

Pathways

The magazine for the people of the Diocese of Oxford | Summer 2023 | **FREE**



Depending on God

Truth, faith and trust in him

PLUS: How God sees you | Life-long faith | Grieving a suicide



Everyday mission

It has been a momentous twelve months. The Platinum Jubilee, a record-breaking heatwave, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, political upheaval, the cost-of-living crisis and the Coronation of King Charles have all been moments of additional load on our parish churches, chaplaincies and schools.

Together we have offered warm spaces, debt advice and food banks, comfort and consolation. We've brought communities together to celebrate and to reflect. It has meant a great deal of additional work for everyone in every place.

Of course, it's not just the key moments and crises that we collectively step up for. I see mission and Christian service taking place across this diocese every day. It's always a challenge for us to choose which stories make it into the pages of *Pathways*, but we share many more in our weekly newsletter. Register to receive eNews at oxford.anglican.org/ **email-sign-up**

Some of you may have noticed that we didn't publish the Spring edition. The team have been working hard to move to direct distribution of *Pathways* to our 284 benefices. We hope that this change will ease the load on hard-pressed parish volunteers and ensure that many more of our congregations can pick up a copy of the magazine. Sincere thanks to everyone who helps to get *Pathways* to each of our churches.

In this edition

Walk down any street and you will see people shuffling along – often with their eyes glued to their devices afraid of missing anything, yet actually missing everything. We carry in our smartphones the anxieties and despair of the whole world.

But when we put down our devices and look to Christ and the power of the resurrection, the impossible begins to look possible and hope returns. Resurrection people see grief turn into possibility, trial into opportunity and sorrow into dancing. God is with us throughout and that's what this edition of *Pathways* is all about.

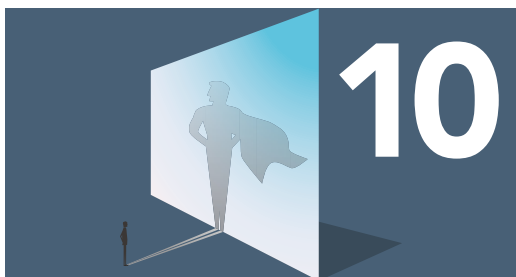
To gain and hold the perspective of eternity as we grapple with the problems of the earth is the message that runs through these pages. Regular readers will know that *Pathways* never shies away from difficult topics. This edition touches on a story of suicide, something that has affected more of my colleagues than I would ever have imagined. Sharon's story is a hard, but hopeful, read.

The Home Secretary says the asylum system is "broken", but what does the Church have to say about sanctuary and welcome for those reaching our shores? See page 15 on how our parishes are supporting newly-arrived asylum seekers and refugees. A different way is possible.

Bishop Steven

Bishop Steven is helping to strengthen the Online Safety Bill, currently going through Parliament. See his speeches in the Lords at youtube.com/c/oxforddiocese

Contents



- 4** Around the diocese
- 6** God in the life of...
Graham Sykes
- 8** Step one
Take the long view
- 10** The Bible on...
How God sees you
- 12** Opinion
Worship: in school?
- 15** For the sake of God's world
Sanctuary and welcome
- 18** Focus on...
Suicide
- 20** Dwelling in the Word
- 22** A prayer in worrying times
- 23** Who told you?



We hope you enjoy reading *Pathways*. Email or write and let us know what you think. Contributor enquiries are welcome.

Pathways is published three times a year by the Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance. To receive the magazine regularly, or to order bundles for your church, please get in touch.

Follow us on Instagram and Facebook for local news and prayers.

To get in touch with *Pathways* email us at communications@oxford.anglican.org or write to *Pathways* Magazine, Church House Oxford, Langford Locks, Kidlington, OX5 1GF



Pathways is printed locally in Hook Norton by kmslitho.co.uk using sustainable uncoated paper. When you're done, cut it up for the church notice board, use it for children's group activities or pop it in the recycling bin.

Design by **15-north.co.uk** Cover image by © Shutterstock. Words and photographs © Diocese of Oxford 2023, unless otherwise indicated.

UK registered charity number 247954

ISSN 2632-0401

Kay Burley



Chaplaincy for deprived inner city

When Kay arrived as the new chaplain at the Oxford Academy, she felt that many in the school were quite reticent to talk about faith. In the last 19 months, she's been helping staff and students put faith back on the agenda and encouraging inter-faith dialogue.

oxford.anglican.org/school-chaplaincy-oxford

For regular news and updates, visit the website: oxford.anglican.org/news

Lauretta Milligan



Chinnor Churches Go Wild

Churches in Chinnor village are joined in a commitment to caring for God's creation. A group of volunteers have developed wildflower areas and left grass unmown in the churchyards to provide habitat for wildlife including snakes, swifts, bats, hedgehogs and butterflies. Their efforts have resulted in churches being awarded Silver and Bronze A Rocha Eco Church status.

oxford.anglican.org/chinnor-goes-wild





Madeleine Hayden



Intercultural Mission

Over a hundred church leaders gathered in April to worship and learn together at the first-ever Intercultural Mission Conference in the Church of England. The conference also saw the launch of *The Oxford Journal for Intercultural Mission* and the Anglican Network of Intercultural Churches.

oxford.anglican.org/intercultural-mission

Wendy Howell



Bra fundraising

Wendy Howell raised over £1,100 for St Barnabas Church, Emmer Green by selling new and second-hand bras. Each month, Wendy receives bags full of bras from a nearby charity shop that is unable to resell unpackaged bras. Instead of them going to landfill, she uses her creative and fundraising skills to sort, photograph and sell the bras online and donates the proceeds to the church.

oxford.anglican.org/bra-fundraising

We're on social media too. Search "Diocese of Oxford" on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

*"... I have learned
to understand the
restlessness God
puts in me ..."*



Graham Sykes

Graham reflects on how God has used his entrepreneurial skills through his career, right up to his present role in a Christian sailing charity.

After serving in numerous and varied roles in the Church of England – Diocesan Evangelism Co-ordinator, parish ministry, Bishop’s Chaplain, Hospice Chaplain – I find myself CEO of the Morning Star Trust (MST), a Christian sailing charity taking people to sea. Hospice ministry and the pandemic burned me out. I needed something new, or to retire.

I realise that, from my early days in banking (before I was a Christian), and through the years of ordained ministry that followed, God has equipped me with a unique set of skills. In ministry I had the opportunity to serve a number of charities, large and small. As Trustee, Director and Chair of Trustees I developed business, theological, pastoral, leadership and sailing skills. Each role developed skills for the next. I have learned to understand the restlessness God puts in me when I have completed whatever role I am in. The entrepreneur in me is prepared to take risks if I think I can use my skills to share the gospel.

The primary charitable aim of MST is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, to which I add: using words if necessary. Our volunteer skippers are passionate about sailing and have important life skills to pass on to those who sail with us. Most importantly, they share who they are, people rooted in Christian faith. They come from a diversity of denominations but are determined to avoid the division of doctrinal differences. I have experienced similar determination leading CPAS Pathfinder Holidays, where the focus is on that which unites us, living the love of Christ. People become curious and respond.

Folk who sail with MST observe that we are different from other sail-training charities. Morning Star Trust does not try to suck money out of people’s pockets with lots of extras – our prices are all-inclusive. We aim to treat people as Jesus would. We are ruggedly inclusive. We are compassionate when cancellations happen, doing everything we can to find another voyage for them rather than pocketing the deposit. God’s love is shared through service and gentle conversation.

When I get the opportunity to sail, I meet wonderful young people who are making their way into the adult world. In the space of a week, I see them grow in confidence and self-worth. At times there are amazing discussions about existential questions. There is nothing quite like coming on watch at 0400 hrs and experiencing the fading of the stars and dawn at sea, with dolphins playing on the bow and the wonder of creation naked before you.

Our work may be drops in the ocean, but it is God’s ocean. The ocean and its wildlife proclaim the Creator, and there is nothing quite as exhilarating as seeing people come to faith. 🦋

Words: The Revd Graham Sykes

Photo: Susan Iskander, Morning Star Trust



MST has a bursary fund for taking small youth groups to sea for weekends or longer. Other church groups can also go to sea in the trust’s three vessels.

www.mst.org.uk



Take the long view

As we live our Christian life, we are likely to be disappointed if we are looking for rapid results. We sow, we water – but God grows. His wisdom and knowledge are infinitely greater than ours and he works beyond time. So, how does our belief in eternity affect our understanding of time on earth now?

The psalmist says, "... a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday..." (Psalm 90:4), reminding us that God's time is not human time which is, after all, based on how long it takes our planet to spin on its axis. As we are also reminded in Psalm 90, "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong": that timespan inevitably colours and constrains everything we do. So how does the eternal and everlasting nature of our God change our perspective?

One instance when I became acutely aware of this relative meaning of time was at the votes for the Ordination of Women to the Episcopate. As a staunch supporter of the proposed legislation, I was deeply disappointed at the outcome of the first vote in General Synod. "You prayed, held your vigil, now God has given you the answer," a friend told me. But the time frame of the Church, never mind God's time, is different from ours. Our first women bishops were ordained five years later.

When we seek to do God's will, it seems important to me that we submit to him in time as well as space or circumstances. That way, we are allowing God to work out his mercy and grace and, importantly, allowing God to work through our weaknesses and failures.

A good illustration of this is the story of David and Bathsheba. I shudder every time I read about the atrocious behaviour of David. Also disturbing is the thought that David continued to flourish and find favour with God afterwards. One message we can take from this story is about repentance – God can forgive anything if we are truly penitent. But it is also about God's time frame; taking the long view, one can see that in the eternity of rolling time, one failure is as the blink of an eye to God.

Time is a complex idea. Even Einstein talked about the relativity of time. Of course we have all experienced how time seems to go quickly on occasions, and sometimes drags! St Peter in his second letter (3:8) urges us "... do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." That might help us understand eternity and Jesus' promise of eternal life a little better. Aligning ourselves with God's eternity would also help us keep the relentless time pressures of daily lives in context. ¶

*Words: Dr Anna Thomas-Betts
Photo: Shutterstock*



All of us can begin to live the power of the resurrection. In a recent blog post, Bishop Steven encouraged us to: "Celebrate your resurrection each and every day."

How does God see you?

Are you worried about God seeing the real you? It's time to dig a bit deeper into the Bible to discover some surprising news...

I think my overwhelming sense of how God sees me is that God loves me more than I can imagine – and as God has no favourites, that means that God must love everybody with boundless love. That is certainly what the Bible says. A verse from John's gospel, "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16) unpacks so much of what the rest of that book says to each one of us: God loves us with boundless love and welcomes us into his family of love.

I guess a problem with believing this is that the Bible frequently talks of God coming to judge those who have done wrong (e.g. Matthew 25:31–46), and that can be unnerving as we look at the standards that Jesus sets in his teaching. We might wonder whether we in any way qualify for his love. If we feel we simply do not qualify, that can make us think that God may not really be quite so loving as the Bible claims. For those of us who have struggled or suffered, such thoughts can go quite deep – even if we like the idea that God loves us.

This is where the Bible makes me think a little deeper. When God's people were locked into slavery in Egypt, the Bible claims that God remembered that he had made a binding

commitment to love them, to look after them and bless them (Exodus 2:23–25). There are many scenes in the Bible like that – where God sees his people in trouble, trouble they cannot hope to get out of themselves, and God comes to rescue them. God looks at us in the same way, even when we are locked into messy situations. God loves us and wants to free us from the mess we are in.

Whether we like it or not, sometimes the mess we find ourselves in results from our own actions, words and thoughts. We really do have ourselves to blame. Here again we see the love of God as he takes our mess on himself to set us free – even though we don't deserve the favour (Romans 5:8). That makes me really stop and think. What kind of person freely chooses to give their life so I can live? A Christian in the first century AD, Paul, stopped to wonder (as many have done since) that Jesus the Son of God "loved *me* and gave himself for *me*." I cannot help but ask myself "Why?" And the only answer is, "Because God loves you that much". ¶

*Words: Revd Dr Andy Angel, Director of Formation for Ministry
Photo: Shutterstock*



If you want to deepen your relationship with our loving God, the 11th Festival of Prayer on Saturday 22 July will help you to explore prayer as a way of life:

brfonline.org.uk/events

The Beatitudes show us the very best of what it means to be human: how to live the most fruitful life we can.



But there can be a wide gap between the people we are and the people God calls us to be. We can feel the pressure to do what is right weigh us down: we feel unworthy of God's love. But this is not how God wants us to feel. Take a moment to explore what this means in this short film from Bishop Steven: youtu.be/OA5th-YRarE

Worship: in school?



The Right Revd Richard Harries, Lord Harries of Pentregarth was Bishop of Oxford from 1987–2006. His autobiography, *The Shaping of a Soul: a life taken by surprise* has just been published by John Hunt Publishing.

For most of my life I have taken compulsory worship in schools for granted. It was only two years ago, during debates on the subject in the House of Lords, that I came to see not only that this should no longer be defended but that as a matter of integrity the Church of England should take the lead in getting it abolished for schools not of a designated religious character. The government won't act, for fear of disturbing the status quo. The church will need to take the initiative.

If a couple are Christian it is natural that they should want their children brought up within the faith. And if there is a church school available it is natural and right that the children should attend it, and that worship should be part of their routine. But I believe that daily worship should no longer be mandatory for state schools, and that the Church of England itself should take a lead in changing the law to abolish it.

The current situation brings both the law and worship into disrepute.

The law at present is very widely disregarded. According to one survey, 53 per cent of primary school teachers said their schools did not offer collective worship. This is

because most heads do not have a faith themselves and have no interest in enforcing it.

In those schools where the law is in fact obeyed the worship, or what passes for worship, is

in danger of being a mockery.

Worship is a fundamental reality for Christians. We believe there is a reality who is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. It is this unalloyed, infinite goodness whose worth we recognise and praise. This is too important a matter to allow a travesty of it to pass in schools.

It is good that there should be assemblies in which fundamental issues of ethics or religion are raised. It is also essential that the basic facts of Christianity are an important part of the curriculum, for they are fundamental to our whole history, literature and culture. But this is

Continues overleaf...

"... what passes for worship is in danger of being a mockery"

In each edition of *Pathways*, we ask two Christians with different perspectives to explore a topical issue. Some in our nation think the church has too much influence on the lives of those outside it. We asked a former Bishop of Oxford and our Chaplaincy Adviser: Should we have collective worship in schools?

Collective worship, when done well, is the most valuable part of the school day.

Much of the day is about “doing”, rushing from one activity to another in a whirl of industry. But lessons only engage part of what it means to be human. We are “human beings” not “human doings”. We need space to ponder, wonder and reflect on the big questions: who am I, where am I going, what is the purpose of life? This is the province of spirituality – we are spiritual beings – and spirituality finds its anchorage in school in collective worship.

But why should Christianity be promoted as the answer to these questions, instead of other faiths and worldviews? Why not just offer mindfulness exercises?

The Christian Church and the Church of England have always been at the cutting edge of education, from the first monastic schools to the inception of universities, to the founding of The National Society and thousands of schools for all.

Centuries of investment and activism surely earns you the right to speak with a distinctive voice into this sphere?

*“this grand
unifying
experience”*

If you are to make provision for spirituality and faith, then you have to offer it from one perspective. You cannot meaningfully inhabit six faiths and three secular worldviews in a way that brings them to life. You can learn about them, and to do so is important – that is the job of RE.

To offer nothing is also not a good idea. As GK Chesterton said, “when people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything.” Carefully planned collective worship offers children and young people access to a faith perspective that is thousands of years old, starting before the time of Jesus at the roots of the world’s three monotheistic faiths.

Perhaps the most significant element of collective worship is the delivery. The church stipulates that worship should be inclusive, invitational, inspirational. Schools go to huge
Continues overleaf...



The Revd Charlie Kerr
is Chaplaincy Adviser
for the diocese.

different from attempts, if they are made, by agnostic heads to impose worship on pupils, most of whom, according to the polls, will not believe in God.

It has been argued by the Church of England that daily acts of collective worship are “a powerful tool in bringing pupils together, giving them a rare opportunity to pause and reflect in the midst of a busy day.” But there can be opportunities to pause and reflect without the obligation to worship the Creator. Indeed, the law says that there must be such opportunities.

I believe that if the compulsory worship element were abolished then schools would apply themselves with much more imagination and energy to provide assemblies aimed at “furthering the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of the pupils regardless of religion or belief.” This is different from worship, which can only be discovered and experienced as part of a worshipping community. ¶

lengths to make worship as inclusive as possible, with different faiths and worldviews included and prayers beginning “I invite you to pray...” or similar. Worship is never compulsory or coercive.

Think of some of the biggest problems for young people today – mental health issues, isolation, social anxiety. Programmes like Space Makers and Prayer Spaces help with mental health by giving young people tools and time for spiritual connection on the vertical axis. But collective worship allows for the wonderful connection of a whole school community on the horizontal axis.

If you haven’t heard a whole school sing “this little light of mine” or “one more step along the world we go,” then you are missing a most uplifting experience. The comedian Jason Manford recognises the value of this grand unifying experience in his *Assembly Bangers*. I think we should value a generous, inclusive and inspiring time in the school day for connection with self, community and – who knows – God. ¶

Further reading

The debate about compulsory collective worship has stretched over many years, with differing views held across all areas of the Christian church and politics.

Guidance for Collective Worship from the Church of England Education Office sets out how collective worship in schools should be inclusive, invitational and inspiring. [churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-academies/collective-worship](https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-academies/collective-worship)

Our own *Space Makers Contemplative Toolkit* for schools and churches offers five contemplative practices accessible to children and young people of all faiths and world views, to help them navigate the world around them. [oxford.anglican.org/space-makers](https://www.oxford.anglican.org/space-makers)

Youth on Religion (2014) presents the findings from a survey of over 10,000 young people with

a range of faith positions, examining the many aspects of their daily lives. The book explores the role of religion for young people growing up in contemporary, multicultural urban contexts, and how they develop their religious identities.

A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools (2018) from the Westminster Faith Debates and Religion and Society Research programme lists a series of recommendations for the updating of religious education and collective worship to reflect the diversity of twenty-first century society.

The Education (Assemblies) Bill is currently going through parliament: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2878>

Jason Manford’s *Assembly Bangers* can be found on YouTube.

Sanctuary and welcome

We follow a God who, in the form of Jesus, became a refugee as an infant, who found safety in another land. We adhere to a faith that urges us to be welcoming, hospitable and generous. The way we welcome those who come to our country seeking safety is a powerful witness to this.

Called to love

Throughout history we have seen the movement of people from one part of the world to another, whether because of nomadic lifestyles, the invasion and conquering of new areas, or people fleeing violence and famine. It is no different now.

Pathways readers may have moved to England or at some point moved to another country to live. For the majority of us, this was a choice based on things like exploring new places, gaining new experiences, or just simple curiosity. But for those who migrate as refugees or to seek asylum, their choice is based on knowing that it is safer to leave than to stay.

The number of asylum seekers in the UK awaiting an initial decision on their case recently climbed to a new record high – 172,758 people. It's without question that long-term strategies are needed to tackle human trafficking and the reasons people have to flee their homes, but the government response so far appears to be focussed on building a hostile environment for asylum seekers and refugees.

Much of what is currently proposed is immoral and inhumane. The Bible offers us a different view. God's people should welcome and care for those who are displaced or far from home; ensure those on the edge of society can find food; treat those who are new to a land with kindness and dignity; and care for the stranger.

That's why churches across our diocese are acting as beacons of hope and welcome, stepping up to counteract the effect of proposals that criminalise people seeking asylum and a media narrative that wants us to fear and 'other' certain groups.

The asylum hotel

Last autumn, one of our churches only discovered there was a new asylum hotel nearby when a few of the residents turned up at their church. The local council had not been given a heads-up and there was no plan of welcome beyond the Home Office's very basic provision.

Often asylum charities gather their resources around these hotels, but those working in this part of the Thames Valley have seen multiple hotels pop up recently and simply didn't have the capacity to support this new hotel too.

The residents did not have adequate warm clothing and shoes, so the church community quickly collected and gifted what was needed. In Christmas-gift bags given to every adult and child there was, amongst other things, a voucher for a local shoe shop so that everyone could choose a pair of properly fitting shoes.

The priest, accompanied by other local leaders, visited and built relationships with the hotel manager and agency staff employed to oversee the hotel on behalf of the Home Office. He also got to know the residents, hearing heart-breaking and traumatic stories of why they came to the UK. Some spoke of persecution from their governments because they didn't conform to strict laws that prevent freedoms we have in the UK, or because they'd converted from Islam to Christianity.

The priest and his team began to advocate for the needs and rights of the residents, working with local schools to get the children registered, co-ordinating a mass sign-up event for residents with

Continues overleaf...

... the local GP surgeries, and working to provide events and activities that the residents could be part of.

The church team has found it hard-going. People's stories are emotive and their needs immediate. Life as an asylum seeker is insecure and they don't know how long they will wait for their case to be processed (the number of asylum seekers waiting longer than six months for a decision now stands at 128,812). Meanwhile, they can't work and have very little to fill their days due to their isolation and financial limitations. Working with people caught in a bureaucratic system is exhausting, but the team talks about the life and joy brought with welcoming and getting to know these people.

A space to gather

A vicar on the eastern side of the diocese has similar experiences. His church has benefited from welcoming asylum seekers into their church community, describing it as a "total joy". His team was denied access to the hotel nearby but have been able to support people alongside the charity Care4Calais, providing practical things, and setting up English classes. The church has provided a space for people to gather socially for tea and coffee, BBQs, outings to the South Downs, and helping out at the local Christmas market.

The vicar recently wrote in a letter to his MP: "Life in the hotels is challenging. The food is of poor quality and after ten months mental health issues are surfacing. From my personal position as parish priest I have grown to think very highly of these people. They are no longer a statistic of 172,758 asylum seekers in this country but people I care deeply about. I feel it would be one of the most important moments in my 30 years as a priest if this group of people were accepted to stay in Britain to offer the skills they have to benefit this country."

English classes

Learning English and finding meaningful activities are crucial for the wellbeing of those seeking asylum. Without English it is difficult to integrate into a community and advocate for yourself, and then if asylum is granted, it is hard to get a job, especially one that matches your skills and experience. And without meaningful activities, some asylum seekers remain stuck in their small hotel room, perhaps feeling lost, hopeless, and losing self-confidence, all of which can contribute to poor mental health.

Another church in the centre of the diocese is running English classes for asylum seekers for the nearby hotel, and one of our Associate Archdeacons, the Revd Canon Liz Jackson, co-ordinates online English-language classes for a huge range of asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom are from Hong Kong or Ukraine. These classes are run by committed volunteers, and Liz is always looking for more people to help.

Citizens UK

We've been helping several churches through our partnership with Citizens UK to campaign for amendments to the Illegal Migration Bill, particularly around child detention and modern slavery, and asking the Home Office to settle the status of those who have made their home in the UK, but are undocumented. We've been writing to and meeting with MPs in Banbury and Maidenhead, and plan to do more of this!

But what can I do?

Of course, not every church community will have an asylum hotel nearby, which means not every village or town will have refugees living there. But every church in the diocese can support asylum seekers and refugees. Check out the list opposite and perhaps encourage your PCC to discuss what you and your church can do locally. 📌

Words: Hannah Ling, Diocesan Social Justice Adviser



Find out the real facts on migration at migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

Support refugees

Jesus drew alongside those who the society of the time excluded. We cannot use our political allegiance, or fear, or lack of understanding as an excuse not to do the same. Here are nine things you can do today.

1

Get informed – check out the information, help-sheets and resources available at oxford.anglican.org/refugees-asylum

2

Volunteer – seek out existing initiatives such as Refugee Resource in Oxfordshire refugeeresource.org.uk

3

Welcome – publicly commit to welcoming refugees at your church. Find out how at welcomechurches.org

4

Read - *The Ungrateful Refugee* explains what it's like to flee from home, dangerous journeys and starting afresh

5

Teach – you can help people to learn English, get employment and begin to integrate (2 hours per week) www.illinks.org

6

Sponsor – consider starting or joining a community sponsorship group. You'll be supported by sponsorrefugees.org

7

Eat together – host a meal sharing dishes from different cultures. Need inspiration? Try *Home Food* by Olia Hercules

8

Campaign – write to your MP and ask for a fair system for those seeking safety. Get inspired: refugee-action.org.uk/campaigns

9

Fundraise – organisations like the Refugee Council are facing unprecedented demand: refugeecouncil.org.uk/fundraising

Suicide

In September 2021 **Revd Sharon Grenham-Thompson** received the devastating news that her son, Leo, had taken his life. The tsunami of grief has been brutal, but she still believes in a God of love.

After a miserable summer, I was looking forward to that Friday evening. The weather was finally warming up, things seemed to be going well and we had all the kids at home that weekend.

As for so many of us during COVID times, the preceding 18 months had been tough. My son Leo, soon to be 18, had been suffering with serious depression for well over a year. He had admitted to suicidal thoughts, and even an attempt to carry out those thoughts, at the beginning of 2021.

Accessing mental health support hadn't been easy, and what we did access was patchy; but we were an open and supportive family, he had been taking anti-depressants since May, and he was receiving some counselling. Despite Leo's troubles, and the complications added by his being on the autistic spectrum, things were looking promising.

That week some of Leo's online friends had been concerned about posts he had made on social media and got in touch with the police. He reassured the officers, and me, that he had simply posted some "dark thoughts" but that he was OK. We drew up a safety plan for him, so when he felt bad again he would know the steps to take.

His mood improved hugely during the week, so when he told me he was off to town to buy some books for college and have a coffee I was not overly concerned. But at 4pm the police were on my doorstep. It was the moment my world shattered.

I remember very little from those first hours and days. I'm told I screamed and screamed, and eventually collapsed. Later I stumbled across scheduled social media posts that Leo had left for his friends, to be seen post-mortem, complete with a haggard selfie so he could be identified. The horror pierced my soul.

The horror didn't stop. Because of his injuries I never saw Leo's body. The bureaucracy of dealing with a sudden, violent death took weeks. I was left with a bewildering sense of unreality and a change that has rocked my whole self, my sense of purpose, of vocation, of faith.

I've been ordained for 25 years, but I've run the whole gamut of feelings: God is a delusion. God is (insert expletive). God is cruel. God has abandoned me. God is punishing me. Why God? Where are you, God? Please be there, God, help me...

I'm still working through all that, but as the dust has settled, I've also come to see moments of light and love in it all. One of the ways my faith has come back to me is the love that I've been surrounded by – not just friends and family, but complete strangers on the internet.

When you see the power of love and people reaching out from their own pain, that can really surround you and enfold you and help you. It's made me think of those words from 1 John 4:16 "God is love. And those who live in love live in God and God lives in them."

Struggling to cope?

There is always someone there to listen to you. Call Samaritans for free on 116 123 or text SHOUT on 85258. The helplines are completely confidential and always open.

I don't have any of the answers I want – mostly to the question "Why?". I probably never will. But I'm starting to ask a different question, "What now?". How do I take this terrible experience and weave it into my story in a way that acknowledges the bitter pain but defies the ever-present sense of futility?

In confronting the agony, I've found the psalms of lament speak to me, especially Psalm 88, which ends with no answers, only questions, and yet a continued deep knowledge that despite the pain, God is there. I'm reminded that many of God's people, over the millennia, have lived their entire lives without resolution of their questions or sorrows. Countless mothers have lost their sons. Somehow, there's comfort in that knowledge: a community, a cloud of witnesses.

Perhaps there's wisdom here too for our own witness in society – not offering easy answers or promises of triumph, not strategies or even jolly gimmicks, but instead sitting with the sorrow and questions, and offering simple, practical love. In the quiet act of presence, we perhaps proclaim most powerfully that God is with us. ¶

The lack of a multi-agency approach and many missed opportunities by multiple services in Leo's case point to systemic failures that repeatedly fail children. Find out more at inquest.org.uk/leo-toze-inquest.

If you are affected by the issues covered in this article, help and support is available at supportaftersuicide.org.uk

Prioritise self-care

Mindfulness has been shown to help with difficult thoughts and it helps us to feel better when we make time to look after our physical and emotional wellbeing.

Could you help?

Talking to someone who may be considering suicide can be life-saving. Learn the skills you need with a 20-minute online course at zerosuicidealliance.com/training

Many of the Old Testament proverbs are a response to the reality of living your life alongside other people. How do you do that wisely? These verses from Proverbs 27 are typical of the practical wisdom in Proverbs.

Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring.

² Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth;
an outsider, and not your own lips.

³ Stone is heavy and sand a burden,
but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.

⁴ Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy?

⁵ Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.

...

¹² The prudent see danger and take refuge,
but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.

¹³ Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger;
hold it in pledge if it is done for an outsider.

¹⁴ If anyone loudly blesses their neighbour early in the morning,
it will be taken as a curse.

¹⁵ A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping
of a leaky roof in a rainstorm;

¹⁶ restraining her is like restraining the wind
or grasping oil with the hand.

¹⁷ As iron sharpens iron,
so one person sharpens another.

*Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.*

Dwelling in the Word

The Bible can “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” as it expresses both the tender love of God for his children and the tough love that challenges our complacency. Are you as comfortable as you should be – or too comfortable?

Are you sitting comfortably? I really hope so. Life can be extremely uncomfortable at times, and unnecessary suffering is to be avoided. Do you take that seriously? God was described by Paul as “the God of all comfort”. He loves you as much as a devoted parent loves their child (Isaiah 49:15).

Yet we might be getting too comfortable when our comfort is at the expense of other people’s. Pressure groups reacting to the news frequently refer to this principle, and we can feel exhausted just thinking about the collective guilt of our society. It’s hard feeling got at, like the poor spouse of a quarrelsome wife – or husband (v.15).

It’s easy to shut down and try to ignore the situation, but that leaves us in the dilemma referred to in verse 12: “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.” To be healthy spiritually, we need to place our conscience in God’s hands, trusting that he who loves us so profoundly will show us the way forward. He understands everything about us – our gifts, our weaknesses, our responsibilities, the state of our health, our motivation, our capacity. We need to enter into the presence of God – a spacious place of peace, light and life – to discern what he is equipping us to do.

Yet we can get complacent and not see things from another’s point of view. For example, it’s great to have a church service that makes me feel comfortable, but supposing the style is outside another’s comfort zone? That challenge struck me forcibly when I read *The Oxford Journal for Inter-cultural Mission*. My personal taste can be too limiting.

We learn to be content to be less comfortable when we are keen to increase the comfort of others. St Paul’s passionate desire to see people come to Christ drove him on, despite considerable suffering. We can, and do, change. If I know I’m uncomfortable for a cause I’m committed to, I begin to think differently about what I am feeling.

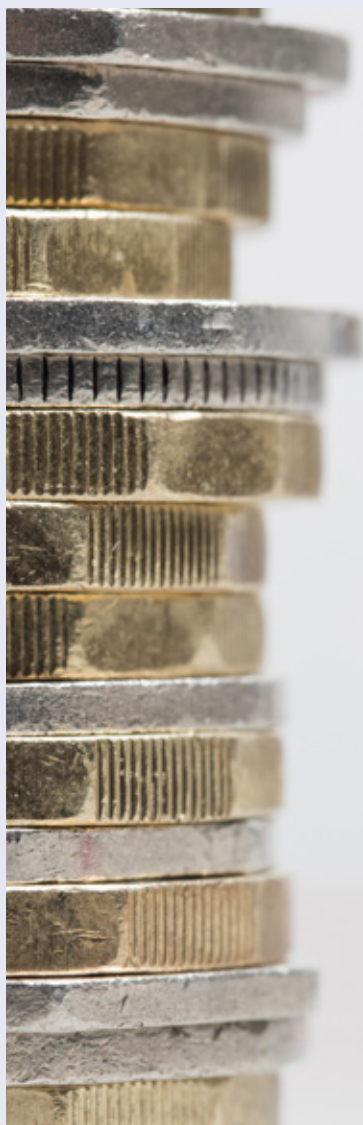
There is a balance to be struck. Jesus reminds us to “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Mark 12:31). As well as encouraging us to love our neighbour, those words can help us decide when to step in to help – and when that particular action is more than is required of us. Would I expect someone else to go the extra mile when they have a streaming cold? Maybe it’s time to rest.

Love doesn’t always look soft and cosy. As verse 5 says, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” We often conceal our true reactions because we hate confrontation. An open rebuke can be more loving than silence, and is definitely better than nursing a grudge. We are all left facing the truth eventually, and it’s often better to know what that is from the start. ¶

Words: Ruth Hamilton-Jones, Communications Officer



The first edition of *The Oxford Journal for Inter-cultural Mission* is available for download at:
oxford.anglican.org/ojim



A prayer in worrying times

Creator God,
our anxious eyes look ahead and
see rising prices,
striking workers
and energy shortages.
In the midst of our worries help
us find security
in your unceasing love for us.
We ask for protection for the
weakest,
courage for the vulnerable,
and hope for the frightened.
Do not let our worst fears come
to pass,
but flood the hearts of those
who make decisions
with generosity, compassion and
justice.
And so may your children be
glad to be alive
and turn to you with grateful
praise.
Amen.



Postcards featuring this prayer and information about resources for coping with the cost of living crisis are available from the diocese: oxford.anglican.org/cost-of-living-crisis

*Prayer by Peter Graystone, Diocese of Southwark. He is also the author of a number of books, including All's Well That Ends Well – From Dust to Resurrection: 40 days with Shakespeare.
Photo: Shutterstock*

Judith Mount told me...



Twenty-five years ago, the local priest in Charlton-on-Otmoor knocked on my door and invited me to church. Fast forward to today, I'm now the priest in that same church and clergy house where my faith journey began.

I remember looking out of the window and seeing Judith walking up the front path and thinking "I'll hide behind the sofa, then she'll go away and not bother trying to ask me again." My conscience got the better of me and I answered so as not to be rude. Judith invited me to give church a go, I agreed reluctantly and protested that if I didn't like it, I wouldn't go again.

My husband has always gone to church, but I had been very happy with what I had in life and had never really given faith a thought. I already had everything I needed in life, or so I thought. Growing up, I was what I'd have called a "C and E Christian", only going to church with school twice a year at Christmas and Easter.

I'd always been frightened by the thought of going to church on my own, but that first service was different. Judith was very good at making me feel welcome. She also understood the pace I wanted and needed to go at in exploring Christianity, and recommended a book for me to read to help me on this journey.

Female clergy have played a really important role in my faith journey, helping me to flourish in roles in church plants, lay and ordained ministry. They pushed me to take on new challenges and explore God's call for me to ordination. When Judith invited me to church, she was a deacon as women were not able to be priests. She went on to be one of the first women priests in the diocese and I still remember the impact the ordination day had on me – it was magical and wonderful in every way.

The knock on the door has stayed with me throughout my ministry, working in prison and army chaplaincy, and parish ministry. It still gives me the confidence to go out and knock on the doors of my local community. I know what a huge difference it can make.

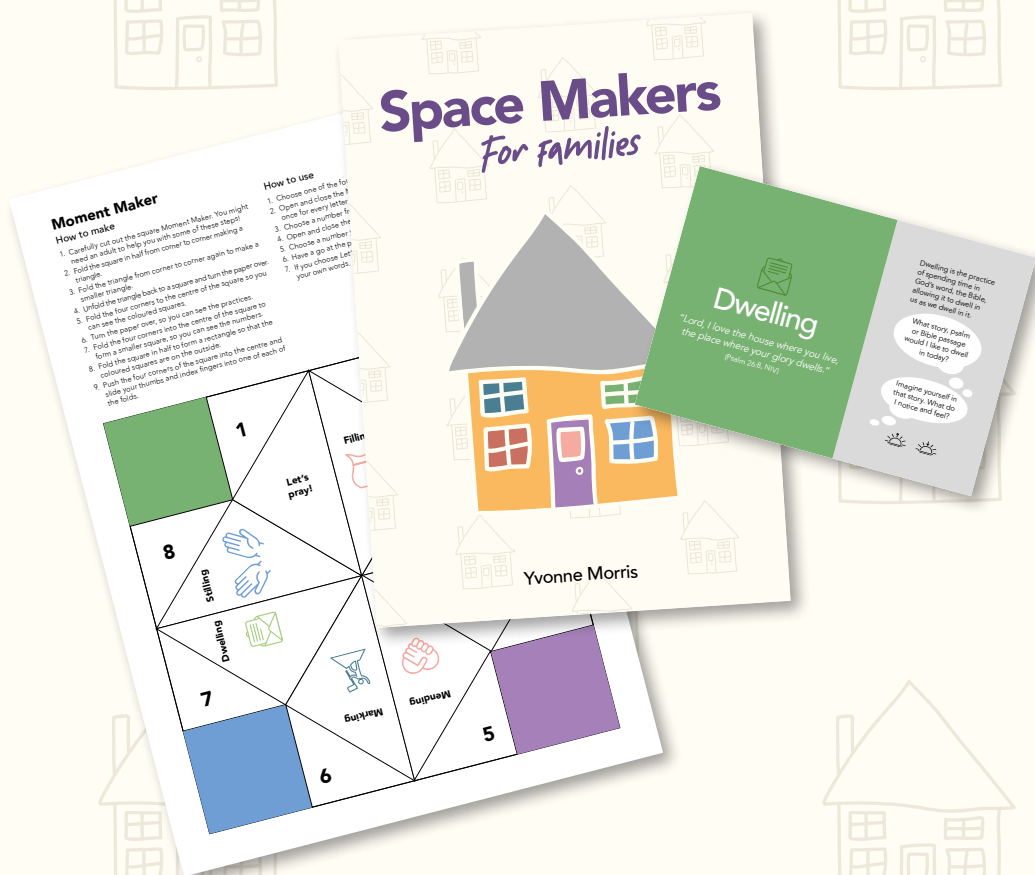
If I had stayed hidden behind the sofa, things could have been very different. That knock at the door or call from the parish priest might just be the prompt from God that person is seeking. Life in abundance with God is what I say I have now. 🙏

As told to Pathways by the Revd Lisa Holmes, Associate Priest in the Ray Valley Benefice.



Who told you? is our ongoing series of stories from Christians about coming to faith and the people who helped them along the way. We are all called to fullness in Christ – and sometimes that's to ordained ministry. Find out more at oxford.anglican.org/vocations

Nurturing everyday faith



Space Makers for Families equips caregivers, parents, grandparents and children with the tools to nurture the everyday faith of everyone in your home.

Each pack contains a guide, a "moment maker", and a table-top book to support daily contemplative practices. Find out more on the website.

oxford.anglican.org/families