



14 December 2016

News:

**Nativity world record for Wiltshire town
Baptist deacon's idea results in Calne breaking the Guinness World
Record for the world's largest live nativity**

A total of 1,254 people donned traditional costumes to participate as wise men (and women), shepherds and angels on Saturday night (3 December) and beat the figure of 1,039 set by Utah two years ago.

The idea originally came from Rachel Rounds, deacon at Calne Baptist Church and head of media and communications at the Bible Society.

'It was just great how the town came together,' she said. 'At one point we didn't think we had managed it, but now hundreds will remember the nativity with a warm glow.'

'It just really goes to show what a community can do together - it was wonderful.'

The record is all the remarkable because Calne had removed the word Christmas from its festive celebration, describing it instead as a 'Winter festival.'

A town council motion from Rachel's husband Tom, the current Mayor of Calne, in favour of reverting back to using the word Christmas was carried unanimously. Last year a small nativity was staged by local amateur dramatic group the Calne Players – and it got Rachel thinking.

'It was lovely, but a very small event,' she said. 'I bumped into two people from the council and said – 'wouldn't it be great if we could get the whole town dressed up?'

The officials agreed, and Rachel – a journalist who has previously worked with Channel 4, GMTV and Sky – began researching. She quickly discovered the Utah record and thought it would be in reach for Calne, which regularly attracts 4,000 people for its Christmas lights switch on.

With the go-ahead given, Rachel set about drumming up support and awareness through visiting the town's local schools, engaging Calne's social media channels, interviews on BBC Radio Wiltshire and leaflet drops.

Around 1,300 people registered, and the stage was set. The adjudicator was in place, with cameras on the entrance and exits. Everyone was given a wristband as they entered the town green, which would then be counted as they left.

Sheets and tea towels had been donated by local pubs, hotels and the launderette for the costumes, with extra ones on the day given by nearby residents. One lady had made 60 sets of angel wings.

The Calne Players played the role of Mary and Joseph and Sarah Dawkins provided her own baby, Sebastian, who is just three months old, to play Jesus. The crowd were joined by artist and street performer, Gareth Jones.

With the night also being Calne's annual Christmas light switch-on and lantern parade, thousands of people from across Wiltshire were also in the town centre celebrating Christmas.

This added to the numbers, and Once the nativity had finished and all the wristbands counted, Guinness World Record official Jack Brockbank (pictured right) described it as "a fantastic result" for the town.

The record is now jointly held by Calne Town Council and the Bible Society.

The Mayor of Calne, Tom Rounds, said, 'What an extraordinary achievement and what a fantastic night. In rising to the challenge, the people of Calne have pulled together to show an amazing sense of community spirit.'

Paul Williams, CEO of Bible Society said, 'People of faith; no faith and other faiths turned up to celebrate the original Christmas story from the Bible. They had great fun; broke the world record and, we hope, brought the Bible to life.'

'We hope people were reminded where the story came from and what it means to millions of Christians across the globe.'

An exhausted but happy Rachel (centre), who praised the contribution of the local churches in helping make the event a success, added, 'Maybe something spiritual happened that night. God was there among the people.'

'The courage to be Baptist'

A call to Baptist churches to face present disagreements over same-sex marriage by being faithful to 'a Baptist way of being church' is made

A group of seven Baptists issued a statement on Monday (5 December) entitled: 'The Courage to be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality'.

The statement authors are the Revd Beth Allison-Glenny, minister of John Bunyan Baptist Church in Oxford; the Revd Andy Goodliff, minister of Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend; the Revd Dr Ruth Gouldbourne and the Revd Dr Simon Woodman, both ministers at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church; the Revd Dr Steve Holmes, Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology at the University of St Andrews; the Revd David Kerrigan, General Director of BMS World Mission, and the Revd Glen Marshall, Co-Principal, Northern Baptist College.

'Baptists believe that each local church must discern Christ's call for itself,' the authors state on the newly created website which hosts the statement (<http://www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk/>)

'Baptists also believe that local churches have a duty to associate together, and should support each other in this work of discerning Christ's call. This involves listening to one another when we differ.... This Baptist way of being church allows us to maintain unity even when we disagree about certain issues. We believe this is a gift of God, allowing us to witness to our true unity in Christ even when we disagree about serious matters.'

They state that one of the serious matters we currently disagree about is whether Christian marriage is always between a man and a woman, or whether a same-sex marriage might be authentically Christian. The authors acknowledge they disagree about this themselves (though all agree that 'our churches must take seriously their welcome of those who identify as LGBT+').

'We believe, however, that our churches will do best by dealing with this disagreement the way we deal with others,' they continue, 'refusing to let it divide us, but continuing to talk and pray and love.'

'We do not pretend this will be easy for anyone. We do believe God calls us, as Baptist Christians, to do this—and so we believe it is the best place we can possibly be.'

'We ask Baptist churches to have the courage to be Baptist.'

Eco award for Worcestershire church Fernhill Heath has become the first Baptist church in England and Wales to win a Silver Eco Church Award

Fernhill Heath Baptist Church registered with the award's predecessor, 'Eco-congregation', in 2013 before signing up to the newly created Eco Church scheme.

Introduced earlier this year by A Rocha UK, the scheme measures five different areas – worship and teaching, buildings, land, community and global and lifestyle. It has three overall categories: Bronze, Silver and Gold.

‘When we heard about Eco Church, we thought that, with everything we had done, we should try for a Bronze Award,’ said the Revd Jeff Porter, minister of the church, originally a daughter chapel of Worchester Baptist Church. ‘We never dreamt that we would get Silver!’

Fernhill’s eco-journey began in 2010. Inspired by a Bible study on Creation, the church set up the Creation Care Group to develop some ideas as to how it could become more eco-friendly. A team of six volunteers was formed and first met in November 2010, taking Psalm 24:1 as a guide.

Calling itself The Green Team, the group decided to take a gradual, “inclusive” approach to becoming eco-friendlier. It applied for Fairtrade Church membership, added recycling bins in the kitchen and fitted ‘hippos’ in the toilets to help save water. It raised £300 to twin the toilets in the church and manse, partly fundraising through a social evening including a toilet roll bowling competition.

The church chooses a theme each year, including ‘Butterflies and Bees’, where people were encouraged to develop insect friendly patches in their gardens - many of which have continued to this day. This year’s theme is reducing food waste.

During the year, the church holds lots of events, including a sunflower-growing competition and making Christmas decorations from recycled materials. Some of the events are educational, including a talk by the District Council recycling officer and a visit to a recycling centre.

‘We have a duty to care for, and not waste, the resources that the Lord has given us,’ said Martin Harris, the Moderator of the Creation Care Group. ‘And also, to look to the wider world, seeking to address the third world problems, where trade injustice and now climate change pose real and increasing concerns.’

‘The first principle we adopted was that we would not ‘preach Green-ness’. It was important to bring the church with us on a journey.’

‘The second principle was that although Creation Care is a serious subject, we don’t always have to treat it too seriously.’

The self-assessment process of Eco Church helped the church tackle each area. For example it has started replacing its lighting with L.E.D. units to save energy. The wide-ranging Personal Lifestyle section identified strengths and weaknesses: the church is strong on recycling and re-using and in its commitment to Fairtrade; however, it has not yet tackled areas such as ethical investing, and off-setting its carbon footprint

'The problem is not commitment, it is resources,' said Martin. 'If we had the money we could invest in solar panels, or consider a ground source heat pump. So we have adopted a policy of being as energy-efficient as we can, consistent with what we can afford.'

'All-in-all we have been much encouraged by the support of the church fellowship, and look forward to working with them in our on-going efforts.'

The support of the church and prayer have been key. 'We have had the complete support of our Minister... from day one,' said Martin. 'He has encouraged us to have Creation Care 'slots' in our services from time to time – the last being for COP 21 Climate Change in Paris, and subsequent developments.'

He added, 'Bring together a group of like-minded members of your fellowship who can start to drive the project forward,' said Martin.

'The absolute pre-requisite is getting the buy-in from your Minister, Deacons, and wider fellowship.'

'With that, and some real enthusiasm, it can be very enjoyable and rewarding.'

Prayer house launched in town shop Churches in a Welsh town have united to rent a shop and create an "urban retreat"

The prayer space in Colwyn Bay opened last week under the banner "Space to pray – the local church gathering together".

Around 40 local Christians have clubbed together to pay the rent and equip the space. The six-month lease runs until April.

'The shop provides a space in which to focus on God, other than our normal spaces,' said Robert Beamish, minister of Prince's Drive Baptist Church in Colwyn Bay. 'So the initial focus for this month is 'coming home', an opportunity for believer and non believer to consider where God really is in their everyday lives.'

'It's also a place for our churches to pray for our community in a more visible way under the banner of 24/7 prayer.'

The idea grew when Robert read Punk Monk, which is principally the story of 24/7 prayer rooms in communities. He gave a copy to the local church leaders he gathered to pray with each week 'declaring that we need to do this!'

Before the summer a local landlord phoned the church wondering if it was interested in a vacant unit on the Main Street. Robert said it might be, but did not progress it any further.

But the landord then phoned again. 'This time I went and had a look at the unit,' said Robert, 'and had a real sense that we needed to progress with this.'

'The landlords are believers and liked the idea of the project. They gave us reduced rent and a short six month lease to test the waters.'

The idea was launched at a joint beach service in the summer. People were asked to give £10 a month towards the rent. More than 30 people signed up which was enough to cover the monthly costs each month. An anonymous donor also committed to funding the setting up the project.

The churches took over the lease at the start of November and had a commissioning of the space last Sunday (4 December). It opened towards the end of the week, with local believers hosting the space for local church goers and passers by alike.

The space has a small prayer den as well as a larger space which can be partitioned for different activities to encourage the praying. It is currently divided into a bedroom, lounge, dining room and kitchen, 'encouraging us to reflect on what our faith really looks like often when no one else is watching,' said Robert. 'This is really helpful at this time of year when we can feel very busy.'

He added, 'It is a great project but I am biased!'

'The plan is to keep the space open until the end of April and then after that we will see how God will lead us and develop the project.'

'We are excited by what God is doing amongst us.'

JPIT nativity film raises asylum treatment A modern retelling of the nativity story which highlights some of the challenges facing asylum seekers in the UK has been released by the Joint Public Issues Team

The film, A Very British Nativity, primarily focuses on a young Mary and Joseph's efforts to find somewhere safe to stay in the UK.

It includes a cameo from the wise men who have ditched their trusty camels in favour of Micro Scooters. However, their mission to deliver gifts is quickly scuppered by an Immigration Enforcement Officer, who is concerned by the group's unspecified travel plans...

The film was produced by a coalition of four Church denominations in the UK: the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.

Since it first aired in early December it has been viewed around 160,000 times across various social media.

Director of the film and policy adviser for the Churches, Grace Pengelly said, 'Our Churches are very concerned about the degrading treatment and challenges faced by asylum seekers in the UK.

'It is sometimes all too easy to forget that many seeking asylum have already experienced a great deal of trauma.

'Rather than providing the standard of care that we would wish for ourselves, many aspects of the UK's asylum system appear to add to the suffering already endured by those seeking refuge.

'Our hope is that in seeing this film people will be more aware of how hard this Christmas will be for some of the poorest members of our society.'

Martha, aged eight, who attends a Methodist Church and played Mary in the film, said, 'Mary must have felt tired because she did so much walking with her suitcase and her baby.

'She would have been sad because she couldn't find a home and worried about her baby. I think people should watch this film. We all need to help people who have left their home because something bad has happened.'

A Very British Nativity launched the day after the release of the Government's quarterly migration statistics, which show that in September 37,958 asylum seekers received support from the Government's National Asylum Support Service, which means they qualify for accommodation and/or financial support of less than £6 per day.

The report also reveals that so far in 2016, 45 per cent of appeals made by asylum seekers were allowed. JPIT said this indicated that the system currently in place is struggling to adequately assess the needs of asylum seekers.

**Heartfelt plea from Aleppo NGOs
NGOs operating in the besieged city of Aleppo, including a partner organisation of Christian Aid, have released a 'message to the world' about the unfolding massacre taking place**

The group has declared that it is suspending its humanitarian operations in what it describes as an “outcry against the international community’s complicity in the massacre” taking place.

'This suspension will only be revoked if concrete and meaningful measures are taken to stop the regime's violence ensure protection of civilians, and facilitate their safe and dignified evacuation.'

The civil society organisations continued: 'In effect, the regime is besieging around 50,000 civilians in eastern Aleppo and is practicing forms of systematic violence such as the use of bunker buster bombs and summary executions without discrimination between women, men and children.'

On Monday a staff member working for Christian Aid’s partner in Aleppo was killed during continuous shelling.

The statement was released on the same day that the UN has reported that civilians are being ‘shot on the spot’ by Syrian pro-government forces entering homes in eastern Aleppo.

Christian Aid is calling for the UK government to significantly step up its diplomatic engagement on Syria to hasten a political process for ending the nearly six-year long conflict, and prevent the deaths of even more civilians.

Máiréad Collins, Advocacy and Programme Officer for Syria at Christian Aid, said, 'What we are witnessing in Aleppo right now is horrifying. We are seeing the massacre of innocent men, women and children in their homes and on the streets, while the world watches in a state of paralysis.

'We are witnessing the unravelling of humanity before our eyes. People are posting their final goodbyes on social media, expecting that they will now be killed by regime forces. This is unbearable.

'Christian Aid, like thousands of other NGOs and civil society organisations, call again for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access to civilians in besieged areas.'

There is currently no access in or out of eastern Aleppo, and reports confirm that there is no food, water, medical facilities or staff. On Monday civilians sought sanctuary in a community centre of Christian Aid’s partner in Aleppo which lacks any access to water, food and blankets in a city which is facing sub-zero temperatures.

Christian Aid is working through trusted local organisations in Syria, and in Lebanon and Iraq, to provide vital assistance to thousands of families displaced by the crisis. The charity is supporting especially vulnerable refugees, such as women and people with disabilities, to access much needed services.

Baptisms

Amphill Baptist Church, Bedfordshire: Tom Coen
Attleborough Baptist Church, Nuneaton: Jeff Pagett
Bromham Baptist Church, Bedfordshire: Phil Lorrimer-George and son Morgan
Cemetery Road Baptist Church, Sheffield: Melissa Newby, Behroz, Mohmmad, James, Ehsan
Crowthorne Baptist Church, Berkshire: Emma Fraser
Gillingham Baptist Church, Kent: Lorraine Hopper
Greenfield Baptist Church, Llanelli: Hannah Thomas
Hereford Baptist Church: Rob Pritchard, Mo Pritchard, Rhian Hill, Eleanor Hollins, Rachel Price, Oliver Bayliss, Hannah Parfitt, Sophie Peake
Herne Bay Baptist Church, Kent: Colin Moore
Limbrick Wood Baptist Church, Coventry: Adrian Birsan
Ringstead Baptist Church, Northants: Lindsay Russen
Streatham Baptist Church, London: Michael Calliste, Peter Nicholls
Temple Baptist Church, Pontypridd: Robert Miller, Edward Smith and Imogen Chalk
The Bridge Baptist Church, Gillingham, Kent: Ruby Smith
Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, Hitchin: Rod and Margaret Piggott
Upton Vale Baptist Church, Torquay: Julie Sissons, Laura Maskevica, Leia Price and Monika Tothne

Baptism stories

Advent Sunday saw two Gillingham (Kent) Baptist Churches join together to celebrate Advent and two baptisms, *writes Pastor Paul Hill*. **Gillingham Baptist Church** (GBC) has kindly allowed **The Bridge Baptist Church** (who normally meet in a Community Centre in North Gillingham) to use its baptistry and premises in the past, but on this occasion they both had baptismal candidates and shared the service. It was an amazing service, with others describing it as “electrifying” and “inspirational”.

Advent Sunday will never be the same again for any of us! To God be the glory! Full story here: http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/486540/Advent_baptism_joy.aspx

On 20 November, Robert Miller, Edward Smith and Imogen Chalk were baptised at **Temple Baptist, Pontypridd**. The baptism took place in our new baptistry and was followed by a buffet lunch for the family and friends of the three young people. It was a truly joyous occasion.

Adrian Birsan was baptised by **Limbrick Wood Baptist Church** Pastor, Darren Bovis-Coulter, during Sunday morning worship on 27 November. Adrian read out his testimony to the congregation, which included his wife and daughter and also his brother and brother-in-law who had travelled from other countries, telling of difficult times in his past life and how the Lord has turned his life around – praise the Lord!

While still open, Limbrick Wood’s baptistry was then used by City Church who had five baptisms.

The Latvian Church, who use Limbrick Wood's building every Sunday afternoon, would also have used the baptistery, but their Pastor was not available that day – they have requested use in January.

We praise the Lord that this baptistery that had been unused for so long has had good use throughout 2016 with more to come in 2017!

Sue Best, Secretary

The congregation at **Attleborough Baptist Church**, Nuneaton, celebrated the baptism of Jeff Pagett on 16 October when he was also taken into church membership. Jeff started attending Attleborough Baptist Church thorough helping out at the Job Club and being invited to a Christmas service. We have enjoyed travelling his journey to faith with him and thank God for his blessing.

Sheryl White, Secretary

Death

PIPER (née Phillips), the Revd Margaret

Died peacefully at Glanffrwd Care Home, Pencoed, on 10 December 2016, aged 91.

Beloved wife of Norman and much-loved stepmother, grandmother and aunt.

Served with BMS in Congo from 1950-1960, and a faithful minister to churches in Kidlington, Siloam in Cardiff & Didsbury and Middleton in Manchester. The funeral will take place on Thursday 22 December at 2 pm at Gilgal Baptist Church, Porthcawl, followed by cremation at Coychurch Crematorium. Family flowers only please, but donations to BMS World Mission would be appreciated c/o Porthcawl Funeral Services, 75 New Road, Porthcawl, CF36 5DH; Tel: 01656 783699.

Obituaries

The Baptist Times has published a number of obituaries this year. To access them visit: www.baptist.org.uk/obituary

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