s the one season of the year when just about every one of us seems to be most likely to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

There’s still time, in all the festive rush to get pressies and food and party supplies, to get onto the internet and take a quick trip through a search engine following the words Christmas Charity Giving. It could be the start of a journey that leads us to helping out someone we never even knew needed our help; or finding out just what Christmas is like for some people with perhaps more challenges than ourselves.

Friends, family, parties and fun times together to feast and make merry - all good things which surely bring a smile to the face of our Saviour as He sees his children enjoy His goodness - just a few minutes thought could also make all the difference for some of His other ‘kids’ who are less fortunate and in need of some cheer. Merry Christmas!
St Mary's Church Baldock has become an ‘incLOOsiive’ church with the opening of a new disabled toilet. The toilet was officially opened at the end of September by John Richards from SHINE – the charity that supports those with spina bifida and hydrocephalus. It’s not a ‘bog-standard’ version but one large enough to include an adult-sized changing table (which can be used for baby-changing too).

Years of planning, fundraising and overcoming numerous frustrations have paid off with an extension that fits beautifully with the original building. Katrina Nice, chair of incLOOsiion said: “incLOOsiion is not about prettifying a church hall, or grudgingly fulfilling our duty to comply with current laws, but about the Church reaching out to elderly and disabled people who just want the opportunity to be active members of society as much as able-bodied people, and this toilet will hopefully be one way of achieving that.”

The second part of incLOOsiion will be to install lift access to the coffee bar in the hall as soon as funds allow. Last year’s Mission Action Plan review demonstrated how vital toilet facilities are to churches wishing to be more welcoming, by the number of plans there were to upgrade facilities.

Summer is often too late to sow, with any hope of a good harvest, but St Mary’s Church, Potton have proved that wrong with the right crop: money.

Their Rector, the Revd Gill Smith, lent sums of £10 to members of the church and invited them to raise more funds from it, sowing according to the Parable of the Talents. Altogether, she gave out £400 - and back came £2812, with more to come after Christmas. (I make that 7x, somewhere between the 5x and 10x return from the good sowers in the parable, suggesting that people vary according to the amount of risk they are prepared to take! Ed).

When it came to Harvest Festival, the contributions were gathered in, along with the donation of food items for Potton Vineyard Church Storebox scheme - a foodbank supported by St Mary’s.

As if that wasn’t enough excitement for one harvest, there was also a baptism, which was a harvest of another kind and the service was followed by a well attended traditional Sunday Roast Lunch. The profits from that are going to the Bishop’s Harvest Appeal, helping Ethiopian Beekeepers to improve on their honey production. More on St Mary’s Church website, www.pottonparishchurch.org.uk.

The church was beautifully decorated, thanks to Bea and Mike Francis-Macrae and their team of helpers and members of the uniformed youth organisations in Potton. The produce was given by the Country Store at Bedfordshire Growers and Woodview Farm Shop at Gamlingay.

The Bishop’s Harvest Appeal can be found at www.harvestappeal.org.

Clergy Appointments

Grace Sentamu Baverstock, presently Assistant Curate at St Luke’s Church, Watford is to become Vicar of St Luke’s Church Leagrave.

Sonya Brown, presently Assistant Curate at St Philip’s Church in Leicester is to become Priest-in-Charge at All Saints Church, Queen’s Park, Bedford.

Audrey Couper, previously Curate (SSM) in Digswell Team Ministry has been licensed as a Public Preacher in Luton Deanery.

Edward (Eddie) Green, presently Team Vicar in the Cherwell Valley, Oxford Diocese, is to become Vicar of All Saints Leavesden.

Clergy Retirements

Jan Brookshaw, presently Rector of the Stodden Churches is to retire to Easton in Winchester Diocese.

Dr Judith Cope, Associate Priest (SSM) in the benefice of Little Berkhamsted and Bayford, Essendon & Ponsbourne, has retired.

Obituaries

David Waterston, a member of Diocesan Synod for many years, a member of the Vacancy in See Committee and of various other diocesan bodies has died.

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