



WE SPEAK

JESUS

THE STORY OF THE HEBA LOCKDOWN CHOIR

Lockdown choirs emerged as a creative response to not being able to sing in the same physical space together. People record a solo on mobile phones at home, which is then mixed and spliced alongside others to create a seamless soundtrack and video. The most well-known example is perhaps the *UK Blessing*: premiered on YouTube with the country still in its first national lockdown in early May 2020, the video featured representatives of more than 65 churches and movements singing a national blessing. It captured a desire to bless the nation at a difficult time, and a sense of God's Spirit not being confined to a building.

"Our buildings may be closed, but the church is very much alive!" it stated.

The *UK Blessing* quickly became a sensation, racking up 400,000 views in its first few days, a figure which has subsequently climbed to around 5 million.

Photo by Kyle Smith on Unsplash

A moving Baptist example of the genre took place among churches in the Heart of England Baptist Association (HEBA) in spring 2021. *I speak Jesus* drew on the musical, instrumental, composing, singing and video-editing skills of ministers and members of more than 30 churches in the association. The song and video were prepared for the online Baptist Assembly 2021.

The video begins quietly with the worship band at Catshill Baptist Church in Worcestershire, gradually joined by representatives from the different churches, all in their respective homes or church buildings. The musicians then enter, adding flutes, euphonium, cornet, alto sax, oboe, trumpet, violin and mandolin to the mix. With the video able to accommodate them all, the result is a joyous representation of a cluster of Baptist churches uniting to speak Jesus over their region.

The immediate feedback when it aired at the Assembly showed how well the whole arrangement was received.

This is so very well done, thank you. We speak Jesus.

Lovely arrangement

Powerful song

What an amazing way to start this evening.

Wonderful worship and impressive joint music project! HT to video edit people

A great way to start thank you

ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT!!!!!! Thank you!!!!!!

Great music and great video editing - thank you to all

Thank you HEBA - that was great!

What an opening... praise God! Thank you!

Loving seeing all the people singing on screen - thank you to all those who made that happen x

Such a wonderful collaboration from HEBA

Simon Gudger, minister at Catshill Baptist Church, arranged, produced and mixed the song.

Simon was a member of a folk band before training for ministry and has toured in musicals with the Christian composer Roger Jones. Blessed with a talented worship band, he has been preparing lyric videos for his church and others to use throughout the pandemic. It led to him being asked to prepare worship videos for the

HEBA ministers' conference in February last year, where former Baptist Union President Chris Duffett was the main speaker. One of the songs Chris had selected was *I Speak Jesus*, released in 2020 by the artist Here Be Lions alongside Darlene Zschech.

At the time Simon was unaware of the song - but he soon realised why it had been chosen by Chris. The song's lyrics talk of 'speaking Jesus into our land', of Jesus 'breaking every stronghold', 'shining through the shadows', of speaking Jesus 'over fear and all anxiety'.

"They are hugely significant lyrics, especially for this time," says Simon. "They really spoke to me."

After this conference, Simon was subsequently approached to produce a song for the Assembly, and it seemed logical to do a bigger version of this particular

song. HEBA team leader Adrian Argile asked if it was possible to include more musicians. Initially Simon wasn't sure about this request because he knew it would need a new score, something he wouldn't be able to provide. However, help was at hand.

"Back at the ministers' conference, I briefly met someone in a breakout room who said he had been a composer before training for Baptist ministry. I found out he was Jonathan Girling of Bearwood Baptist Church, and it turned out he had written music for West End Shows.

"I emailed him, asking 'How about writing a score for this song?' He did an amazing job, producing a score in just a week, for 12 instruments."

Thanks to Jonathan's input, the song could now feature musicians as well as singers.



A screenshot from the *I Speak Jesus* video. The song begins with Simon and the band at Catshill Baptist Church, who are in turn joined by singers and musicians from more than 30 Baptist churches across the Heart of England Baptist Association

Simon contacted HEBA churches, and received a great response, getting volunteers from around 30 – 35 churches.

People sent him what they'd recorded on their mobiles, and Simon's role now was to mix the music together. Once finished he sent the completed audio version to Darren Bovis Coulter, pastor of Limbrick Wood Baptist Church in Coventry who, as video editor, had the equally mammoth task of splicing the films together in a way that built that sense of momentum and strength in numbers. Before full-time ministry, Darren ran a design and production company with his wife. His first degree was in Computer Animation, but this quickly led to integrating animation with film, and producing for an online audience. With such a background he had already started to put together virtual choirs before they became popular, and had some ideas when approached by Simon.

"The concept for the video was that it begins with an individual church praying and singing on a Sunday," explains Simon.

"But when you think of the popular hymns and songs, they are sung and prayed by hundreds and thousands of people each Sunday, and the video tried to capture that. Unbeknown to your own church, people in churches across HEBA and beyond are also singing and praying these words. The video was about that – and Darren did a great job – gradually building to show that it's not just one church praying this, but many.

"And this happens every Sunday – there is a bigger thing going on."

Simon reveals that he and Darren were working until 2.30am on their deadline day. "It was hours, but so worth it in the end."

He adds: "Lockdown forced us to look at new ways of joining forces together, and this is one example.

People who were part of the choir have told me how much they've appreciated being part of something greater.

"It has blessed and surprised a lot of people - and enabled people's faith to be encouraged and moved on."

Watch and listen to the song here:

bit.ly/wespeakjesus



**Simon Gudger has been
Minister of Catshill Baptist
Church in Worcestershire
since 2016**