



23 December, 2015

News:

Stunning Christmas labyrinth at Hampshire church

As part of its Christmas celebrations Eastleigh Baptist Church transformed its building to take people through the Christmas story

The church created a stunning, interactive Christmas labyrinth to explore the characters and events of the Nativity.

The Nativity Experience featured different scenery to transport visitors to the heart of the story, alongside costumed storytellers who brought it to life. There were also games and activities.

The labyrinth was open to the public on Saturday, 21 November to coincide with the town's Christmas lights switch on. During the ensuing week it was open by appointment to schools.

It proved popular, with 765 people coming on Saturday, and a similar number of school children throughout the week.

'The aim of the experience was to engage children in the wonder of Christmas, and to learn about its importance to Christians,' said minister Joth Hunt.

'We also tied it into the Religious Education curriculum in schools, with the children coming in for a lesson and the characters taking them through the story.

'We've done a number of things in previous years, but this was on a far bigger scale. I'm not surprised we were around 1,500 people.'

'The story of the loveliest note of all'

Baptist minister and children's author Richard Littledale has teamed up with Tommy's this Christmas to release a charming audiobook

The Note is a story of hope and never ending love, and was released on iTunes and all other digital platforms on Friday 18 December.

Proceeds from the audiobook will benefit Tommy's Charity, which funds medical research into the causes of miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth, and provides advice and support for all parents-to-be to help them have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby.

The Note does not approach the subject of loss directly, says Richard, minister of Teddington Baptist Church, but the story will resonate on many levels.

'There is something people don't know about notes, even though it's all around them, all the time.... every note goes on forever, once it's been played or sung, it stays out there hidden in the air until it's needed again.

'This is the story of the loveliest note of all!'

He adds, 'All too often the note of a child's voice is silenced far far too soon, neonatal death is the source of untold anguish, a symphony cut short at the first note.

'Miscarriage or still birth are a tune whose first note is never, ever played.'

The Note is the latest children's book for Richard. In recent years he has authored "The Littlest Star" and "Little Owl".

The Note will be released on iTunes and all other digital platforms on Friday, 18 December, price 99p.

Sermon of the Year launched

National competition designed to be the catalyst for a fresh look at and celebration of the craft of preaching

This competition will explore how stories and illustrations can be most effectively used and at heart "is a way for people to bring the Bible alive to a 21st century audience," say the organisers. Designed to be an opportunity for preachers old and young to hone their skills, the competition is a celebration of those with the gift of communicating the Word of God.

Submissions are to be in the form of written manuscripts of between 1000 and 2000 words, emailed to sermon@lst.ac.uk by midnight on 31 December 2015. Two finalists in the categories of under 21 and 21 and over will preach their sermons to a panel and a live audience on 28 May 2016 at LST in Northwood.

The shortlisted entries will be published and the winners will be awarded various resources, the chance to access some free study at LST and the opportunity to be mentored in their ministries.

Preach Magazine editor Jo Swinney said: 'We believe sermons have the power to quite literally change the world. Yes, this is in part down to the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the listeners, but the preacher can do their part.'

'We want the competition to cause our nation's preachers to consider their craft and raise their games for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom.'

Matt Adcock, director of communications at LST said: 'The Word of God is the bedrock on which LST's theological teaching is built and our preaching module is a key element. All LST students undertake church-based placements and many deliver sermons across a range of denominations.'

'The Sermon of the Year competition is great opportunity for those with a heart to share God's Word to step forward and share their skills with a new audience.'

The panellists include Ian Coffey, a Baptist minister and currently the Vice-Principal and Director of Leadership Training at Moorlands College; Julie Sheldon, an international speaker, evangelist, writer and broadcaster; and Krish Kandiah, President of LST as well being Founder and Director of Home for Good.

Lords launch for CAR sexual violence report

The voices of hurting women thousands of miles away were heard in the Houses of Lords last week

The UK launch of an important report on sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) during the recent conflict in Central African Republic (CAR) brought government officials and faith leaders together last week, thanks to a report co-sponsored by BMS World Mission.

The 8 December meeting provided leaders with an open platform to discuss findings in a new report, To Make Our Voices Heard, and explore ways of preventing similar atrocities in the future.

It all began with brave voices. The voices of survivors sharing stories of degrading abuse and heartbreak.

Christian anti-Balaka militias and Muslim Seleka rebels were both responsible for atrocities during the recent conflict and BMS and Tearfund carried out a joint study in April and May 2015 into sexual and gender violence used as weapons of war. It was the first research of its kind since the conflict began in the country.

One woman who was interviewed in the survey told of the impact sexual violence had had on her in the conflict. "It leaves physical damage and emotional scars. Sexual violence shatters the survivor's life and the experience cannot be erased from your memory. These traumatic experiences become alive in your head for the rest of your life."

A voice like this cannot be ignored and her story cannot be erased. The initial launch of the report was held in Bangui, capital of CAR in September 2015. But, some in the United Kingdom also heard their cries this week.

The launch event was hosted by Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose, a commissioner for the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission and former BMS volunteer in Trinidad and Tobago.

Government and representatives from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), BMS, Tearfund, members of Parliament and other organisations met to discuss humanitarian response efforts and how the government can best respond.

From the report and discussion it was clear that international humanitarian help could do more to engage faith groups in assisting survivors' voices to be heard and community reconciliations to be achieved.

Leaders discussed the response of faith groups in countries of conflict. Religious groups provide a source of trust for communities and faith leaders can be instrumental in preventing conflict in the first place.

"There is remarkable potential for an interfaith approach," says Chris Dain, Deputy Head of the FCO's Central and Southern Africa Office. "It can diffuse tensions in conflict and the faith approach is a core strand of the total international community response."

Moving forward, the report urges faith groups around the world to play a bigger role in responding to SGBV.

As the voices of these women challenge faith groups, they also challenge governments. Baroness Berridge brings a motion before the House of Lords this week. The goal is to challenge the government to place more pressure on UN humanitarian response not to forget to address important issues of gender and sexual violence in places of conflict.

Even though these voices are thousands of miles away, taking a stand for them here in the United Kingdom is incredibly important.

"It's a fundamental truth about mission that God cares about these people. God is passionately upset by what happened to these women and he calls his Church into action to pursue justice and mission within the world," says Steve Sanderson, BMS Manager for Mission.

“I believe every BMS supporter that’s been involved in giving and supporting to BMS relief work is also standing alongside these women. BMS has not been silent. Everyone involved in giving, praying and supporting has not been silent either.”

Baptism of an asylum seeker

A minister shares the story of an unusual - and urgent - baptism

There was a knock at the front door of the church as I sat in my office preparing this Sunday’s message. I answered the door to find a young, Middle Eastern-looking man stood there. “Can I help you” I said. He pointed a finger at me and said carefully and deliberately “You baptise me”!

From the expression on my face, he thought that I had not understood him, so he took out his mobile phone and typed something into google translate and showed me the English translation : “You baptise me”!

I invited him inside where I learnt that his name was ‘Ali’ and that he came from Iran. He was living in temporary accommodation at a hotel on the other side of Stockport which is being used as a transit post for refugees and asylum seekers before they get moved on to their final destination. I was intrigued to know how Ali had managed to find his way to my church from the hotel so I asked him how he had got here and he pointed to his phone and said “google maps”.

“But why did you want to come to this church, there are plenty of other churches much nearer to your hotel, why did you not go to one of them?” With a look of exasperation, he pointed to our sign and said “Stockport BAPTIST church – you baptise me”

That was my introduction to a remarkable young man who in the space of a few short days has had an amazing impact on our church and everyone else who have met him. He explained to me that he was brought up in Iran as a Muslim, but became addicted to drugs and lost the will to live. He lived in darkness for several years and thought about ending his life on numerous occasions.

Eventually, one of his friends who was a reformed drug addict, suggested that Ali should attend rehab and therapy. He agreed to what his friend suggested and attended these rehab and therapy sessions with his friend for approximately one month. He was then given a book and was told this would help him through these difficult times. This book was the Bible.

He read the Bible and became very interested in learning more about Christianity. He was introduced to a Christian community and after three months decided that he wanted to become a Christian although he knew that would be very dangerous for him. He decided to escape from Iran and come to the UK where he was transferred from London to Stockport.

“But why did you want to come to this church, there are plenty of other churches much nearer to your hotel, why did you not go to one of them?” With a look of exasperation, he pointed to our sign and said “Stockport BAPTIST church – you baptise me”

After listening to his story I realised that there was no good reason why I shouldn't baptise him but the question was when? I explained to Ali that, unlike in the Bible, there was no obvious natural watering hole around Stockport that I could use so we would have to use the under floor baptismal pool which requires considerable effort to get it filled, heated and ready. I proposed to Ali that we could arrange the baptismal service for a week on Sunday giving us 9 days to get everything organised. He agreed and seemed very excited that he was finally going to be baptised.

The following day I spoke to the lady from the Home Office who was responsible for looking after the refugees at the hotel and she explained to me that Ali could be moved to another location at any time – that they were given no advance notice and could be moved to anywhere in the North (including Scotland).

I decided that we could not wait another week to baptise him, as in all likelihood Ali would not be around that long. So I contacted a few of the church leadership team and we agreed that the earliest we could do it was Sunday evening. This is mainly because it takes 5 hours to fill the pool and another 12 hours to heat it!

I asked Ali if he would write his testimony down so that it could be read out at the service and he said he would but it would need to be translated from farsi. I recalled that a lady called Monica who had recently volunteered to cook a meal at our 'Loaves & Fishes' homeless project was Iranian and could speak Farsi so I contacted her and she very kindly agreed to translate Ali's testimony.

Late on Saturday evening, I received a text from Monica telling me that she had translated Ali's testimony and that it made her cry and could she come to the service as she had never seen a baptism. I thanked her and told her that she would be very welcome to come along.

Sunday duly arrived and the pool was filled with water. We decided to hold the service at 5.30pm which coincides with the time of the 'Loaves & Fishes' meal that we have every Sunday evening with the intention of inviting the homeless to join us upstairs in the sanctuary before the meal.

Just before the service I received a text from a friend of Ali's who I had met at the hotel the previous week but who had since been moved to another location. He had

heard of Ali's baptismal service and he wanted to know if I could help him as he wanted to be baptised.

The service was very simple but extremely moving as Monica read out Ali's testimony there was not a dry eye in the place. Ali thanked Jesus for 'saving his life'. He told me before the service that he had no family – here or in Iran – whether that is because they have all died or because he has been ostracised by his family wasn't clear. But I explained to him that he now had a new family and we were all his Christian brothers and sisters.

We have no idea where Ali might eventually end up but we do know that he is in safe hands and that God will be with him wherever he goes.

One of my Deacons asked me whether we should empty the pool and I said that we should hang fire as who knows what this week might bring!

Steve Hough is the permanent, part-time minister of Stockport Baptist Church

Baptisms:

Bishop's Stortford Baptist Church, Herts: Isaac Wheeler, Chris Byatt, Nigel Sweeney
Bromham Baptist Church, Bedfordshire: Elizabeth Puffett, Keith Knowles, Shari Webb
Redcar Baptist Church, North Yorkshire: Julie Hillier and Janice Hiller
Redditch Baptist Church, Worcestershire: Alexander Los
Victoria Park Baptist Church, Bristol: Darren Knowland

Know anyone preparing for baptism? [Check out our new range of cards](#)

Send your baptism notifications to phobson@baptist.org.uk

Jobs

Opportunities to serve in Union life - Trustee and committee member roles with Baptists Together
Specialist Team Leader, Ministries, Baptist Union of Great Britain

For more information on all these positions, visit <http://www.baptist.org.uk/jobs>

Events/resources:

New year prayer call

Praying for more people to meet, love and follow Jesus in 2016. Lots of info and

resources here: <http://hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/256554/Prayer.aspx>

Enough for Advent

During the season of Advent, the Joint Public Issues Team are offering a series of four reflective readings and prayers. They are designed to be suitable for use in Sunday services as part of the lighting of advent candles, but could be used in other contexts too.

These resources are designed as part of the #ENOUGH campaign, to help churches be more aware of its key priorities and to help root our public campaigning with our Gospel faith.

Visit www.baptist.org.uk/enoughadvent

Immersive experience with Baptist pioneers

Interested in a few days of living alongside the ordinary life of pioneering Baptist church plants? A 4-day residential opportunity to experience and reflect on emerging Baptist churches is being offered in April.

More here: <http://churchfromscratch.org/immersive-experience-25-28-april-2016>