

SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2024

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THE MAGAZINE OF SOUTH ESSEX METHODIST CIRCUIT

Harvest & Creation Edition



**Sharing the 'good news' that is happening
across the circuit and in our local communities.**

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A WORD FROM SUPER'S DESK...

Dear All,

All around us are signs of harvest. As trees and shrubs give ripe fruit and crops and flowers produce a last hurrah of vibrant colour all of these signs of creation and reminders of Creation-tide which we currently celebrate in the Church calendar.

I was at a conference the other day and found my attention diverted from the ponderous topics under discussion to a particularly magnificent crop of delicious looking golden-red apples on the trees outside. At the first opportunity I got I sped to the apple trees to see what I could forage from the windfall and was quite disappointed that on closer inspection it turned out most of them were diseased in some way.

But as I reflected on this, I was grateful to be reminded that although the fruit did not serve my purpose they could still perfectly serve other equally good purposes. It was still a good provision of food for the birds and other small mammals, like hedgehogs and squirrels; still good to be used as mulch that is made into feed for livestock and eventually once carefully decomposed still good as nutrients which would return to the soil to help kickstart the whole cyclical pattern of the natural world. A rather fascinating sequence.

As people who believe in the God of creation, the God who pronounces all that S/He has made to be 'Good'; it is a critical part of our faith in practice to care for that creation and collaborate fully with it. To move away from seeing nature primarily as something that serves our needs or exists to be exploited by us to the appreciation of its far greater benefits.

Appreciating the relationship of co-dependency between humans and the natural world and the need for each other in order for life to carry on. And failure to maintain that good relationship leads to the painful reality of climate emergency, deforestation, pollution and other evils that now confronts us.

This reminded me of 'Ubuntu', the African wisdom practice which extols the virtue of mutual relationships as the essential way to promote a thriving, positive existence. It applies as much to maintaining human communities where no one is an island in him or herself, but acknowledges the need of the other. A concept of *'I am because you are'*, as it does to maintaining our relationship with the natural world so it can exist for future generations.

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It might sound a daunting undertaking to think that one person's actions can effectively impact the tide of global ecological emergency and yet there is truth in that 'small drops of water make a mighty ocean'; we would be wrong to disdain the effect small deeds and even organized pressure of world leaders consistently applied can achieve.

I'm delighted that as a Circuit we're beginning to actively engage with the Eco-church movement. This has been in operation for many years but in the light of the Methodist Church's aspirational target of becoming a net zero carbon emissions church by 2030 has encouraged many of our churches to get involved and become more ecologically and environmentally active. Many have signed up on the Eco-church mission. If you haven't already, then please head to the A Rocha website for more information (<https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/>). This is a really positive move that we expect to have great impact.

May we all become more committed in noticing God all around us and in the care we give each other and His creation.

*He only is the maker of all things near and far;
he paints the wayside flower, he lights the evening star;
the winds and waves obey him, by him the birds are fed;
much more to us. His children he gives our daily bread.
All good things around us are sent from heaven above;
then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.
(STF 130)*

Prayer

Sovereign Lord, In the beginning you tasked us to take care of the earth and all that lives in it, to work with you in your beautiful, fragile creation. We grow more than enough food, raise more than enough animals, yet too many children's stomachs are empty at night and as they go to school in the morning. Fields are turned to dust that blows away, or are swept away by floods or destroyed by storms to which we give quirky names. Challenge us, your Church, your people, to proclaim you as Sustainer of your beautiful, fragile creation. Amen.

Yours in Christ,
Revd Felicity

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ST PAUL'S HARVEST CELEBRATION



St Paul's Church Basildon enjoyed a wonderful Harvest celebration on the 28th and 29th September. On Saturday we held a coffee morning and flower and vegetable festival. The church looked stunning with lots of people getting creative for our harvest themed displays, that were placed around the church. There are a team of people who regularly work their socks off to hold coffee mornings at Church and there were lots of goodies to eat and interesting things to buy.

We raised funds for the Methodist Charity 'All We Can' for whom we are a Partner Church and the produce we brought went to the 'Helping Hands food bank' next door at the community centre.



Our Sunday service was led by Holly Wilkinson who (apart from growing up in St Paul's) is now a Managing Trustee of All We Can. Holly brought us insight into the charity's policy of working alongside existing projects in other countries and we heard the personal testimonies of those working in Liberia with All We Can. After the service we sat down to a ploughman's lunch, followed by the cake from Saturday's Coffee Morning. There was the usual pre-lunch panic about do we have enough and as usual there was an excess of food – namely cheese and yes, cake!

It was lovely to see so many people at the service and staying for lunch.



Apologies to those not in the photo because they were in the kitchen preparing lunch. This was a particularly special time for St Paul's as the Basildon Churches have been praying about their future. St Paul's carries on with a sense of rebirth as we are made aware of God's plentiful gifts to us as a Church.

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Harvest Prayer

God of the harvest, giver of grain and good gifts
Everything we have comes from you.
Lord of promise and plenty, you provide all that we need,
Your promise never fails.

God of the harvest we dance with the corn and sing with the meadows.
Bringing you gladly the first fruits of our worship.

We praise you Jesus, the bread of heaven.

For his sake through the Spirit who pours out gifts from the fountain of God's grace.

We gather to adore the harvest Lord.

Amen.



Suzanne Stubbs

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THE VISIT OF THE PRESIDENT OF CONFERENCE AND SERVICE OF ADMISSION OF A NEW LOCAL PREACHER



At a special Circuit service at Trinity on 13 October, we welcomed the visit of the President of conference, Revd Canon Helen Cameron, and the admission of Colleen Weedon as a new local preacher. The service was led by the Revd Felicity Al-Hassan and Revd Dr David Chapman, Chair of the District, led the prayers of intercession. Many people came from around the circuit to celebrate these two events, to worship together and enjoy fellowship. The last time a President of Conference had visited the circuit was 32 years ago!

The Revd Canon Helen Cameron was elected and inducted as President at Conference in June 2024, and she is busy visiting many Districts and Circuits. Revd Helen also is the Moderator of the Free Churches in Britain and President of Churches Together in England. She also read the prayers at the late Queen's funeral and took part in the Coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla. She has been involved with the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group. She is passionate about churches listening to the experience of those in poverty and those in marginalised communities. Her message is that "we need to listen so that all can flourish".

Revd Helen began by talking about her experiences travelling on trains and the need to listen and look out for announcements. She reminded us that Isaiah speaks of a messenger bringing the message of "good news", (Isaiah 52:7-12). The messenger announces peace, salvation and that "Your God reigns". Those with messages to give



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must speak clearly, be heard and, if necessary, repeat the message a number of times so “we all get it”!

Revd Helen recalled memories of her childhood in a fishing community as she spoke about the Gospel reading (Luke 5:1-6). She remembered the colourful fishing boats coming into shore and the fish being sold straight from the boats. She reminded us that listening, stillness and attentiveness were key to hearing God’s voice. Shortly after this reading Simon, James and John take up Jesus’ calling to “follow him”. We too must listen for his calling on our lives.

Two boats were needed to land the catch because it was so abundant. A reminder that we are called to work together and not in isolation. Together, we are all called to be partners in building the kingdom of God (Ephesians 4:11-16).

The “Admission of Colleen Weedon as a Local Preacher”.

Revd Felicity began this part of the service by reminding us that the role of lay people in ministry has been part of Methodism from the early days. She then used set questions which asked the candidate about their call to preach and understanding of the commitments which they promise to keep. Colleen made a series of promises – “With God’s help, I will”.

All Local Preachers were able to renew their vows.



“Receive this Bible as a sign of your authority to preach the Gospel and lead God’s people in worship and praise”.



Revd Felicity gave Colleen her Bible and asked the congregation to support her in her ministry.

On admission Local Preachers are also presented with a letter signed by the President and Vice-President of Conference. It was a special time as Revd Helen was able to read her letter to Colleen and remind her that “she is now one of Mr Wesley’s preachers”.

Farewell....

As the circuit welcomed a new local preacher, we also said farewell to Mark Smith from Western Road, Billericay. Revd Felicity thanked him for well over 20 years of service as a Local Preacher as well as his work with young people at Western Road. The circuit wishes him well for the future.

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The service was followed by much chatting over afternoon tea. Revds Helen, Revd, David Chapman and Felicity spent time talking to people over refreshments. It was good to catch up with friends and be able to congratulate Colleen. Thanks to Steve and Clare Nice as well as members of Trinity for a delicious tea!

If you were unable to come to the service it is available on YouTube www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYVGDeOdQp8 .Or search YouTube, Trinity Methodist Basildon 13 October.

Anna Williams

‘JOURNEY’ TO BECOME A WORSHIP LEADER

Autumn is here! Leaves are falling! Days are shorter! Celebrities on “Strictly” are about to beginning of their ‘journeys’! Hopefully, by the time you read this, I will have completed my ‘journey’ to become a Worship Leader!

I have learnt so much on this course. I actually enjoyed the coursework, even though it has been nearly thirty years since I was involved in serious studying. I feel, and hope others who have been part of my ‘journey’ feel, that my preparing and delivering services has improved. I have not been afraid to make changes and try out different approaches to services, for example Cafe church services lasting an hour and a half and “Bring and Share” services.

In my church I have introduced a Prayer tree and Prayer stations. I used a skill, which has lain dormant for many years. Before the emergence of The National Curriculum displays around the classroom were massively important. Displays had to have backing paper, a frame and everything had to be triple mounted - I drew the line at ‘triple mounting’, I didn’t want to spend all night, as well as all day, making my prayer stations!

Especially, during the summer months, with lower numbers, the services I have led have become more like Bible Studies or Fellowship meetings enabling everyone to take part, if they want to. I could really feel the Holy Spirit guiding me through the unexpected happenings. With God’s help my confidence and faith have been increased.

I would say my greatest development has been in the area of music and my own performing skills. I have been a pianist and an accompanist in many churches since the age of 14 but I hadn’t given a lot of thought to how valuable a resource the hymns can be in a service. In my introduction of a hymn I like to explain my choice,

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and illustrate how they shed more light on that part of the service. I also realise that singing together is an exciting and edifying experience, it binds us together in worship.

I have made much more use of recorded music during services. My service on 'Good Shepherd Sunday' in April included a recording of Howard Goodall's interpretation of Psalm 23 - the theme from "The Vicar of Dibley - rather than reading the Psalm or singing one of the many hymns based on this psalm. It was a soothing, thought provoking and contemplative experience. My mentor, Clare Nice, felt, for her, this was the most effective part of the service! I also now use themed music as I ask the congregation to find information from a prayer station or the Bible. For example I played recordings of "Sheep may safely graze" by J S Bach and Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony" as the congregation ventured around the "Good Shepherd" display.

I hadn't composed, or arranged any music for years, and my involvement with school and choirs had ended with COVID. My ante penultimate assignment was to produce an item for a service dealing with grief. I chose to produce a song/hymn for a Maundy Thursday service in my own church. It was a lament describing what Jesus may have felt just before his arrest, trial and death on the Cross. It was based on Psalm 116, of which He would have been familiar. I also performed it at a Bible study and a LPWL Study session, after which I received much appreciation. (The CD will be available soon!)

Above all, I have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit more and more, both in the preparation and delivery of worship, performing and encounters in the outside world to bear witness to friends of a different faith.

My journey to become a Worship Leader may have ended, but my journey, spreading the Word of God, continues. In the words of the famous hymn, it is "One more step along the World I go!".

My future is encapsulated in a hymn I often played and sang as a teenager - "I know who holds The Future" by Smith and Clarke [Song Solutions Daybreak]

I do not know what lies ahead,
The way I cannot see;
Yet One stands near to be my guide;
He'll show the way to me.
I know who holds the future,
And He'll guide me with His hand.
With God things don't just happen;
Everything by Him is planned.

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So as I face tomorrow
With its problems large and small,
I'll trust the God of Miracles,
Give to Him my all.

Cathy Beckwith

FAREWELL TO TERRY SANGER

At the September LPWL (Local Preacher and Worship Leader) meeting we said farewell to Terry Sanger as the LPWL Secretary for the South Essex circuit. The meeting recognised the many years of service that Terry Sanger has given in her role as the Secretary. She started in the post in 2006 so few people could recall her predecessor who on “hand over” gave her a single sheet of paper! Terry has left me much better prepared to take on the role of Secretary having passed over documents for the last two years and placed the older paperwork into “archive materials”. I’m sure there will be times when I draw on her experience and knowledge.

Terry has contributed to her role as secretary through her knowledge and understanding of preaching, support of those in training and attending tutorials when available as well as many ongoing learning opportunities. Terry has preached at churches throughout the circuit and is continuing to be a Local Preacher and offer dates to the plan.

**Anna Williams,
LPWL Secretary to the South Essex Circuit**

A MUSICIAN’S MOAN

I guess we have all been in a service where the tech has failed but I have to hand it to the Tech teams that they try their very best to ensure that worship is at its best in our churches – so this is definitely not a moan about them!

Where I think things are not at their very best is in the choice of hymns from YouTube – other apps may be available. So I am offering some advice – as a singer and a life-long Methodist – on ways to improve worship when there is no musician available.

John Wesley said that we should “Sing lustily and with conviction. Everyone should join in.” Methodists are known for their singing but we need to be careful we don’t

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lose the ability to sing well, so here are a few suggestions to help improve the music side of worship, when we have to rely on hymns from the internet.

1. Try to choose hymns that are at the right pitch (not too high/not too low) for all to sing. Sometimes if a man is singing a solo it will be pitched for a tenor, which makes it very difficult for women to sing with – they have to sing either an octave lower or an octave higher than is comfortable.
2. It is probably not a good idea to choose a cathedral choir singing on their own, unless you have checked it is sung in a straightforward way. Too often a cathedral choir will want to throw in a verse sung by a soloist - in which case the volume level drops and the congregation is left struggling to hear the lead. Or sometimes you will get a descant which hides the tune and again a congregation can't hear the lead.
3. Equally sometimes solo singers will sing very slowly or in a way not conducive to congregational singing. Ask yourself whether you can sing easily to this track.
4. Make sure the words displayed are easily readable by the congregation. The colour of the font should not be too similar to the background. The background should not detract from the words. A moving background behind words is particularly difficult for those whose sight isn't 20/20. Black on white is not necessarily the best combination - especially for those with dyslexia. Yellow on blue is apparently the easiest to read, though maybe not for everyone. Make sure the font is large enough to read at a distance.
5. Ensure that when words need to move on - between verses for example - they move slightly ahead of time. The congregation needs to see them slightly before they sing them. I recently experienced a hymn where every first word of the verse was unsingable because it appeared too late.
6. Check the number of verses is the same as the music being played. This might happen if you use YouTube for the music but relied on the hymnbook for words. And if you are typing up words check they are spelt correctly and have capital letters if needed – i.e. for Lord.
7. It is probably a good idea to try to sing along to the hymn beforehand to check for any problems.

I think YouTube is great for using music in worship when you want to be reflective or use an unknown hymn/song to develop a theme. It is not great when used to lead hymn singing in the Methodist tradition. If you want a congregation to sing well, you have to have a good backing track. I am a singer and I find it difficult to sing in the

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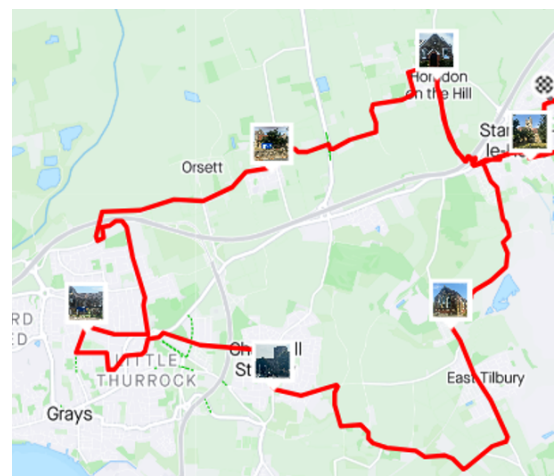
way I would like to, when trying to follow a YouTube song. I find myself singing at reduced volume and not really praising God!

Maybe some discussion is needed on this. Maybe we need to offer help to those who choose hymns from the internet. Perhaps others could share their experiences of hymn singing without a musician.

Clare Nice – Trinity

CYCLE OF FAITH

On the 21st September an intrepid group of cyclists set out from St Margaret's Church in Stanford-le-Hope. Their aims, to cycle around the Methodist Churches in Thurrock, to pray for their members and communities, and appreciate the wonder of God in creation. As someone who has ridden a bike only once in the last 3 years, I set out with a certain amount of trepidation. But, with the encouragement of my fellow riders, and the patience of Jeff (the organiser and most experienced cyclist of the group who had the task of guiding the rest of us



amateurs along the route) I soon found myself getting into the rhythm of it, enjoying riding down Thurrock lanes that I hadn't had the opportunity to explore before, and appreciating the opportunity to spend my Saturday outside in the sunshine. It was not a speedy ride, we set out at 11am arrived back in Stanford-le-Hope around 2:30pm, covering approximately 18miles with 5 stops, but the relaxed pace allowed for greater appreciation of the scenery and more time to pray.

The standout moments for me were:

- Befriending a grasshopper in Grays Methodist Church car park.
- Gatecrashing the Grays Thurrock Team Ministry away day at St Giles and All Saints Anglican Church in Orsett and joining them for lunch. (Thank you Rev Kate and team for the invitation and wonderful hospitality!)
- The feeling of joy and freedom when cycling downhill.
- The opportunity to spend time in prayer together outside of our church buildings.

It was a fantastic reminder that we are often capable of so much more than we think and that when we step out in faith it is then that we discover that God has gone before us preparing the way.

Revd Fiona Smith

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Linford

Are you stuck with ideas of what to do this half term?
Why not bring them to Linford Methodist Church on
Tuesday, October 29th!

SAINTS AND SUPERHEROES YIPPEE CLUB 2 - 4 pm

All ages of children are welcome, accompanied by an adult
Please come dressed as a Superhero,
or a Saint - there will be prizes!
Activities include biscuit decorating, making masks
and other arty-crafty activities, plus live music!
Refreshments

No charge but donations welcome!
Please contact Cathy BECKWITH on 07581280276 for more details

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MOSAICS, MINDFULNESS AND PRAYERFULNESS

I'd like to think that I was fairly consistent (you be the judge of that), I do vary but one great interest that has been consistent is mosaics. You need perseverance, thinking long term but also 'living in the moment', focussing on what you're doing there and then for a fixed period of time, and being contented with that - even if the end result seems far, far away. That 'living in the moment', rather than being caught up in "what if this happens?" or "what if that goes wrong?" is a key aspect of 'mindfulness'. It's also a way of living with and managing anxiety, one of many things that I battle with constantly since my brain injury. You might also think of similarities with prayer and prayerfulness - something I've only recognised recently with the process of making a mosaic.

Even as I sit in a noisy studio with others, and there's noise, conversations and real life going on around me, I'm totally focussed on the task in front of me - cutting or silvering glass, shaping tiles, attaching the pieces, grouting, working to the design. It's absorbing - like prayer. It's the focus of the moment - like prayer. But real life and noise, and people, and voices and hustle and bustle still go on around you - like prayer.

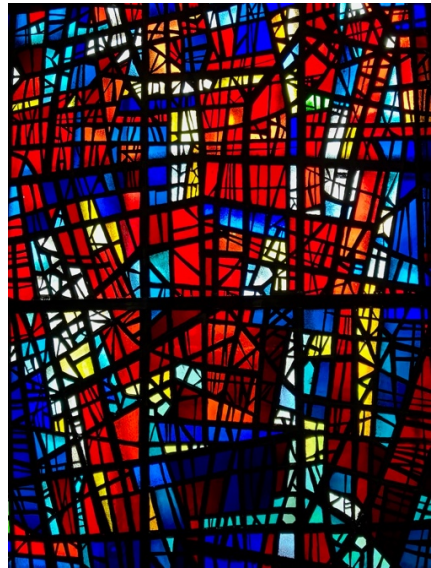


I do not find it easy. Sometimes it works, sometimes it most definitely doesn't, but there's something going on there. A thing I've noticed is that the pieces that I design or work on are inspired by an experience, or where I've been, or someone I've spent time with - I don't just 'think them up'. The other aspect that's there is that they are all somehow spiritual - not necessarily religious or Christian - but most definitely spiritual, about what it is to be human and part of my searching the heart. Let me

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take you through an example – two pieces I've completed (with a 3rd 'on the go') and the single inspiration for them.

In June 2023 Ashley and I were very fortunate to be in Iceland staying in Reykjavik with our friends John and Ásrún. John and I have been friends since school. I was his best man, and he was mine. Among the many, many amazing places we went to was Skálholt cathedral in Bláskógabyggð, out in the wilds, in the middle of absolutely nowhere.



It was a beautiful, plain, building that had great treasures within. As well as a striking mosaic of Jesus, an altarpiece taking up the entire end wall of the sanctuary, the Cathedral was blessed with simply astounding modern stained glass windows. Designed by Icelandic artist Gerdur Helgadóttir, the 25 windows refer to Skálholt's 900-year history as a centre of Christianity. We sat in that deeply spiritual and creative space for over 2 hours, taking it in. I knew that these windows would inspire me.

So, where to begin? The first piece I decided on was a mirror, about 300mm diameter inspired by, but not a copy of, the Icelandic windows. I elected to work with cut glass (each piece had to be silvered on the back), pearlescent tiles and highlight beads. To echo the stained glass, quite early on I decided to go with black grout (which also makes the colours 'jump out') and a design with thin and thick boundaries to mimic leading and beading. The design is the first and often the hardest step. What do I want to achieve and why? Then selecting colours and cutting the glass and tiles. I don't find any of these stages easy, and with my brain injury am often overwhelmed by choice, have some really scary 'rabbit in the headlight' moments and often sit immobile unable to do anything for ages – but the tutor artist knows this, and with gentle encouragement, let's me work through it and

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do what I can, when I can. Below are some photos of work in progress and the finished article.



That act of patiently building up the piece, not giving up, and each week focussing on what I was doing with my mind and hands, and not being over ambitious, was an exercise in mindfulness and prayerfulness. It didn't always feel that way at the time, there were many distractions and low - as well as high - points, but now I realise that it was. To give you an idea of timescale, I started the mirror in September and completed it in March 2024, so it's not a quick process. That's been the case across the 6 other major larger works I've done. My brain makes me a slow worker and thinker with limited reserves of energy.

I think that it was with the second Iceland-inspired piece that I realised the creative process was an unexpected and, for a while, unnoticed experience of mindfulness and prayerfulness, I wanted to create a glass hurricane lamp candle holder (it's about 20cm high and 13cm across). This was my first experience of glass-on-glass with a backlight from the interior. With the mirror, I took my lead from the random shapes and colours of the original windows, With the hurricane lamp, I wanted to resonate the colour palette, but to take my shapes from the vertical form of many stained glass windows that we see in England, So I cut my glass pieces using a template I'd drawn for fairly consistent width (I didn't want perfect rectangles or squares each time), but varying lengths. I had drawn out the colour progression on a separate sheet, and using a piece of graphpaper rolled up inside the glass lamp as a guide, began to place and seal the pieces one panel at a time. This was a smaller and more regular piece and 3 months later (a record for me), the black grouting made it come alive and I had a finished piece of work that was as I imagined:

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I'll be starting the 3rd and final piece (some glass garden/pot stakes) after the summer. I can't tell what it will be exactly or how it'll turn out. I know I'll have times of exasperation and brain freeze. But I will also have times of total focus, of living in the moment, of mindfulness and prayerfulness, of creating something with my own hands. I hope that you too may experience these times yourself – through the arts, in the garden, knitting, embroidery, preparing lovely food, reading, singing, listening to music, times devoted to prayer or silence, walking – the list goes on, and only you will know which one is right for you. Seek it out, if you don't already know what it is. I THINK that I have found mine, Mosaics, mindfulness and prayerfulness, but not necessarily in that order. I can only hope (and pray) that I will be consistent.

Revd Alan Boyd
Supernumerary Minister
Nottingham North-East Circuit

PRAYER STATION - LINFORD

This is the Prayer Station I built up during July and August as we learnt more about David and Solomon. Most of the resources came from 'Roots'. I also used some material from the 'Good Shepherd' service in April, featuring Psalm 23.

Cathy Beckwith



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‘THIN PLACES’ A Brief Sabbatical Report April – July 2024

If ever a sabbatical was needed, it is this one! The COVID-19 pandemic not only brought the world to a standstill but also disrupted all our lives and demanded new ways of working and interactions with one another. Pastoral ministry through this period brought its own layers of new complexities and exhaustion. During this period, I changed appointments after five years of my initial appointment in Nottingham North-East to a teaching post at Cliff College, in Derbyshire. And then, at the end of the pandemic to this current appointment here in the South Essex Circuit. It has been, as we say, ‘full-on’ and ‘non-stop’. For many in full-time Circuit ministry, there was hardly any respite from the transition from the pandemic to the post-pandemic world, ministry carried on regardless! So, a gift of Sabbatical for a long fruitful break, to catch breath, to reflect, and spend quality and interrupted time with family was just what was needed.

WHAT WAS THE SABBATICAL ABOUT?

The danger of any sabbatical is that we get caught up in the ‘protestant work ethic’ – or, more particularly, the ‘Methodist work ethic’ - make it all very ‘worthy’, try to generate work, fill the days, achieve results and produce ‘things’ from it. W. H. Vanstone wrote the book, *The Stature of Waiting* as a meditation on retirement from priestly ministry. But the book could just as easily be for Sabbatical and the line that has stuck with me is this one. ‘We set great store by activity and busy-ness. We want to be ‘in control’. We value what we ‘do’ more than who we are. So when we become ill, or retire from work, or suffer an enforced period of inactivity, our self-esteem is threatened. We evade, repudiate or resent experience of passivity, of waiting . . . The times of passivity and ‘passion’, when we have things done to us instead of doing things, the times when we simply wait, are as important as the times of action and taking charge’. Thankfully, Sabbatical is actually meant to create a bit of space in the unending headlong rush of ministry. It is a gift of ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’, a prayerful and reflective space.



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I called my Sabbatical 'THIN PLACES' – a double-edge phrase I picked up from Elaine A. Heath and Larry Diggins' book, *Missional, Monastic, Mainline*. On the one hand, an Irish expression, describing a place (or experience) where the gap between heaven and earth is 'thin' ('a place where heaven and earth are uniquely close'); on the other hand, it can also mean an experience where God is 'thin on the ground'. Pastoral ministry during the pandemic and since the pandemic have at times felt like 'thin places', one where God is 'thin on the ground' . . . where heaven and earth seemingly feel distant from each other and stubbornly refuses to conjoin.

WHAT DID I DO?

By using the notion of 'thin places' (or spaces) in a focused and reflective way through intentional communities of both traditional and contemporary monastic rhythms of prayer, silence, scripture and hospitality, the intention was that I would be doing at least one significant thing in each of the 3 months of the Sabbatical:

- APRIL:** Try to renew myself and (re)connect with family
- MAY:** Reflection on my vocation
- JUNE/JULY:** Think seriously about the future of my ministry

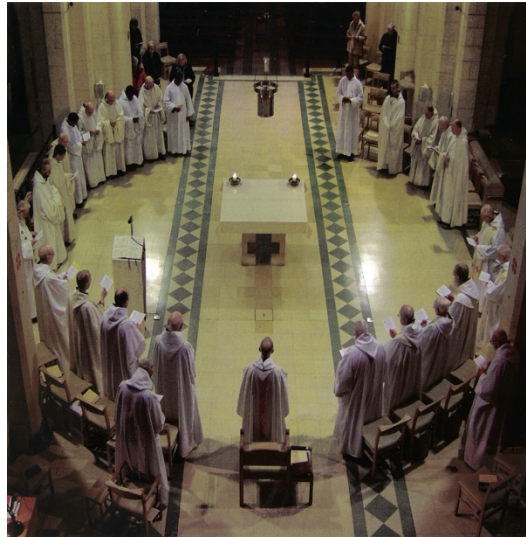
WHAT CAME OUT OF IT?

After a frantic few months in Circuit, especially with all the Easter events and activities, with everything right 'up to the wire', the sabbatical began on Tuesday, 9th April. You don't know how fatigued you are until you stop! Thankfully, I had already planned that the first month of the Sabbatical would be free from travel and activity, a month to rest and be with the family and catch up on reading. I was able to spend quality time with the family, visit our wider families, did things we've not been able to do for a long time (like regular visits to theatres, museums, entertainment etc.). I also discovered the pleasure of long-distance running. This really came out of the blue. One morning, after ploughing through a large chunk of a very difficult book on the origins of Western Christian mysticism (the first volume of Bernard McGinn's *The Foundations of Christian Mysticism*), I certainly decided that I would go for a run to clear my head. And I have not stopped since; running has become a weekly routine and one of the ways I now attune and connect with God and nature.

Those few weeks with family and resting cleared my head and helped me relax a fair bit before my semi-guided retreat at Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in rural Leicestershire. The Abbey is home to several dozen Trappist monks. The Trappists are famous for following some of the oldest rules practised by Christian monks, and especially for taking a lifetime vow of silence, obedience, poverty, conversion and stability (i.e. commitment to a place). These monks have given the rest of their lives

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to prayer and reflection. In order to accomplish that, they strive for silence, speaking only when necessary as they go about their daily tasks in the Abbey's enclosure. The monks aspire to become the living embodiment of prayer without ceasing. Unimportant conversations interrupt contemplative prayer, so the monks spend their day avoiding small talk so as to centre on prayer. If something doesn't absolutely need to be said, they don't say it.



Lauds and Chapter at Mount St Bernard

It was that very thing that had drawn me to this particular Abbey. This is one of the few places for me, where heaven and earth meet. I first visited Mount Saint Bernard Abbey during my final year of ministerial training with a handful of master's students studying the life of Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. I found it helpful and challenging. In guiding, the monks show grace but no mercy ... getting right to the nub of things. During my stay, I was assigned a monk, Fr Laurance Ezeilo, a Nigerian by origin, who has been in the Abbey since the middle of 1970s. Fr Laurance referred to their Liturgy of the Hours (also called the Divine Office) as 'the sanctification of time'. He said that there is time in a day for prayer, for work, study, and play. 'Liturgical time', he said, 'is essentially poetic time, oriented toward process rather than productivity, willing to wait attentively in stillness rather than always pushing "to get the job done'. The only way to understand this is to experience the liturgies daily and take part in it. And that is what I did. I attended the daily prayers beginning with Vigils (at 3.30 am), Lauds and chapter (7:30 am), Eucharist and Terce (8:00 am), Sext (12:15 pm), Noon (2:15 pm), Vespers (5:30 pm) and Compline (7:30 pm).



I found that gradually my perspective on time changed. Like the monks, I came to value time for what it truly is, a gift from God to be used well in the service of prayer. It is settling into the monastic pattern of worship and prayer that sets the scene and opens up the heart, mind and soul. Then, more often than not, it's the regular, consistent reading and chanting of the Psalms

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where the real effect takes place, and the real work happens. It helped me reflect on many things in my life and my ministry. Receiving the Eucharist daily brought home the importance of Eucharistic ministry (feeding and being fed) with many questions to ponder – where do I touch and make contact with the Spiritual – what discipleship really means ... and much more. I was above all challenged to offer and live in ‘THE SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENT’ – to come from deep ancient roots, but to speak to and live in the present ... to what’s happening here and now ... incarnate with the incarnate God. I recall that at vespers on my first night, we heard from Jeremiah: ‘I have loved you with an age-old love . . . Again I will build you, and you shall be built’, words that renewed in me the stirrings of memory to my call to Sacramental ministry and desire to living out that calling faithfully. I knew from that moment standing before the altar in the monastery chapel was a remarkable place for me to be.

Throughout my time, I met with Fr Laurance every morning for private conversation and prayer. We reflected on many things, focusing on the nature of vocation and discipleship maturation. ‘The call to the priesthood’, he would often say, ‘is a way of life. You need to discern what that way is for you in order to sustain it for the long haul’. Fr Laurance challenged me to reflect deeply on St Benedict’s third vow of *conversatio morum*. It means ‘a way of life’ or ‘a discipline/conduct of life’ to keep growing. ‘The vow of *conversatio morum* is aimed at an ongoing transformation of lifestyle and values according to the Beatitudes of the Gospel’ explained Fr Laurance. ‘How will your commitment to this vow help you to practise (St Benedict’s) simplicity, fidelity, humility and self-discipline in a society where self-importance and self-indulgence are so often the norm?’ ‘In what ways have you found your daily meditation on God’s word (*lectio divina*) helpful in fostering your life-in-Christ and your relationship with those around you?’ he asked. I’m still pondering these questions. But Fr Laurance was reminding me that the call to ordained ministry is first and foremost, a call to a deeper and mature discipleship. In living out that discipleship, ‘how can we ensure that *conversatio morum* remains a fast-flowing, life-giving stream and does not return into stagnant pool full of pondweed?’ writes Abbot Erik Vardem in his book *Entering The Twofold Mystery: On Christian Conversion*. That question is not only for ministers, but also for every Christian who desires a deeper spiritual life with Christ.

After the retreat and blessed fortnight, it was time for the Nazareth Community a community that gathers at St Martin-in-the-Fields on the edge of Trafalgar Square. This community is made up of people from all works of life who meet on both online and in person to seek God in contemplation and prayer and learning to live generously and compassionately. It follows a simple seven-fold rule of life. It was set up and grown by the Anglican priest, Richard Carter. But the theology which underpins it all is inspired by the work of the Vicar of St Martin’s, Sam Wells.

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The Nazareth Cross

The Nazareth Community has a simple, contemporary rule of life – the 7Ss: Silence, Service, Scripture, Sacrament, Sharing, Sabbath, Staying With. This rule of life is a gift that is still emerging. They began with silence and listening deeply. Richard explained that each of the 7Ss is one of the roots of their life as a community. When all the roots work together, it is earthed, nourished and able to flourish. Or another metaphor is that the rule is like the seven strings of an instrument – using the seven notes of the scale to create harmony. There were many lessons from my time with the Nazareth Community to share here but already this ‘brief’ report is long. One of the powerful experiences with the community was taking part in a regular reading of scripture together using the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. The monks at Mount Saint Bernard practice this way of reading daily. Indeed, it was St Benedict himself who termed it *lectio divina* – meaning ‘divine reading’ or ‘spiritual reading’. *Lectio* is an attempt to read more with the heart than with the head. It is a slow, meditative reading of scripture, which pays attention to the power of words to resonate with the full range of human experience. It was one thing seeing the monk practice it – after all it is their daily bread and butter - but quite another seeing lay people, bankers, shoppers etc sitting in a large circle to practice *lectio* at St Martin’s on Wednesday evenings. Witnessing the profound raw reflections was truly a moving encounter – scripture felt like ‘an open door, which no one is able to shut’ (Rev.3:8). It reminded me of the words of the great poet and theologian of the early church, Ephrem the Syrian, who said: ‘Scripture brought me to the gate of paradise, and the mind stood in wonder as it entered’.

AND WHERE DID IT LEAVE ME?

It was a wonderful 3 months - all went well, smoothly and as hoped for. If I were to sum up the key lesson for me in a word, it would be ‘perspective’. This Sabbatical helped recover my perspective of presbyteral ministry, viz., the cure of souls and attuning to God’s way of being and loving in the world. This awareness, in turn, took me back to my ordination vow of the three-fold ministry of Word, Sacrament and pastoral care. It is not always easy to maintain this perspective in ordained ministry today. But Fr Laurance taught me that this requires the exercise of *conversatio morum* – a way of life to keep growing!

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I'm very grateful for this gift from my Churches, the Circuit, the District and the Methodist Church. I've still got plenty of thinking (and talking!) to do about my Sabbatical and what came out of it for me – but I'll be mulling it over for some time and will share things with others at the right time. I had offered a well-known prayer for the 3 months, using the words of Richard of Chichester (c.1197-1253):

Day by day, dear Lord,
Of thee three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
To love thee more dearly,
To follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.

Well, I started off from a thin place. But as I returned back, I was glad, not fatigued, despairing and desponded. After all, if we preach a Gospel of freedom and hope, then we ought to be able to experience that freedom and hope in our own lives as well.

Revd Moses Agyam