

Pathways

The magazine for the people of the Diocese of Oxford | Spring 2020 | **FREE**

A new season *for God's call on our lives*



PLUS: Faith and armed conflict | One tunic or two? | Freedom from...

Hello



I dedicated the new stained glass window at Blewbury church recently. It's part of a broader plan to help visitors get closer to God. The glass is a magnificent blaze of colour, right at the centre are Alpha and Omega: Christ, the beginning and the end. A wonderful message for uncertain times and I encourage you to visit if you get the chance.

There's much to celebrate and inspire in this issue of *Pathways*. Overleaf you'll find stories from around the Diocese. Do look on the website for our film about children using the new contemplative toolkit. Then turn to page 15 to find out how the project fits into our common vision for a more Christ-like Church.

This edition of *Pathways* purposely explores the contrasts of light and darkness and encourages us to respond to God's call on our lives. Paula Clifford explores what it means to live simply so that others might simply live. Paul Armitage, the first of many to undertake a Personal Discipleship Plan (PDP) in recent months, tells us about coming to faith as an adult. Do you have a story to share with us that might inspire others?

Armed conflict is the focus for discussion in the centre pages of this edition and, once again, the writers aren't as far apart as we might expect. It's the latest in our Head to Head series of articles to inform and challenge.

Perhaps the most challenging of our articles this month is *Focus on...* which explores the darkening public health crisis of pornography. The statistics are painful and upsetting to read. But they do need to be read and we are not powerless to act. You'll find a list of useful resources to read and share on page 19.

I hope that you enjoy this edition of *Pathways*. After four issues we're asking you, our readers, what you think. You'll find a brief survey to complete online at oxford.anglican.org/pathways, or you can contact the team (see below) and they'll send you the survey form to fill in.

With every blessing,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Colin Fletcher". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

The Rt Revd Colin Fletcher
Bishop of Dorchester and Acting Bishop of Oxford

Bishop Steven is on sabbatical.

Photo: Steven Buckley

Pathways reader survey.

Let us know what you think at
oxford.anglican.org/pathways
or call 01865 208200 to request
a paper version of the survey.

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Jo Duckles



Christ Church pilgrimages

It's the Year of Pilgrimages and the Year of Cathedrals. British Pilgrimage has published five historic pilgrimages you can make to our Cathedral. Each starts in a holy place, with more churches and monuments en-route. And you can complete each of them in just one day. Find out more here: bit.ly/OxPilgs

For longer versions of these stories, more news and interesting features see oxford.anglican.org/pathways

Steven Buckley

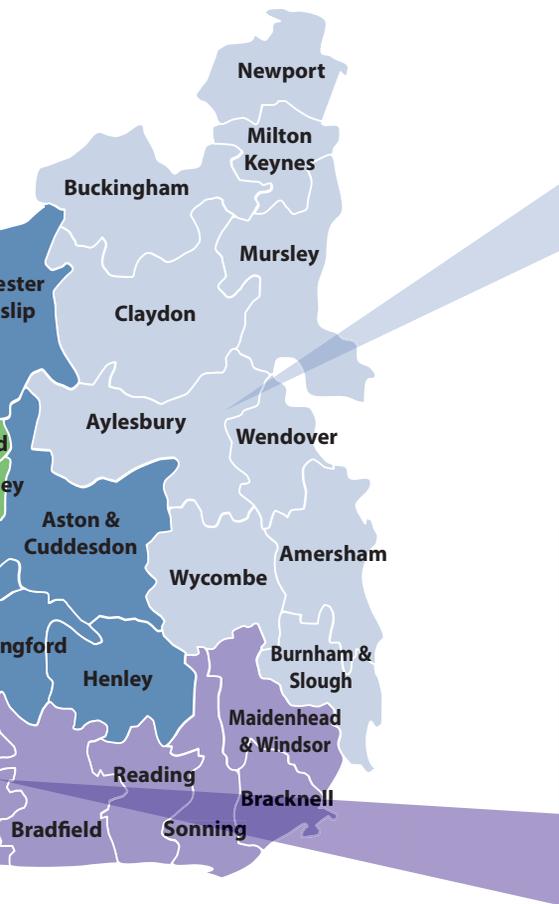


Calmer classrooms

The noise of the classroom quiets down within minutes as children become calm during a series of new contemplative practices being piloted across the Diocese of Oxford.

This is happening at Goring CE Primary School, one of the church schools taking part in the Contemplative Toolkit pilot. The Toolkit is one of a suite of resources being trialled among youth groups and families. The Toolkit is set to launch in June.






Rescue drill in the church tower

Firefighters are honing their rescue skills by practising drills rescuing a 'casualty' from the ancient tower at St Mary's Church, Aylesbury.

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue personnel used specialist equipment to rescue the dummy from the top of the church, down the winding staircase, into the less confined space of the bell ringing chamber. They even put together a hoist system to lower the dummy to the ground floor!

Jo Duckles



£180,000 fundraiser

A rural Berkshire church has raised more than £180,000 in less than two years for vital repairs.

The Grade II* listed St James Church, Leckhampstead received a National Churches Trust grant of £15,000 in late 2019. Along with a significant fundraising effort, the money means the church, which is currently on the Historic England At Risk Register, will be watertight and its historic fabric will be preserved.

St James' Leckhampstead

**We're on social media too.
Search 'Diocese of Oxford'
on Facebook and Twitter.**



“For me, being appointed a bishop feels like being liberated into being more who I really am...”

The Rt Revd Olivia Graham

Bishop Olivia talks about her journey from Archdeacon of Berkshire to becoming the Bishop of Reading.

Consecrated in December, Bishop Olivia is the first female bishop in the Diocese of Oxford. As someone who didn't initially see herself as called to episcopal ministry, she has been on a journey of discernment.

"I thought it was a job I didn't want, having worked closely alongside bishops for the last 12 years, but I think I was seeing the role from one angle," says Olivia, who had previously considered being a bishop, but put the idea to one side. "I have been really fortunate to have people around me who have been wise, and prayerful, and who know me well, and who know what the challenges of an episcopal role are, and they have guided me to think about it in ways in which I couldn't have thought about it myself," she says.

"For me, being appointed a bishop feels like being liberated into being more who I really am, which is a very joyful feeling. It's to do with taking a really big view of what God is up to, which can be much more difficult as an archdeacon."

The summer 2019 announcement of Bishop Olivia's appointment was timed to coincide with a visit to Ranelagh School in Bracknell. There she and Bishop Steven met a group of around 15 students. "I had a really interesting time talking to some of them about their faith and how difficult they found it as young people to express their faith, even in a church," she says.

Afterwards, one or two of the girls told Bishop Olivia how important it was for them, as young

Christians, that there is a female role model as the Bishop of Reading.

The role will see Bishop Olivia's diary packed with meetings, preaching engagements, confirmations, ordinations and much more. So how will she sustain a healthy spiritual life with such a hectic schedule?

"By making time for it," says Bishop Olivia. "It's making sure you get up early enough to say Morning Prayer and spend time with God before the day starts. I make sure I have a quiet day every month at one of the religious communities and, for me, a really key part of the work is meeting with the Berkshire area team and spending time together Dwelling in the Word and noticing where we have seen God at work."

Dwelling in the Word has become a regular practice at the start of many Diocesan and parish meetings and is a way of listening together to God through scripture and encouraging each person both to listen and to speak.

Bishop Olivia also says she always takes at least one day off per week, sometimes two, diary permitting, and encourages others to do the same. 🙏

Words: Jo Duckles Photo: Steven Buckley

Video: bit.ly/bishop-olivia



Read more inspiring faith stories:
oxford.anglican.org/god-in-the-life-of



Jesus spoke about fasting in the context of both almsgiving and prayer, suggesting that all three are a natural way of expressing our faith. He invites us to fast as part of our daily walk with him. Why? How? And from what do we fast?

How to fast

Why we fast

In Matthew 6, Jesus reminds us that fasting is a way of putting God back at the centre of our lives, which in turn means loving God, our neighbour and ourselves better. Why we fast is rooted in this deeper desire to grow in God's love.

When we turn our attention to God in fasting, our hearts are filled with a desire to reflect God's loving mercy, justice and compassion in our own lives. Therefore, our fasting becomes a means of supplication for, and solidarity with, those who hunger, thirst and suffer, and in this way we both share in, and become, the Body of Christ in God's world.

Fasting also becomes a means of humbly expressing who we are, loved children of God, and through fasting we may ask for God's guidance, express sorrow for our sins or seek to prepare ourselves for a major life event.

How we fast

When we read Jesus' words in Matthew 6, we could imagine that fasting should be an individual matter, and yet the Bible is full of corporate acts of fasting, as whole nations cried out to God to save them. Small groups of early Christians gathered to fast and pray before making significant decisions.

Consequently, like prayer and giving, fasting may be practised corporately or individually depending on the context. What remains vital is that those who fast, whether together or alone, do so with their hearts turned towards God. Taking the time to prepare to enter God's presence in this way is helpful.

What we fast from

Fasting is often associated with abstaining from food and drink, and yet as we begin to take more seriously Jesus' invitation to fast, we may discover that as we start our preparation he is inviting us to think more broadly about incorporating regular fasts from things such as using social media, driving when we could walk, working on our day off or avoiding a difficult relationship.

People caught in addictive and unhealthy behaviours may also consider fasting as a way of setting themselves free. Use of pornography might be one such addiction. Page 18 of this edition explores how porn use is becoming a digital public health crisis.

The fruit of fasting

When we fast, we may choose to redistribute the money we save on food and fuel to those less fortunate. We can also choose to give time, that would have been spent overworking or on social media, to self-care and other relationships.

Ultimately the sweetest fruit of regular fasting is the growing freedom to love God, our neighbour and ourselves. ¶

Words: Revd Joanna Gallant Photo: Jo Duckles



Fancy learning more and giving fasting a go? Check out *Fasting: A Fresh Look at an Old Discipline*. bit.ly/grovefasting

One tunic or two?

Trying to live simply can, paradoxically, leave us scratching our heads with confusion. It was no different for 13th century Franciscans. As followers of Christ, what can we learn from Jesus' example?

In the late thirteenth century, the otherwise peaceful Franciscans were deeply divided on the meaning of their vow of poverty. They knew that in their daily lives they were to follow the example of Jesus. But their problem, in a nutshell, was how poor was Jesus? How poor is poor?

Jesus' wider group of followers did, it seems, include people who provided for him and his disciples. On the other hand, the 70 were sent out on a mission with next to nothing: "no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics" (Mark 6: 8), so that they were dependent on the charity of others to survive. Yet even this suggests that they had possessions, maybe an income, that for this venture they deliberately chose to leave behind, to step out in faith.

Poverty is about having no choice: choosing to wear one tunic instead of two is not a mark of being truly poor. Years ago, when I was working in Tanzania, I had a driver who said: "It must be very expensive to live in a cold country because you need two sets of clothes." Yet even that very basic choice between a summer cardigan and a winter coat is beyond the reach of the poorest people in our wealthy society.

If we are trying to adopt a simple lifestyle, we need to examine the nature and the implications of our choices.

It makes economic sense to buy one good quality coat rather than a cheap one that won't last nearly as long. It may also make ethical sense: pay more and get clothes sourced in an environmentally friendly way. Look for clothes that aren't

produced using child or slave labour. But in addition to issues of personal economics and ethics, it's undoubtedly important to remember the people who struggle to afford even the cheapest outfits. If you have several decent coats, why not give one away?

"One person's moderation is another person's luxury."

In 1312 Pope Clement V sought to end the Franciscan dispute by advocating a favourite medieval virtue: moderation. "Let the Friars have a tunic with a capuche [hood], and if they wish to have it, another without a capuche. And let those who are driven by necessity be able to wear footwear," he wrote. Sound advice, given the Italian winters, but let's never forget that one person's moderation is another person's luxury. ¶

Words: The Revd Dr Paula Clifford. Photo: Shutterstock

"no bread,
no bag,
no money
in their
belts..."



Go deeper with God and challenge yourself to take steps towards a simple, ethical lifestyle with Ruth Valerio's *Just Living*.

ruthvalerio.net/publication/just-living

War and peace



The Revd (Flt Lt) Jonathan Newell (Padre Jonny) is based at RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire.

Growing up in Northern Ireland, the road to peace could be described as 'the road less travelled'. Years of armed conflict have led to, at best, a fragile peace process. This is, however, the place I call home and the lens through which my worldviews have formed.

As a military chaplain, I am often forced to come to terms with the problematic relationship between conflict, reconciliation and peace.

To understand peace and reconciliation, we first need to understand what conflict is, what it is that we are trying to reconcile, and why we need peace. This is not easy as there are numerous interpretations of what creates conflict: collision or disagreement; violence; emotions; incompatible goals; differences of opinion; social change; fear and insecurity. If there are many contributing factors and different levels of conflict then there are many different levels of peace and reconciliation.

“there are many different levels of peace and reconciliation.”

Johan Galtung defines conflict using three components:

contradiction - underlying issues creating a conflict situation

attitude - affecting people's perceptions and emotions

behaviour - from non-violent

threats or acts to disruptive physical attacks. For resolution, all three must be addressed.

Galtung talks about peace being positive or negative.

The absence of

violence does not necessarily make things better, but it is a good start. We have a negative peace in Northern Ireland. There are no 'Troubles', but people are still unhappy and living in a negative environment. The absence of direct violence does not always create a positive environment.

Peace can exist alongside repression, deprivation, exploitation and injustice. Negative peace is described simply as: 'trying to put the fire out without having looked at the cause of the fire in the first place.'

Jonny's article continues overleaf

In each edition of *Pathways*, we ask two Christians with different perspectives to explore a topical issue. As we were researching this edition, an attack on Iran was just one of the international conflicts hitting the headlines. We asked two experts to consider whether the road to peace can ever be through armed conflict.

The best road to peace is love: it is the Holy Spirit's weapon in the face of danger or injustice.

Jesus lived in love for those who hated him, crucially when he prayed: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." In his abundant love he risked pain and death. His loving reaction to injustice opened the way for those who shouted "Crucify him" to have a change of heart. On the Day of Pentecost many of his accusers became his friends. There is joy in heaven when one sinner repents, and peace on earth.

Martin Luther King took risks in his human rights movement in Alabama. But it was founded on love. While he was in jail a bomb exploded at his home. His wife and two-month-old daughter were there. When released from prison, Luther King found a crowd wanting to march in vengeance.

But Luther King's message for white people was: "Bomb our homes and threaten our children and, difficult as it is, we will still love you." The crowd marched peacefully. Those who love their persecutors are blessed.

"If your enemies are hungry feed them... overcome evil with good."

In modern-day Palestine, Christians speak of "seeing the image of God in the face of the enemy." Many centuries earlier, in the time of Elisha, the King of Syria was attacking Israel. Elisha prayed for blindness to strike the invaders. He led them to his city, Samaria, where the King of Israel asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them?" But Elisha said: "Give them food and water and let them return to their master". Syrian raiding parties did not invade Israel again.

This is a glimpse of God's road to peace. Don't exterminate enemies but help them to become friends. St Paul, who knew the road in Syria,



The Revd Donald Reece is an Anglican Pacifist Fellowship Counsellor.

Donald's article continues overleaf

[Jonny...]

Positive peace is achieved by overcoming a direct conflict situation, leading to a positive environment. Think of Rwanda in 1994. This peace serves the wider population through the restoration of relationships. Positive peace is achieved by peaceful means: legitimacy and justice. Peaceful means in the Rwandan context involved military action.

So, can the road to peace be through armed conflict?" I argue against a purist approach. Our reality is a violent world *without* armed conflicts. In that reality, however, peace is possible.

If peace is possible after 'The Troubles', after the genocide, then perhaps there is hope for the comparably smaller rifts that plague our relationships and communities. In conflict, we have a responsibility to assess our role in the peace process, to be a presence, and show that in our words and actions.

Peacebuilding does not merely require loving one another. It involves mutual acknowledgement of past suffering.

There are many different directions, different roads, different levels of conflict. We need to make sure that 'the road to peace' is one we all recognise, well-lit and well-travelled. ¶

[Donald...]

wrote, "If your enemies are hungry feed them... overcome evil with good."

Jesus took the initiative in challenging evildoers, and in helping those who suffered. This proactive love was the source of his road to Jerusalem and of his sending his friends out like lambs among wolves, ready to take up the cross as his followers. Jesus redeemed Israel without armed conflict.

Those who reject armed conflict are often asked "What would you do if you had a gun and someone you loved was being threatened?" My answer, as someone who easily gets angry, is that I don't know. My first response would probably be to put myself in the line of danger.

The nearest I have come to such a situation was at a holiday camp when a fight was taking place in one of the chalets. I went in and spoke calmly to the youth with the knife and took it off him.

We may only walk an inch at a time on the road to peace but, on this road, let us follow Jesus. He has always been with us, is now, and will be in times of quiet and of conflict. ¶

Further reading

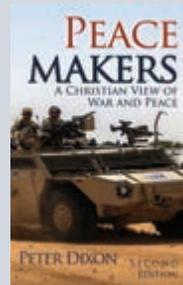
The Anglican Pacifist Fellowship is a group of Anglicans who reject war as a means of solving international disputes. They believe that peace and justice should be sought through non-violent means. Their website has a host of articles, blog posts and details of their projects: anglicanpeacemaker.org.uk



"Violent means fail to bring lasting solutions, and humanity itself is increasingly at risk of extinction."

Former RAF pilot Peter Dixon has published *Peacemakers: A Christian view of war and peace*. Dixon explores what 'Blessed are the peacemakers' means in practice. His book offers a moral framework on which to base our thinking about war and peace.

cloudhillpress.com/book/peacemakers/



"A work of extraordinary relevance in today's troubled and volatile times." Lord (Richard) Dannatt, former head of the British Army.

A Christ-like Church

In September it will be three years since we set out our common vision. A wealth of resources are now available.

But first, news of recent developments across each of the focus areas that we think God is currently calling us to pay attention to.

Making a bigger difference

In January, we launched a major climate change initiative under the leadership of Bishop Olivia. An intensive programme of work is underway to identify all that we can do at a national, diocesan, parish and individual level to address the climate emergency.

Catechesis and discipleship

A new approach to increasing confidence in people's everyday faith is making a huge difference. Over 300 people are trained to accompany individuals on a Personal Discipleship journey. Our prayer is that the programme is available to every parish by June.

Growing new congregations

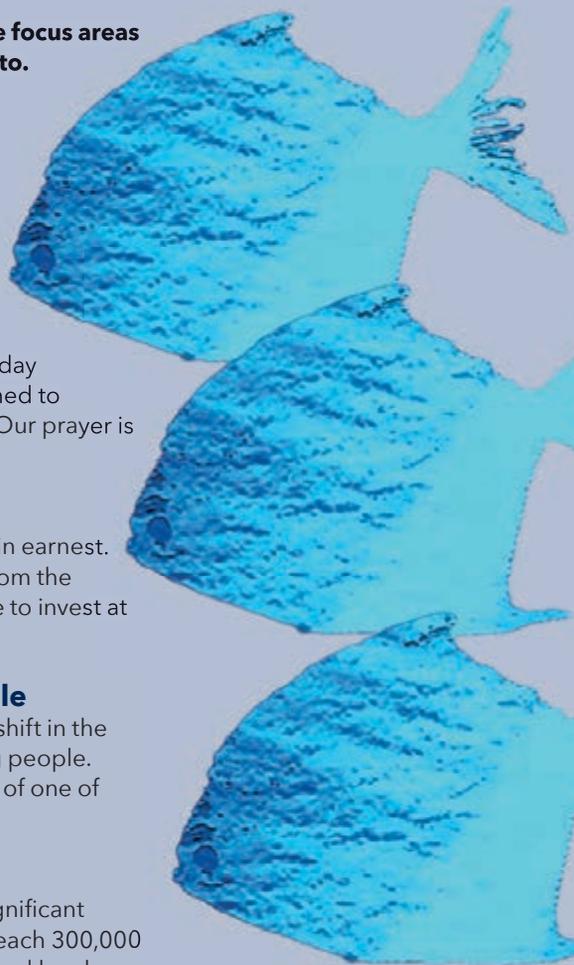
Our work to grow up to 750 new congregations has begun in earnest. Parishes, benefices and deaneries can now bid for grants from the development fund to support new congregations. We hope to invest at least £4m in this focus area over the next five years.

Serving our schools, children and young people

A major report in June will set out how to achieve a culture shift in the way that churches engage with schools, children and young people. Search 'Contemplative Toolkit' on the website to see a pilot of one of the tools that will accompany the report.

Celebrate and bless Milton Keynes

Milton Keynes is a rapidly growing large town reaching a significant turning point. The Church has an excellent opportunity to reach 300,000 people living there. A prayer coordinator has started work and local churches are working to discern what happens next.



As we begin to act and attempt new things, it is a good moment to listen to St Luke and to find fresh inspiration for God's mission.

Luke chapter 5 tells the story of Jesus teaching by the lakeside. He gets into the boat and says to Simon: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answers, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." They put out into deep water, and they find a miraculous catch.

Might we respond to the call to become more Christ-like in a similar way to the disciples? "Look, we have worked all night and caught nothing. Ministry has not been too fruitful of late. The things we have done are not really making a difference."

We must be ready to hear Jesus' words and say with confidence, "if you say so, we will let down the nets". Only then can there be the equivalent of a miraculous catch of fish: new disciples; people confident and equipped to live out the good news in all areas of their lives; a fresh relationship with our schools, children and young people; new congregations planted; the captives set free, and signs of the kingdom in ways we do not expect.

The harvest will, of course, have a different emphasis in every place. God's Spirit is a Spirit of infinite variety and creativity and we need to draw on the diversity and God-given gifts that are already there in every church, school and chaplaincy.

The resources and tools on the opposite page are just some of the things available from the Diocese that are designed to support your mission and help you to discern God's call.

Think of an area where you feel in need of fresh inspiration. Take a moment to pray that you will put out into deep waters this week and let down the nets.

This is an edited extract from Principles of Deep Water Fishing, see study guides, opposite page. ¶

 Brand new Everyday Faith case studies and common vision resources for 2020 are available now. visit oxford.anglican.org/commonvision

Image composite: Studio Beam

7

Encourage generosity: sign up for the Parish Giving Scheme and check out the range of helpful resources on the Parish Resources website.

Act on God's call

As we move into a new season, there are plenty of things we can do to help us and others think anew about God's call on our lives. Here are ten ways to do just that.

1

Explore: what it means to become more Christ-like. Four study guides, by Bishop Steven, are for home group and personal study.

2

Navigate God's call for your church: the *Parish Planning Tool* is suitable for use by every parish/benefice, whatever your local context.

3

Fund new initiatives: parishes, benefices and deaneries can bid for grants from our development fund to become more Christ-like.

4

Go green: a parish energy audit will help you to discover the simple no-cost and low-cost changes you can make.

5

Go greener: we'll facilitate a parish retreat for you focussed around the environmental themes in Ruth Valerio's *Saying Yes to Life*.

6

Offer a course: people want to explore Christian faith in a way that's accessible and welcoming. *Pilgrim* and *Alpha* are great examples.

8

Read *Everyday Faith*: 21 daily Bible reflections to inspire you to find and follow God in the ordinary stuff of life. Suitable for use throughout the year.

9

Identify your gifts: *Gifts for everyday faith* can be used on its own, or as the first step in a Personal Discipleship Plan – a mentoring scheme for your spiritual journey.

10

Keep going: visit *Pathways* magazine online for further inspiration and the steps you can take to become more Christ-like: oxford.anglican.org/10-ways-to

Pornography

Porn isn't usually found in the pages of a church magazine. But it's becoming a digital public health crisis, and we need to start discussing it at home and in church.

There were 42 billion visits to one porn website alone last year. Sunday is its busiest day and, although accessing pornography is a predominantly male pursuit, around a third of visitors to that site are women.

The sexual acts in pornography are a far cry from the risqué top-shelf magazines and videotapes of yesteryear.

We're now exposed to graphic images that promote life-threatening sexual acts such as rape or choking a partner for pleasure. Sexting, revenge porn and unnatural body images are skewing what we consider normal. When we consume this content, we are purchasing someone's humiliation and fear.

What evidence do we have for this digital public health crisis? The average age of someone accessing porn for the first time is 11. Our children are just a click away from hard-core pornography. Nearly 90 per cent of the most-watched porn scenes feature violence against women and 84 per cent of those viewings are via a mobile phone.

The picture is just as bleak for adults. Online pornography is re-wiring our minds and sexual behaviour. A UK survey last year suggests 38 per cent of women under 40 have experienced unwanted slapping, choking, gagging or spitting during consensual sex, and as many as 10 per cent of Britons have been victims of revenge pornography.

We become excarnate when we consume pornography. That is, we are acting in a virtual world, outside of our physical bodies. In the cold light of day, we might excuse porn use as merely fantasy and entertainment. That the images portrayed are acted and fake, that no-one is hurt.

“The New Testament calls us to honour God with our bodies...”

That can't hold true. Masturbating to cruel, humiliating or 'vanilla' pornography rewires our brains away from sexual intimacy and connection to normalising something sinister. The New Testament tells us to honour God with our bodies and to love our

neighbour as ourselves. We are sexual beings, but can consumption of pornography, violent or not, truly be honouring to anyone?

Is there such a thing as ethical porn, or are we all victims? In an era of performance anxiety and body-image issues for boys, girls, men and women, we are at risk of ruining our chances of healthy sex in a committed, loving and intimate relationship. The sort of intimacy that's so beautifully described in Song of Songs.

What can Christians do? We need to talk openly and honestly with our partners, children and church families about porn before the pornographers do. Perhaps we need a long hard conversation with ourselves too. ¶

Words: Steven Buckley and Jo Duckles

Photos: Shutterstock



The online version of this article includes research links.
See: oxford.anglican.org/pathways



Share this

Thinkuknow is for children, young people and their parents. The site has age-appropriate information about sexual abuse and sexual exploitation: **www.thinkuknow.co.uk**

Childline has excellent resources to help young people understand the risks of sexting and what to do if they have shared a nude image: **childline.org.uk/sexting**

Talk about it

Culture Reframed is a US based website with free to access online modules designed "to help parents to raise porn-resilient children": **parents.culturereframed.org**

The NSPCC has tips for talking with children about the risks of porn, how to limit access to it and what to do when they discover explicit content: **nspcc.org.uk/online-porn**

Speak out

#notyourporn describes the horror and humiliation of revenge porn. This grassroots group is demanding legislation to protect victims: **notyourporn.com**

We Can't Consent to This challenges normalised violence against women in sex and use of "rough sex" legal defences: **wecantconsenttothis.uk**

Get help

The Naked Truth project is designed to help churches, congregations and their communities to talk about and tackle pornography: **thenakedtruthproject.com**

Your Brain on Porn explores how porn rewires our brains towards low desire for partnered sex and escalating to extreme material: **yourbrainonporn.com**



A vital part of being a Christian is learning to draw close to God by reading the Bible. This is a practice that has sustained believers throughout history - starting in Old Testament times. Psalm 119 reveals how the believer is transformed by God's word.

- Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD.
- ² Blessed are those who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart -
- ³ they do no wrong
but follow his ways.
- ⁴ You have laid down precepts
that are to be fully obeyed.
- ⁵ Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your decrees!
- ⁶ Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your commands.
- ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.
- ⁸ I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me.
- ⁹ How can a young person stay on the path of purity?
By living according to your word.
- ¹⁰ I seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.
- ¹¹ I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.
- ¹² Praise be to you, LORD;
teach me your decrees.
- ¹³ With my lips I recount
all the laws that come from your mouth.
- ¹⁴ I rejoice in following your statutes
as one rejoices in great riches.
- ¹⁵ I meditate on your precepts
and consider your ways.
- ¹⁶ I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your word.
- ¹⁷ Be good to your servant while I live,
that I may obey your word.
- ¹⁸ Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.

The Holy Bible, New International NIV®

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Dwell in the Word with God

The practice called Dwelling in the Word is a wonderful way of drawing close to God. In this edition of *Pathways*, we look at how the writer of a psalm found his faith sustained by reading scripture.

The Old Testament reveals how life is enriched by meditating on scripture. Surprisingly, this includes meditating on laws laid down in the first five books of the Bible. The law might sound like something to be avoided at all costs, but the writer of Psalm 119 says, "I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches." He feels like a lottery winner. He has found the scriptures a guide to a better life; a gateway to the presence of God, in which he can rejoice. In contrast, the Pharisees followed the law only as a set of rules. When read as rules, it gave ever-diminishing returns.

We shouldn't be surprised that the Old Testament yields such delight. It was the only bit of the Bible that Jesus had. When he summed up what it was all about, he said it was about loving God and loving your neighbour.

Jesus gives us a vitally important way of understanding how the Bible transforms us. In John 5 he reveals where the Jewish leaders were going wrong in their way of reading scripture:

"You study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."
John 5: 39-40

When we study the Bible it should always be to come to Christ and find life. Without that desire we are sometimes left with empty words which diminish us rather than giving us life.

Of course, we are only human. We don't always *want* to be open to Christ. Like the psalmist, we acknowledge that we fail:

"Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!" (verse 5)

Yet he doesn't give up. He prays, learns, obeys, rejoices, meditates, and remembers. He is not half-hearted. This is a crucial factor; the Bible emphasises that 'double-mindedness' gets us nowhere. How can it? Either we are opening ourselves to Christ or we are closing the door.

We must be persistent. We are like the new driver, finding a different way of going forward. There will be some false starts.

Sometimes we are perplexed by what we read in the Bible. It might not seem to be about love at all. We need to interpret 'difficult' passages in the light of scripture as a whole. We need to develop wisdom and understanding. We need God's help, and also the insights that others can give us.

The last lines of the extract from Psalm 119 are:

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

When we start reading the Bible, we can ask God to help us see things which naturally we are blind to. We have been blinded by the particular distortions of truth in our times. A change of heart can only come with Christ's help. ¶



Reflect on a Psalm a day throughout Lent and Easter with *Songs of the Spirit* by Megan Daffern, former chaplain of Oxford's Jesus College.

spckpublishing.co.uk/songs-of-the-spirit

Prayer for freedom

God of hope, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free,
yet so often we choose to bind ourselves and others
to a yoke that is not yours.

Breathe your Spirit into us,
and give us eyes to see the invisible chains
which constrict and constrain your image in us and in others.
Give us ears to hear the silent cry
of those whose lives languish in the darkness of despair.
Give us hearts to feel the pain
of lives whose iron bars hide all horizon of hope and healing.

Lord Jesus, who bound the Strong Man,
who conquered the grave,
and who has freed all captives from the slavery of sin
in your powerful name:
we renounce our own self-destructive habits of hopelessness;
we denounce a world which coerces and compels with fear
and false obedience;
and we pronounce the dawning of your kind and
compassionate kingdom,
the hope of all who walk expectantly with you in your exodus
from the darkness of dependence into the light
of your new life.

In his name we pray
Amen

Addiction is rife in our society. Substance abuse, misuse of social media, gambling, and a host of other unhealthy behaviours can drag us down. This prayer shows that there is always hope and that even in our despair, God is bigger than our habits.

One particularly distressing addictive behaviour is viewing pornography. See pages 18 and 19 to learn more and access resources that can help those who are trapped. ¶

*Prayer by Charlie Kerr
Photo: Shutterstock*



If you are looking for transformation, then you might consider reading Bishop Steven's *Abundant Life*.

store.anglican.org

A Sunday school teacher, Anne and John told me...



At the age of eight or nine I was given a nativity Christmas tree decoration with an exhortation to remember Jesus even when the bauble was put away for most of the year. At the time, I made it to about the second week in

January, but that nativity scene popped into my mind off and on for many years.

Coming to faith in my 20s coincided with starting a family. I experienced a range of emotions I hadn't felt before and these led me to explore more of what was beyond myself. My wife, Anne, had joined a Young Wives group at church.

Through her I met John, the Team Vicar, who, over time, brought both of us to an abiding belief in the reality of that nativity scene. Anne, as ever, was ahead of me, but for me the final step to commitment came at Lee Abbey in Devon – a Christian community that has been incredibly important to me in my faith journey.

My first visit to Lee Abbey was with an informal church group for a holiday. I had been baptised – at the same time as my baby daughter – and was attending confirmation classes, so had pretty much committed my life to Christ, but I was to experience something that week that has helped sustain me ever since. As the week progressed, I felt a stronger and stronger need to participate in the concluding Eucharist. With the nod from John

that I wasn't damning my soul forever by taking communion before confirmation, I took the bread and wine for the first time on a sunny morning looking out over the countryside to the sea. I remember this feeling of being filled up from the tips of my toes to the top of my head – a sensation I can feel now as I write. It's from this point that I count myself as given to Christ completely.

It was about 20 years from the time my Sunday school teacher gave us our Christmas tree decorations until that visit to Lee Abbey. Anne and John were the two people who finally got me to the starting line, with Lee Abbey's community cheering me on. It's a joy to be still running 25 years on. ¶

As told to Pathways by Paul Armitage. Paul was one of the first people in this Diocese to follow a Personal Discipleship Plan (PDP), an accompanied faith journey.

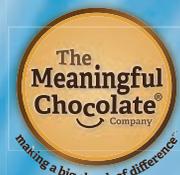
Lee Abbey on the spectacular North Devon coast offers Christian retreats, holidays and conferences. See leeabbeydevon.org.uk



Watch Paul talking about the next stage of his faith journey and how he's benefiting from a PDP: oxford.anglican.org/catechesis-discipleship/



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The Real Easter Egg was launched in 2010 as a way to share the Easter story and support Fairtrade. In its first year churches and schools from Oxford Diocese helped crowd fund the idea by ordering more than 10,000 eggs.

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