



December 2012

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Women in Ministry

Throughout a lifetime in pastoral ministry, I have often found myself trying to unite conflicting groups on common ground. I have the greatest of sympathy with St Paul in his dealings with two members of the Philippian Church, Euodia and Syntyche. They had fallen out, and he urges each of them to be of the same mind in the Lord. Most churches have someone like that. How can we deal with them? There was a time in China under Chairman Mao when all good citizens were expected to look and dress exactly the same, but there has never been a requirement for all Christians to be clones of a single ideal. Nevertheless, while we may have all sorts of legitimate differences from each other in the things of the world, when it comes to "the things of the Lord", can we not put aside our personal differences so that God may be glorified and His mission advanced?

Not always, it seems, especially over issues such as women's ministry. To do so smacks of compromise, and that threatens the integrity of positions based on deep, if conflicting, convictions. When I am helping people to engage in ecumenical dialogue, I often urge people to try to understand the other person's position, to appreciate why they hold so dear the things that they do. Only then can we hope to go forwards together. I won't agree with the stance taken by every Christian I meet, but I do need to understand their background if I am to join in meaningful dialogue or mission at any level with them.

For some of us, tradition is everything, God's will mediated through a timeless Church which is rooted in Christ and source of all authority. For others of us, the Word of God as revealed in Scripture and interpreted by the Holy Spirit to individual believers is paramount, shaping and guiding the Church itself. And some of us move between the two positions and are influenced by both.

How can one bring these contrasting experiences together? If I knew that, perhaps I'd be the one heading for Canterbury! But I am conscious that ecumenism itself has moved during the decades I have been involved in this particular movement. There was a time when its goal was seen as the creation of a super-church, one which, while broad, would have one universally agreed pattern of ministry and worship. Recently, though, the language has changed and there is much more talk of "receptive ecumenism". In such dialogue we will be less inclined to explain to others why our position is (obviously) the right one, more inclined to invite the other person to share with us the spiritual treasures of their experience in order that we might grow in our own faith and knowledge of God and His Church. In the days of the Early Church, it is arguable that allowing women to lead the Christian community would have caused a scandal in some provinces and hence would have severely limited the Church's mission there. Now it seems that the tables have turned. Not allowing women to lead at all levels of the Church is clearly scandalous in the eyes of many outside the Christian community and our credibility is again threatened!

So is everything relative? Does everything depend on context? Not at all. But as Jesus himself said, (Mark 12:27) *"(God) is not the God of the dead, but of the living,"* and a living God will speak to His people in every generation. At the beginning of the Book of Revelation there is a repeated chorus: *"If you have ears then listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!"* So what might God be saying to us? Perhaps above all else, to listen to each other and to discern what is truly of God and what is only of humanity. Gamaliel, a famous member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, faced a similar challenge in the first century. His argument was simple. If Jesus was a false prophet like many others before him, this new movement would soon fade into obscurity. If, however, the work was *"of God, you cannot possibly defeat (it). You could find yourselves fighting against God!"*

To some ecumenism itself is no more than a lukewarm apostasy. To others like us it is a means by which in all humility we may discover the greater riches of God, not least through the revelations each Church has received. So may He guide and bless the leadership of all of our Churches to meet the challenges of this day.

(For those who are looking for some Scriptural exegesis of St. Paul's teaching on the issue of Women in the Church, check out this useful blog by [Andy Goodliff](#) who also says, "For those struggling with 1 Corinthians 11, 14 and 1 Timothy 2, see Bishop Tom Wright [here](#) and Simon Woodman [here](#).") [Back to top](#)

Luther anniversary planning at Ecumenical Centre

With a robust evocation of the Word – written, spoken, incarnate – Bishop Martin Schindehütte of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) launched a day of planning with leadership of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical organizations in Geneva for the celebration in 2017 of the 500th anniversary of the seminal moment in the Reformation when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg. The bishop was accompanied by the Revd Dr Margot Kässmann, who serves as the EKD ambassador for the Reformation Jubilee, and the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)'s German National Committee Revd Norbert Denecke, as well as EKD press officer Silke Römhild.

Schindehütte offered his thoughts in a homily during morning prayers in the Ecumenical Centre on 28 November, centring his reflection on the first verse of the gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word." Noting that state observance of the anniversary will focus on the Reformation's boost to freedom of conscience and democratic impulses, Schindehütte probed the deeper meanings that the verse and the concept of the Word hold for Christians, especially since the Reformation. "The Word does not indicate a reality. It creates reality. It is reality. It becomes reality." For Christians, he claimed, the words "contain the mystery of God" and the ground of life on earth.

WCC general secretary Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit stressed the ecumenical importance of the Reformation, often seen as a church-dividing event, for its fresh encounter with the Bible, its renewal of Christian polity and reflection, and its spur to Christian discipleship in the world. The upcoming anniversary has been a topic of broad discussion in recent years. "What we should celebrate together is the renewal and the discovery of the gospel. We should celebrate that the ecumenical movement and dialogues have helped us to see this as a treasure for all of us, regardless of which church tradition or identity we might have," Tveit had told the WCC Central Committee in August. "I will be disappointed if strong recognition of the importance of the renewed understanding of the gospel in 1517, which we have seen from all partners in the ecumenical family, including the participants from the Roman Catholic Church, is not seen as a reason to celebrate in 2017."

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Tribute to Patriarch Ignatius IV

The World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit attended the funeral of Patriarch Ignatius IV (Hazim) in Beirut, on 9 December. Tveit paid a befitting tribute to the patriarch, calling him "a beloved church leader" recognizing 33 years of his immense contributions to the ecumenical movement and Christian Muslim dialogue.

Patriarch Ignatius of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East passed away on 5 December in Lebanon, aged 92. His funeral took place at the Saint Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral in Beirut. "We have honoured a beloved church leader for the Orthodox family, a significant ecumenist, a great religious leader in the Middle East. I was received as a friend when we met last year, and I kept this memory as a costly treasure. May God bless the seeds of his legacy," said Tveit.

The service was presided by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I. Among other attendees included Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus and Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and Durres, bishops of the Antiochian Orthodox Church and representatives of the Orthodox churches worldwide. The funeral service was also attended by Catholicos Aram I, head of the Holy See of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Maronite Patriarch Bishara al-Rai, together with Eastern Orthodox bishops, Oriental Catholic patriarchs and leaders of Protestant churches. The Lebanese government announced 9 December as an official day of mourning.

The Lebanese president Michel Sleiman and prime minister Najib Mikati were also present at the funeral service of Patriarch Ignatius. At the ceremony, the Lebanese president praised the late Patriarch Ignatius for his moderation and wisdom, and awarded him the National Order of the Cedar. Many officials who offered their condolences to the Antiochian Orthodox community also described the patriarch as a man of moderation.

Metropolitan Saba Esper was appointed as interim patriarch on 7 December, whose main task will be to organize the election of a new patriarch. Immediately after the funeral service, Patriarch Ignatius' body was taken to be buried at the Mariamite Cathedral in Damascus, Syria.

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WCC invites young communicators to work for its assembly

The World Council of Churches seeks young communication professionals from its member churches and ecumenical partners to work for the upcoming 10th Assembly, from 23 October to 10 November 2013 in Busan, Republic of Korea. This will be an opportunity for skilled young communicators to work with a diverse team of communication professionals from around the world.

By inviting young professionals, the WCC hopes to include their unique perspective in sharing stories from the assembly with audiences across the globe. In addition to gaining valuable communication experience, these positions also offer an opportunity for ecumenical formation. The young professionals should have 3 to 5 years' experience in the field of media and communications, either with the church or general media. Applicants must be between the ages of 22 and 30 years old. They will also need to demonstrate strong involvement in church, youth or ecumenical activities in their community. Fluency in speaking and writing English is essential. Fluency in Korean, French, German or Spanish will be an asset for some positions. Applicants are invited to review the job profiles and submit a letter of intention and curriculum vitae to [Linda Hanna](#) at the WCC Communication Department no later than 31 January 2013.

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Czech Church is ecologically-friendly

From an interview with Professor Hana Librová of the Department of Environmental Studies at the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno. With the books 'Pestří a Zelení' (Colourful and Greens) and 'Vlažní váhavi' (Tepid and Hesitant), she established the terms 'voluntary modesty' and 'ecological luxury'. Christians and ecologists have, in her opinion, more in common than they admit: attentiveness towards the environment and the urge to protect the weak.

Are nature and countryside threatened today?

The threat to our agricultural countryside is most visible with the rapidly diminishing number of bird species. But also the soil is in a bad condition. The water deficit is substantial. Wind and water erosion are heavy. The rural countryside takes a beating everywhere you look.

One chance for the recovery of agricultural land through greener farming is the European Union. Through EU legislation and funding programs, it seeks to preserve the rural landscape and to initiate new forms of farming that are gentler for the environment. However, it is a relatively weak force, which can hardly achieve anything essential. By the way, the attitude of the EU is also sometimes paradox, she funds heavily, for example, road traffic which harms the landscape. The support by the EU can therefore not be assessed as unambiguously positive.

Your subject is 'Humanitarian Environmental Sciences'. What is that?

In general terms, it deals with socio-scientific issues regarding the relationship between humankind and nature. The relationship with nature is always connected to a certain degree of human sensibility. I think that an emotional basis is here a necessary condition. I see this as one of the common denominator of Christian groups and conservationists.

Each of us can do either much or little. It depends how he understands his relationship with the world around him and how this influences his own standards. It must be said that the destructive influences, that destroy our environment, are powerful, starting with the free market and the nature of the production going on to demographic growth to the need to consume constantly. Today this affects the whole world. The attempt of the individual to do something seems completely unremarkable. But it is in the power of each to include in his way of living the concern for nature and then to act according to this knowledge. If life today shall retain its dignity, this side shouldn't be ignored. And what does that mean practically? The list would be endless: Starting with the mandatory cleaning of streams and springs, the planting of trees on to a non-wasteful lifestyle, avoidance of ski runs, energy conservation, waste separation, attempts to living off the grid, vegetarianism, and purchasing local products to the support of nature conservation initiatives.

Can voluntary modesty save nature? How can people be convinced?

Certainly it cannot save nature. Voluntary modesty is more of a behavioural model which we can approach more or less. It is about leading a dignified life in times of ecologic crisis. There are very few voluntarily modest people and according to my research, also they lower, over the years, their standards somehow: If we would draw a factual balance, we would notice that, compared to the destructive and powerful influences of the technological and consumerism society, voluntary modesty as real form of life is a negligible and fuzzy factor, as its positive effect on nature is mediated in a very complicated way. But that does not mean that it is meaningless.

Sometimes the results of a modest and environmentally friendly lifestyle are easy to see. Under consumption we have not only to imagine the purchase of material things. Restricting consumption can also mean to ignore some activities and services whose environmental harm is evident, for example, skiing on slopes or holidays abroad. The huge tourist complexes of coastal resorts have destroyed the ecosystem of the beaches. And if it has to be: why do we need on one side of the hotel a swimming pool when the sea is on the other side? I see today in the wild addiction for adventure a bigger problem than in purchasing continuously new things.

Are we as Christians responsible for God's creation?

I dislike the statement that "a Christian is responsible for the environment" from depth of my soul. It seems to me that a complicated matter is here replaced by a thoughtless cliché, like with the metaphor "stewards of creation." What is meant here with the big word 'responsibility'? Shall the word express that Christians feel responsible, as stewards of God's work, for what has been happening, from the past until today, with nature, for what has become of creation? (By the way, Christians are often blamed for this.) As a Christian, I would tremble before the wrath of the Creator with fear! But if with 'responsibility' is meant the actual task of Christians, regarding the future, that neither makes sense. Looking at it objectively: what can a Christian do? He can merely pray (I say this without any irony and actually in the conviction of the only reliable efficacy). To give an example: Real is something like the responsibility of the parents towards the family. They ensure the success of the family; they can protect the children effectively. But a similar responsibility can't be taken on today by Christians towards nature with regard to the ever increasing ecological crisis. They are not equipped, especially when it comes to power, for such a giant task. To say: "responsible for the future development are the politicians in top positions, Presidents, Prime Ministers and especially the leaders of major industrial corporations" - yes, that would be correct. I see the calls from the pulpits for

responsibility for God's creation, as something that is not backed up by real thought and what surprises me in thoughtful Protestants. Sure, also I'm talking about this in a very simplified manner here.

Christians sometimes look at conservationists a bit derogatory, like at pagans. That it is not true in my opinion. Like I said, I see the contrary, the similarity of the two groups. Two things connect them. For one, both refer to something higher, which transcends humans. I see that with students from a Christian background, how well they understand and process environmental issues. Additionally Christians have another characteristic, which is actually the foundation for nature conservation, and that is altruism, the sense for the weak. Today the position of the weak that must be helped is taken by nature.

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Taizé Meeting in Rome

The next European Meeting will be held in Rome, from 28 December 2012 to 2 January 2013. The Taizé Community is preparing the meeting together with the Diocese of Rome. It will gather tens of thousands of young adults for a new stage of the "pilgrimage of trust on earth" which Brother Roger began in the late 1970s.

Participants from Europe and beyond will be accommodated with families and religious communities, both Catholic and of the other churches present in Rome and the surrounding region. They will be invited to join in pilgrimage to the tombs of the apostles and to the catacombs, to pray in the large basilicas and meet Pope Benedict XVI.

In the message he addressed to the young people gathered in Berlin for the last European Meeting, the Pope wrote, "The Holy Father wants to tell you of the joy he will have in welcoming you next year for the 35th European meeting of your 'pilgrimage of trust on earth'. Rome will welcome you warmly!"

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David Moxon becomes chief Anglican rep to Catholic Church

The Archbishop of New Zealand is to become the Anglican Communion's chief representative to the Roman Catholic Church.

Archbishop David Moxon will make the move to Rome after stepping down as Archbishop of New Zealand and Bishop of Waikato in April. He will act as the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative at the Holy See and as the Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome, which works to foster unity between the Catholic and Anglican Churches. Archbishop Moxon is expected to take up his new roles by next May.

The outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, said he was delighted with the appointment. "There can be few people in the Communion so well qualified for this work," he said. "Archbishop David has done distinguished service to the Anglican – Roman Catholic dialogue both locally and globally, and brings to this post both a wealth of experience and a range of profound friendships across the confessional frontiers."

Speaking about his new appointment, Archbishop Moxon said: "Our two churches are on the verge of new opportunities for joint mission, especially in the aid and development area. "I'm also convinced there are new opportunities to learn from each other, and to support each other in the sacred cause for which Jesus gave his life and blood."

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Porvoo Conference in Denmark

The Porvoo Communion of Churches held their 4th Theological Conference last month in Copenhagen on the theme: The Sacraments in the Mission of the Church

The Churches of the Porvoo Communion have signed an agreement to "share a common life in mission and service". At this year's conference in Copenhagen the communique spoke of the vital link between sacraments and mission, "since sacraments are the life blood of the church, and mission is the core mandate of the church." In a rapidly changing world the traditional pre-suppositions for celebrating the sacraments and communicating the Christian faith can no longer be taken for granted. The conference therefore looked at the following:

- Lack of Christian confidence in a multi-cultural, multi-faith and increasingly secularised Europe.
- The impact of the economic situation in Europe and its implication for Christian mission.
- Tensions between social customs and tradition on the one hand and church commitment and membership on the other.
- The increasing percentages of people who feel estranged from or have no contact with the church
- The desire of the non-baptised to receive Holy Communion in some contexts
- The possibilities and difficulties of inter-church marriages
- The contributions of the world church to European Christianity towards understanding mission engagement

Conference presentations focussed on the twin sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, making the church itself a sign to the world of the Kingdom of God, which is its mission to announce.

All presentations were followed by plenary discussions. There were three concluding workshops to facilitate more meaningful small group discussions. Through public conversations in an interview format Keynote Listeners provided the participants with the insights they had gained from the presentations and group work.

There were opening and closing services at Dragoer Church, and during the conference the participants visited the Church of The Holy Spirit in the city centre of Copenhagen and heard a moving presentation by Revd Carina Woelck on the parish work with people living with HIV. The participants also heard about the Greenlandic congregation, and enjoyed a beautiful mini-concert.

Snapshots of Contributions

Baptism: Apprenticeship to the Master

The keynote paper by Paul Avis dealt with the essential identity of the church, which comes from God in word and sacrament and is an instrument of the mission of God. Jonas Jørgensen spoke about non-Western perspectives on the sacraments with examples of marginal forms of Christian practices in Bangladesh and South India, such as Sufi Islam with Jesus as their prophet and the Christ Bhaktas. Karl Sigurbjörnsson reflected on discipleship as the working-out of baptism in a learning and doing relationship, like being an apprentice to the Master. Ian Paton argued that the gifts of baptism commit Christians to being part of their society with a duty to exercise citizenship in their witness to God's kingdom. Renewing the church includes both active service within it and practising a life of prayer and love of one's neighbour.

Sandra Gintere reflected on how the membership of the universal church given in baptism is primary and belonging to a denomination only secondary. Christopher Cocksworth advocated that confirmation be more closely related to empowerment for missionary activity in the world.

Jaakko Rusama described the rapid shift of the centre of world Christianity to the global South, and called for the transmission of the Christian faith to reflect cross-cultural interdependence.

The Eucharist: A sacrament of hope

Michael Jackson spoke of the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity and mission in Christ, and Peter Stjerndorff gave examples from his pastoral ministry to illustrate the Eucharist as a sacrament of hope. He described how some people can feel themselves excluded out of a sense of the sacrament's holiness and their own unworthiness. Tomi Karttunen argued that God as the giver of everything good is the basis of Luther's theology of Holy Communion, while Rachael Jordan presented the Church of England's new practice of 'fresh expressions' in an attempt to reach the un-churched and the de-churched by gathering people outside traditional forms of congregation. Finally, Gwynn ap Gwilym reflected on how the fellowship of the baptised is one of repeated new beginnings – also for the churches in the Porvoo Communion.

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WCC sees positive step in Palestine upgrade at the UN

The newly upgraded status of Palestine in the United Nations (UN) is viewed as a positive step in the direction toward peace and a reaffirmation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) long-term commitment to a two-state solution, Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC general secretary said. "It is now up to the two sides, Israel and Palestine, to move this process forward. The vote in the UN confirms that the two-state solution is the best way to peace in the region. Without that, the future holds yet more violence and insecurity, and continuing tragedy for both peoples."

Tveit made his comments following the decision of the UN General Assembly on 29 November to acknowledge the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a "non-member observer state". The motion passed by more than the required two-thirds majority. Previously, participation in the UN had been on the basis of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's recognition as a "permanent observer". A 2011 attempt to install the PA as a full UN member-state stalled in the Security Council. "The WCC has consistently spoken in favour of a two-state solution," Tveit recalled. Since as early as its First Assembly in 1948, the WCC has championed the rights of both Israel and Palestine to free and independent states of their own.

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Nigerian youth adopt eco-justice for urban neighbourhoods

A sense of eco-justice is arriving, step-by-step, in urban Lagos, Nigeria. The story of Njideka Onwunyi shows how one young woman can galvanize a growing response.

When Njideka Onwunyi talks about the effects of flooding in urban Lagos, her young peers nod their heads in understanding. They know all too well the realities of the cycle: the regular flooding causes contaminated water that has led to chronic and extreme drinking water shortages for the poorest neighbourhoods in Lagos. In fact, all of Nigeria has experienced extreme flooding in recent years, a condition most experts attribute to climate change.

Onwunyi decided to start in her own home city. First, she got her peers to talk about eco-justice. Then, she inspired them to improve sanitation and water, little by little, in an effort that is a growing positive force within the city. After attending Youth for Eco-Justice (Y4EJ), a 2011 programme organized jointly by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, Onwunyi was determined to take her passion for the earth back home. Nigeria, home to 120 million people, faces ecological challenges related to deforestation, urbanization and pollution. The country also contains the largest wetland and the third-largest drainage basin in Africa.

Onwunyi began a group called Youth for Eco-Justice Nigeria and developed a three-step Eco-Justice Education/Awareness Project. First, she planned a two-day workshop for 30 youth members of Our Lady of Fatima and St Augustine Catholic churches, as well as St Bartholomew Anglican Church. The workshop was presented as part of a "Youth Week" with the theme "Blossoming to Save the Earth! What's Your Stand?" In addition to speakers from the faith community, presenters also included representatives from Lagos State Waste Management Authority and Urban and Regional Planning Authority. Second, Onwunyi produced 30 copies of an eight-page booklet entitled "Eco-justice – Our Role as Young Christians in Preserving the Environment." The publication features case studies from Nigeria on eco-justice, along with theological references.

The majority of Onwunyi's audience was just beginning to understand the concept of eco-justice. That's why she chose to focus her program on true-to-life descriptions of Lagos to demonstrate how eco-justice is relevant within Nigeria's daily life. "I centred more on issues of climate and water justice based on my work knowledge and experience, and then followed up with case studies of climate change as it affects us here in urban Lagos with flooding and excessive heat," she explained. Onwunyi found that her workshop sessions were highly interactive as young people asked questions to help them understand the eco-justice movement. They were more than ready to talk about how climate change affected their own lives.

The practical results of Onwunyi's efforts are just beginning to show. Several young people in Lagos have started water and sanitation projects that will alleviate, little by little, the root causes of the water shortages for urban neighbourhoods. As she continues to plan workshops and actively communicate with her peers, Onwunyi still considers her Y4EJ training as the landmark experience that both educated and inspired her. "I got to see and understand in a broader view the eco-justice concept, and the best part was getting to see how active the faith community is in advocating for justice," she said. "This experience sparked off my desire to do more back home."

In implementing her project, Onwunyi met some serious challenges head-on. "Some young people were not too optimistic about joining the eco-justice advocacy, citing that there was no material benefit," said Onwunyi. "A major reason for this is the high unemployment rate (70%) among youth and the high rate of poverty in the country." But Onwunyi is gradually helping her peers see the relevancy of eco-justice to their daily lives. "In the end, the participants were very eager to learn."

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New milestone charted by International Review of Mission

International Review of Mission (IRM), the journal of the World Council of Churches (WCC) which celebrated its centenary this past year, focuses on one of the most recent ecumenical affirmations of Christian mission in its November 2012 edition. The title of the issue is *New Milestone in Mission*.

IRM explores and provides analysis of a re-affirmation of mission and evangelism which is to be presented at the 10th Assembly of the WCC when it meets in late October and early November 2013 at Busan, Korea. A product of the WCC commission on world mission and evangelism, the statement was unanimously adopted by the WCC Central Committee in September 2012. The document, *Together towards life: Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes*, emphasizes such aspects of contemporary outreach as "mission from the margins", "transformative spirituality" and "speaking the truth in love". Amid the shifting contexts of changing cultures, the church is shown to be "on the move". Among the authors of articles in IRM are WCC general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit, commission moderator Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, Kirsteen Kim, Tabita Kartika Christiani, Opoku Onyinah, Rosalie Velloso Ewell, Vladimir Fedorov and Beverly Eileen Mitchell. The International Review of Mission is edited by Jooseop Keum and co-published by WCC Publications and Wiley-Blackwell.

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Natwivity

Natwivity, the Christmas story told on Twitter and Facebook, is back for another year with more than 10,000 followers signed up ahead of its launch date on 1 December. *Natwivity* began, in 2010, as a project to tell the Christmas story in an up-to-date format for the digital age. Followers catch up with the story as it unfolds through tweeted comments during the day. Thousands of followers will, once again, hear the thoughts of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, but this year can look out for two new voices - the inn-keeper's wife and a reporter for the *Jerusalem Daily*.

Huw Tyler of creative agency, Share Creative, who devised *Natwivity*, said of its popularity: "*Natwivity* caught on because it helps us imagine the thoughts and feelings of a group of people caught up in one of the biggest stories

ever told, and the Twitter platform is a great medium to express that." Each character will post up to 140-character updates on Twitter and Facebook each day. By reading their daily tweets, followers can learn more about each of the character's lives in the run-up to the birth of Jesus on 25 December. Excerpts reveal Mary's inner thoughts as she decides how to reveal news of her pregnancy to Joseph, while the *Jerusalem Daily's* star reporter files stories about late night arguments of an expectant couple and a girl of 16 being thrown out of her home.

Among the team of writers is Andy Kind, a stand-up comedian, writer and tweeter. Andy said: "Many of our followers from last year told me *Natwivity* had helped them rediscover the story afresh because of the personal - and, we hope, comic - observations. Tweeting the nativity also really helped me think how this story might have unfolded at a personal level for such well-known characters." *Natwivity* has been made possible through collaboration between Share Creative and the Evangelical Alliance. Followers can visit www.natwivity.com and see the story unfold at www.twitter.com/natwivity or on www.facebook.com/natwivity. The play is suitable for people of all ages and backgrounds. [Back to top](#)

Cuts and welfare changes having a "scandalous" impact

Thirty church leaders in the North East of England have written an open letter to the Prime Minister warning that spending cuts and welfare changes are having a "scandalous" impact on communities in their region.

The letter, signed by church figures from Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, United Reformed, Baptist, Moravian, Quaker, Lutheran, Salvationist, Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions, was sent before the chancellor's recent autumn budget statement, but pertains directly to the policies and concerns it raises -- including further welfare cuts hitting the poorest in society.

The letter says: "As Church leaders in the North of England, we would like to express our concern over the way that cuts in public spending and reforms to the welfare system are beginning to play out in the communities we serve. We are disturbed that the political rhetoric that is increasingly used of benefits claimants, 'scrounger' and 'feckless' to name but two, stigmatises welfare in such a way that those who are in genuine need become reluctant to make claims, to the detriment of themselves, their families and the communities in which they live."

The church leaders urge the Prime Minister to achieve a better balance in the UK economy between the South and the North, "to enable people in northern communities to deploy and benefit from their skills, thereby enhancing the productivity of the country as a whole." They also express support for those aspects of Universal Credit "which make a genuine attempt to address longer term problems within the welfare system that can act as a deterrent to work", but add, "However we would also wish to draw your attention to the need to ensure that full employment remains a policy aim for the Government in support of a system that sees welfare as transitional assistance for those that are capable of work".

The letter has been coordinated by the ecumenical Churches' Regional Commission in the North East (CRCNE), and also commends to the Prime Minister and the government the CRCNE publication *Am I My Brother's Keeper*, which gives an informed and detailed overview of the impact of spending cuts and other economic measures on the region. The church leaders also affirm the importance of the welfare state, just employment and fair taxation.

The list of signatories include the Rt Rev Nick Baines, Bishop of Bradford (Anglican), Mgr. John Wilson, for the Catholic Diocese of Leeds, the Rev Dr Roger Walton, Methodist Chairman of West Yorkshire District, Bishop Tony Parry, from the New Testament Church of God in Bradford, the Rt Rev John Packer, Anglican Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, the Rev Jane Day, Regional Minister (Mission) for Yorkshire Baptist Association, the Rev Kenneth Evans, chairman of the Yorkshire District Conference of the Moravian Church and the Rev Kevin Watson, Yorkshire Synod Moderator of the United Reformed Church.

Bishop Nick Baines commented last week: "The Government needs to know how its proposals are impacting on people who live outside London; they're not just dealing with figures in Whitehall, this is having an impact on people every day and the poorest are paying the highest. In Bradford we have 38,000 children living below the poverty line. Welfare reforms mean the poorest people are getting poorer, while the richest people are getting richer – and that's a scandal." [Ekklesia] [Back to top](#)

No room at the Inn for the homeless this Christmas

Churches are offering people an advent calendar with a difference this Christmas. Launched under the banner [No Place Like Home](#), the interactive calendar focuses on the issue of housing against the backdrop of the nativity story, aiming to raise awareness about the increased threat of homelessness and poverty in the UK. Bible reflections and action points are hidden behind the calendar's windows which reflect the campaign's four key themes: housing, affordability, stigmatisation and the Christmas story. People can keep up to date with the calendar by following No Place Like Home on [Tumblr](#) and [Twitter](#).

Rudi Richardson, founder of [Streetlytes-UK](#) - a charity helping homeless people and people with drug and alcohol problems, said: "I have been homeless in the UK, in the States and in Germany. I was homeless for seven years. Homelessness starts way before you are physically homeless - there is a disconnect that is unresolved. You internalise those feelings and that is the problem. Homelessness is a spiritual problem too. I believe that the gift of hospitality is so important to the self-esteem of the homeless person. We are already broken anyway and we need to know that we are loved."

The Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain are all backing the campaign. At the Methodist Conference in Plymouth this summer, Methodists voted to establish a group to look into policy on affordable housing, assist Circuits and Districts in the local management of housing resources and help people who are homeless. James North, Policy Adviser for the Methodist Church, said: "Britain is in the midst of a housing crisis. Millions of families still search for a safe, affordable home, whilst numbers of homeless people accessing services, such as those provided by Methodism's Whitechapel Mission to the Homeless, continue to rise. Many churches provide day centres and night shelters and, following the government's spending cuts, they must maintain and increase their support. But the chronic shortage of homes is a broader issue. I hope this calendar inspires Churches and individuals to 'make room at the inn' and continue working to ensure that everybody has a decent home."

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Holy Innocents Day Vigil for victims of abuse

Congregations of all City and Town Centre Churches in the UK are being asked to hold a Vigil for Children and Young People, past and present, who have suffered abuse.

Why? Currently, there is in Britain a willingness to confront sexual abuse and to hear from those who have survived it. Churches can play a part in keeping this window of time open. They can show solidarity with people who have been affected by sexual abuse as well as challenging perpetrators to stop. Finally and crucially, it is a chance to bring this evil before God and ask for his mercy and wisdom.

Holy Innocents Day, Friday 28th December, 12 o'clock – 3 o'clock p.m.

When? Holy Innocents' Day has been chosen for its profound symbolism of lost childhoods and affirmation of the absolute innocence of children suffering sexual abuse. Pragmatically 1) People are likely to be in town and city centres shopping. 2) Members of our congregations and other volunteers are less likely to be at work. 3) A fixed time nationally makes publicity easier and clearer for people who may wish to attend (though people may need to be flexible locally). 4) It falls on a Friday so it is something that Mosques could more easily participate in.

What? Be open from 12-3 p.m. on Holy Innocents' Day

- a. have a rota of volunteers to cover the 3 hours in order to offer a prayerful presence
- b. have a simple ritual activity for people to do with clear instructions (suggestions can be found [here](#))
- c. have prayer cards with help line numbers on the back (example found [here](#))
- d. Be ready to respond as fellow human beings should people become distressed.
- e. Gather whatever has been used in the ritual (e.g. stones, candles, buttons ribbons) at the end of the vigil and have them brought during intercessions on the next Sunday.
- f. Check Ecumenical partners in your area are at least discussing participation and ask Mosques, where you have links, to include a prayer in their Friday worship.
- g. Let your local media know including putting an advert in your local papers.
- h. Contact (if you wish to discuss further) kate.plant@sheffield.anglican.org

Who? – Lay People. This is an activity that does not need to be led by clergy. Initial enquiries suggest that networks such as spiritual accompaniers, Mothers Union or volunteers from other churches or outside the church may be willing to support this initiative should you not have enough volunteers from your own congregations. [Back to top](#)

Charities should "be good and do good"

Charities should not take public trust and confidence for granted, the new Chair of the Charity Commission, the regulator of charities in England and Wales, stressed. Speaking at the annual conference of the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) on Thursday, William Shawcross highlighted the importance of good governance in upholding public trust in charities. He pointed in particular to independence as a key driver of public confidence and a fundamental principle of charity law.

William Shawcross said: "Public confidence is vital. Indeed, it is why the Commission exists. The public expects charities not only to do good, in the ways that I have described, but to be good, to represent, in their form and their management, our better natures. This is especially important given the enormous diversity of charities on the register. Diversity implies a level of disagreement and dissent. And in a pluralistic society, this is as it should be. The fact that an organisation is a charity does not mean everyone will support it. But the public expects that all charities meet certain basic standards of integrity and probity. So if charities are part of the glue that holds society together, then good governance is the glue that binds charities."

He went on to highlight accountability and independence as two key elements of good charity governance. "Independence is about making decisions only on the basis of the best interests of the charity and its beneficiaries. Not the interests of funders – including government. Charities operate in a complex environment and are in ever fiercer competition for funding and contracts to deliver services. This competition is not a problem in and of itself. It may help drive innovation and keep charity trustees on their toes. But I wonder whether this development also places great strain on trustees to make decisions on behalf of their charities. These decisions must be independent and reflect the interests of the charity only – not the interest of funders. Partnerships with government enable many charities to stay in the mainstream of policy and to improve their services. But charities should not become the junior partner in the welfare state; whether or not they provide services funded by government or indeed receive grants from government, they must remain independent and focused on their mission. "

William Shawcross also reassured delegates that the Commission recognises the historic and continued contribution charities advancing faith make to British society. "People of faith – particularly Christians – have formed the backbone of civil society and charitable giving in this country for at least a thousand years. Not only are millions of individuals motivated by their faith to give of their time and money to charities right across the register. There are also tens of thousands of registered charities with the specific purpose to advance religion. If you search our register by charities that carry out religious activities, you'll get over 31,000 results. And that won't include the many thousands of charities with wider objects that are based on or linked to a religious tradition. The suggestion some have put forward that the Commission is seeking to overturn centuries of law and culture by questioning the charitable status of religious charities is, quite simply, wrong. One MP asked me recently if the Commission was part of a plan or even plot to secularise British society. Absolutely not, I said. I repeat that emphatically today." [Back to top](#)

The Pentecostal Credit Union: Forward Ever, Backward Never

The Pentecostal Credit Union (TPCU) is a not-for-profit financial co-operative which is owned and run by its members who are all drawn from the Pentecostal congregations. Credit unions provide a safe and convenient way to save and to borrow at fair rates of interest. We are one of the most successful financial services organisations which has deep roots within the black majority church movement.

Credit unions are popular in the Americas, Australasia and Ireland, but relatively new to Britain where it is little known that their role was pioneered by Caribbean migrant communities. Turned away by mainstream banks, Pentecostal churches and their congregations came together and formed TPCU in 1980. Originally operating from a tiny room in Balham, sixteen people attended its first meeting in 1979; in the same year its first official payment was made – £1.20 for a Rule Book.

TPCU provides professional, friendly and efficient services. We actively reach out to all in the Pentecostal community, no matter what your circumstances, using any savings for the benefit of Pentecostal congregations and churches. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, TPCU stepped in to support Church groups which were trying to establish themselves in London and reach out to communities. The credit union was able to lend Church groups funds and by doing so supported the building and renovating of church buildings making a real difference to people's lives. However when credit unions came to be regulated by the Financial Services Authority (FSA), TPCU was no longer able to lend to church organisations. Despite this Revd Carmel Jones was determined to find a way to continue to support the Pentecostal movement and, on behalf of TPCU, continued to accept loans from churches, lending £1m in the process.

Early this year the FSA put a stop to this activity, sanctioned the credit union and Rev Jones. The TPCU and Revd Jones suffered some negative publicity as a result but our members on the whole stayed true to the TPCU only four members left. Ironically since January 2012 credit unions have been able to lend to 'corporate members' (i.e. churches). TPCU is now planning to offer online access to its services, a current account and re-launch its church and business loan scheme. The credit union also offers great rates on loans between £250 and £120,000 and will in future be offering more competitive interest rates for members who are regular savers. There are no arrangement fees, early repayment penalties and the application process is simple. If you've been turned away by the bank before TPCU will offer a sympathetic ear. All the profits go back to developing the credit union services or are given to the members as a profit sharing dividend.

TPCU's savings accounts are protected by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. You can pay into your account with a lump sum or by regular payment using a standing order from your bank. As long as your savings are not held as security for a loan you can access your money at any time. By joining TPCU you can support the Pentecostal and majority black church movement you can prove that mutual financial services are a real ethical alternative to the high street banks that have recently damaged our economy so much.

You can find out more by phoning 0208 673 2542 or visiting www.pcuuk.com

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Fresh Expressions looks to the future

Fresh Expressions is to continue its work 'well beyond 2014'. Bishop Graham Cray, Archbishops' Missioner and leader of the national Fresh Expressions team, confirmed the movement was 'staying in business' during a speech at its national day conference to review progress to date and to look to the future.

Addressing ***Following the missionary Spirit – going forward with fresh expressions*** at Holy Trinity Brompton, Graham Cray emphasised an on-going role for the team, 'We will continue to network pioneers, gather learning, publish stories, and provide the training needed. New partners are joining and longer standing ones identifying the work that is needed well beyond 2014.'

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, spoke of missional opportunity and the importance of belonging, 'Why should people still be interested in the church? Because the church is what speaks to us about the possibility that all human beings can belong together by the grace and acceptance of God if they'd only just...turn round, repent and believe, turn round and trust, look to the generosity of the God who created and redeemed you, look into the face of the stranger in a completely new way. So what we've been looking at and thinking about in terms of fresh expressions (of church) is...belonging being created. People who thought they didn't matter, they weren't welcome, are discovering that they are; suddenly finding there's a challenge about community that only the Christian vision or the Christian community can help them with.' In a poignant moment, Rowan Williams was later prayed for by the President of the Methodist Conference, Mark Wakelin; Moderator of the URC General Assembly, Val Morrison; and a group of young adults from re:generation, a Methodist fresh expression of church in Romford.

Martyn Atkins, General Secretary of the Methodist Church, commented, 'Fresh expressions have rescued the church in numerical decline... and the introspection and desperation that come about from that. I don't buy the narrative that fresh expressions is simply a knee jerk reaction to how you get more bums on seats, rather I see it as an impulse of the missionary Spirit that rescues is from the introspection of certain kinds of ecclesial thinking.' He also called for an 'evolving and real theological narrative' for the inherited church – as well as fresh expressions. 'We must move in the future, at a level of proper theological engagement, from the approach of some people, that the whole of inherited church is all right, to be defended without question, and anything that is seen in their eyes to detract from that needs to be held up to the light every five minutes or uprooted every two years to see whether or not it is growing. Or indeed, to be knocked around the head to be asked if it can still stand up straight! We do need an evolving and a real theological narrative.'

Links to full video and audio files from all contributors on the day can be found [here](#)

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Young Methodists debate sexuality and gender at sell-out 3Generate

Young people aired their views on conflict and peace, exam stress, bullying, sexuality and gender orientation at the sell-out 3Generate event last month. More than 250 children and young people met at Whitemoor Lakes in Lichfield for the annual gathering, which drew delegates from as far away as Gibraltar, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales. A report on the assembly will be presented to the Methodist Conference next summer.

Tamara Wray was elected to the role of Youth President for 2013/2014. The 21-year-old university student from London said: "I was shocked when I found out that I had been elected - I was so excited that people felt I would be able to do this role. I hope to get more to know more young people in the Church and empower them to do something with their lives." Abby Waterson, Roxanne Bainbridge and Tom Williamson were elected to support Tamara as representatives to Conference in 2013/2014, and Rebecca Belshaw was elected to the role of Council Representative. Samuel Hutchinson was elected to the role of Ecumenical representative for 14 to 17-year-olds and Emma Johnson was elected to the same role for the 18 to 23-year-old age group. Rachel Allison was voted in as the British Youth Council representative.

Hayley Moss, Methodist Youth President, hosted the event. "It was a fantastic event," she said. "The young people I spoke to were really enjoying themselves. They talked about their faith and their connection to the Church which they felt was being re-invigorated as a result of their experience of the weekend. It was a time full of vitality, challenge and hope as we explored who we are and what God is saying to us as part of the Methodist Church of today." The young people also made a pilgrimage around the National Memorial Arboretum and held a collection for the final communion service for Street Child World Cup. A film of the weekend will be released to District Synods in December.

The Lichfield venue is provisionally booked for next year, but organisers will reassess whether they need to book a bigger venue closer to the time. People eager to attend next year's event are being encouraged to register their interest [now](#), although doing so will not guarantee a place. [Back to top](#)

The Housing Crisis in London: mobilising the church

Christian leaders and organisations involved in action on housing and homelessness have launched a report on The Housing Crisis in London: mobilising the church. The report follows the conference of the same name organised by Housing Justice, the London Churches Group for Social Action and the Methodist/Baptist/URC Joint Public Issues Team on 10th October, World Homeless Day. This was called in response to the growing shortage of affordable housing in London, now reaching crisis proportions for people on low or average incomes, and to households receiving welfare benefits.

Clergy and church personnel, as well as advice and support workers, are already mobilising as poorer households are increasingly being priced out of their homes in London. The welfare reforms in 2013 are widely expected to make this crisis even worse. The Conference brought together more than 70 church leaders and representatives. Expert speakers, whose presentations are in the report, included Paul Morrison of the Methodist/Joint Public Issues Team on Poverty; Kate Barker CBE, on Financial Policy; Steve Wilcox of York University on Housing Supply; and Alison Gelder of Housing Justice, who set out some alternatives to Benefits Caps.

Several recommendations for action are in the report. These include the need for more ethical lettings agencies, charging fair rents and being prepared to grant longer and more secure tenancies. Christian landowners and investors (including churches) are urged to use available land to develop genuinely affordable housing for individuals and families with the greatest need. Christians are also encouraged to take a stand against public attitudes or NIMBYism, and support the development of more homes where they are most needed. Further recommendations include challenging the benefit cuts and caps, and tackling the injustices in the present taxation system.

Terry Drummond of the London Church Leaders Group for Social Action writes in the report "It is completely unacceptable in 2012/13 that a wealthy nation such as the United Kingdom leaves so many individuals and families living in sub-standard housing. The challenge we offer is to government both local and national, to landlords and to the Churches who are in many cases both landowners and landlords. In addressing government we cannot avoid looking at ourselves and working together to bring about change. This is about how ordinary people survive – or fail to survive - in British society." Alison Gelder of Housing Justice said "To have somewhere we call home is a fundamental part of our human dignity. To be deprived of such a basic necessity is to feel less than human." James North of the Joint Public Issues Team added "Churches and individual Christians are called to be good news for the poor. We have rallied to this call before and now it is time to do it again." [Back to top](#)

The Still Centre: A quiet day in the heart of the City of London

Saturday 2nd February 11am-4pm

The Still Centre days are offered by the London Centre for Spirituality, The Church of St Edmund the King, Lombard Street, London EC3V 9EA, so that you can enjoy a day of peace and quiet in the heart of London with all the facilities of the London Centre for Spirituality on hand. The bookshop has an extensive range of books both new and second-hand, and the library is well stocked with books, magazines and periodicals. There is space to sit and read or reflect; areas for prayer and contemplation; and the streets and alleys of the City to explore without the rush and busy-ness of weekdays. Each day begins and ends with a short meditation.

£10 please; bring your own lunch, drinks are provided. Click to Book: [The Still Centre](#)

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Work continues on implementing the Anglican-Methodist Covenant

The Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) of the Anglican Methodist Covenant has voiced its disappointment that the General Synod has not found a way to move forward on the question of women bishops. It added, however, that, although the vote in General Synod failed to remove a major obstacle to growing into that unity to which the Church of England and the Methodist Church are committed in the Covenant between them, the basis of that Covenant has not changed.

"There is much that still unites us and we will continue to work towards the full visible unity of our churches," said the Rt Rev Christopher Cocksworth and Prof Peter Howdle, who co-chair the JIC. "The relationship between our churches has been growing at all levels – national, regional and local – since the Covenant was made in 2003, with many examples of sharing and working together especially at local level. The JIC is committed to helping our churches continue to grow together and to find new opportunities for serving the common good under the Covenant.

"We hope that Methodists and Anglicans, bound together in Covenant and a common history, in the light of the General Synod vote, will continue to pray for each other, value each other's spiritual heritage and work tirelessly with renewed determination for the unity of the whole Church." [Back to top](#)

Catholic Bishops and Church of England Synod back the Living Wage

On 16 November, the Catholic bishops of England and Wales committed Catholic institutions to implementing the Living Wage. Their meeting in Leeds took advice from their Diocesan Finance Secretaries to recognise "that fair wages are essential to the common good of our society". The Bishop of Brentwood, Thomas McMahon, has been a long-standing supporter, along with previous bishops of Wrexham and Newcastle. Given the extent of employment by Catholic organisations and charities, it is likely that thousands of people could be affected and lifted out of 'in-work poverty'. As such, it will be one of the largest institutions to support the Living Wage.

Then on 21 November, an overwhelming vote of the Church of England's General Synod backed the Living Wage in a debate led by Church Action on Poverty member, John Freeman. The motion was carried with no votes against, after an hour-long debate which included contributions from the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu. It was supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury elect, Justin Welby, who last week reiterated his support for the Living Wage and said it is something "we should be shouting about".

Alan Thornton, Church Action on Poverty's Campaigns Officer, said: "Virtually every Christian denomination in the land is now committed to the principle of the Living Wage. Since 2002 we have been working with churches to take a clear stand against poverty by adopting the Living Wage. Our work is almost done. It is a great encouragement to the Living Wage movement that two large institutions like the Catholic Church and Church of England have backed the Living Wage within the past week."

Politicians as diverse as Boris Johnson, Ed Miliband and Alex Salmond have all endorsed the Living Wage in the last year. As well as 35 councils, 12 universities, and four hospitals in the public sector, a range of private sector companies are already accredited Living Wage employers: Barclays, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Lloyds of London, KPMG and Lush. [Back to top](#)

New Chief Executive for the Arthur Rank Centre

The Trustees of The Arthur Rank Centre are delighted to confirm the appointment of Mr Jerry Marshall as CEO with effect from 1 December 2012. Jerry takes over from Revd Dr Gordon Gatward who is retiring after thirteen years of distinguished service.

Jerry joins us from Transformational Business Network, a network of business people using enterprise to alleviate poverty and transform communities. An entrepreneur, he brings with him skills in bringing diverse organisations together to respond to opportunities and tackle needs. His career has encompassed agriculture and engineering and includes international speaking, lobbying and national broadcast media experience. A member of Westwood Church, Coventry, he led a rural church congregation for 18 years and has been involved in youth and business ministries.

"Rural communities are at a critical point," says Jerry. "There are massive opportunities, for example as broadband increases scope for remote working, but also crises shaking the agricultural sector and the challenges of rural transport, housing and employment. Local churches can be part of the solution if hard pressed ministers find appropriate support and resources. This is where we can help. The Arthur Rank Centre is well respected with some important projects and I look forward to working with Trustees and staff to build on these achievements and move the organisation onto the next stage." [Back to top](#)

Twelve Myths of Inter Faith

'God only works through Christians', 'Other faiths only engage in Inter Faith relations to convert us' and 'We can't work alongside people of other faiths'. These are just three of the 12 myths of Inter Faith engagement challenged in a new resource from the Baptist Union of Great Britain which was launched during Inter Faith Week.

12 Myths of Inter Faith Engagement is designed to be used in a small group session to allow for discussion. It is hoped that by working through these myths, Christians will have an increased knowledge of other faiths and a new confidence in how to engage with them. Other myths include 'Being involved in Inter Faith activity means we have to worship together', 'The Inter Faith agenda seeks to make one world religion' and 'Muslims are taking over the country...we need to keep them back'. "Our prayer is that *12 Myths of Inter Faith Engagement* might be a resource to inspire and equip the work to which we are all called," says Ian Bunce, Head of Mission Department at the Baptist Union of Great Britain. "By confronting and overcoming the myths that hold us back, we can become more confident in engaging with our neighbours from different religions and cultures and building good relationships." [Back to top](#)

Together Middlesbrough launched

Over 150 people joined the Archbishop of York and the chair of the Church Urban Fund to launch Together Middlesbrough on Sunday 2nd December. [Together Middlesbrough](#) is a joint venture between the Church Urban Fund and the Diocese of York, to enable churches to help the poorest people in Middlesbrough. The launch service, held at St Barnabas Church, Linthorpe, gathered people from churches of many different denominations. It followed a day conference on poverty in February which was attended by over a hundred people from a wide variety of Churches.

Paul Hackwood, Chair of Trustees of the Church Urban Fund gave the address. Asking all people in the church to hold hands in one big circle, he reminded the congregation that we need to work together to make a difference. He preached on Matthew 25:31 – 40: 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Archbishop Sentamu also reminded the congregation about the need to work together, quoting a Ugandan proverb: 'Each tooth is very important. But one tooth on its own can do nothing – all the teeth in the mouth need to work together to chew food'. He asked us to remember this proverb whenever we eat, and remember the work of Together Middlesbrough. Heather Black is the new Joint Venture Development Officer for Together Middlesbrough. Speaking about the service, she said, "It was a meaningful service, with contributions from many different churches and projects, a fitting start to what will be a great partnership. Together Middlesbrough will help churches across Middlesbrough, from all different traditions, work together to tackle poverty. The scale and spread of deprivation in Middlesbrough is amongst the worst in the country. 47% of the town is ranked in the bottom 10% poorest places to live, and in these communities up to 59% of children are living in poverty. These statistics can seem overwhelming, but Christ calls us to respond to the needs of our neighbours, to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to befriend the lonely, to care for the sick. Together Middlesbrough is a practical Christian response to local need. By coming together, we can support, resource and encourage one another to make a significant difference in our communities."

Paul Hackwood, Chair of Trustees of the Church Urban Fund said, "I am delighted that we are working in partnership with the Diocese, in Middlesbrough to tackle poverty. We are firm believers in the power of churches working together, to transform the lives of the poorest and most marginalised, through the quality of relationship and solidarity that we build with them." The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu said, "I'm delighted that the Diocese of York and the Church Urban Fund are working jointly for Together Middlesbrough. It's a great example of changes happening at grass roots level, and from within Middlesbrough itself. We have a very unequal society. Overall income inequality is higher than at any time in the last 30 years - and whilst the poorest see their incomes slashed, incomes at the top have been rising rapidly. But everyone deserves a decent quality of life and if we show real determination, and courage for justice, I believe that we can make that dream a reality. Together we can see God's Kingdom of love and justice coming across Middlesbrough." [Back to top](#)

Operation Noah challenges Energy Bill

Exactly four years ago, campaigners were thrilled when the Climate Change Act was made law on November 26th 2008. The UK became the first country to set out legally binding and far reaching targets to reduce carbon emission by 2050. The Labour government was proud to show international leadership in tackling concerns over climate change. Cameron campaigned in 2010 to continue such leadership, stating that his would be "the greenest government ever". Two years is a long time in politics. The current headlines just announced for the next Energy Bill to be released this week indicate that it ignores a key provision of the Climate Change Act – to intentionally reduce emissions by 2020 and beyond. The coalition government simply says that defining a comprehensive energy strategy post 2020 will be up to the next government in 2016.

The vision of Operation Noah is for a complete decarbonisation of the UK economy by 2030 through various measures including reducing energy demand and substantial investment in clean energy. To achieve this, we must start now. By 2016 it may well be too late. Ignoring this issue now goes against both the advice of the government's own independent advisory body, the Committee on Climate Change and the International Energy Agency (which says that emissions need to peak at 2016 to keep below 2 degrees, and be cut rapidly every year after that). Operation Noah believes that avoiding our duty to substantially reduce emissions is immoral. It shirks our responsibilities both to those suffering as a consequence of climate change now and to future generations. Around the world exceptional weather conditions continue to be experienced, including this week's UK weather and flooding. The World Bank's report, 'Turn down the heat', published last week, notes that "*present emission trends put the world plausibly on a path toward 4°C warming within the century.... A 4°C world is likely to be one in which communities, cities and countries would experience severe disruptions, damage and dislocation, with many of these risks spread unequally*".

Andy Atkins, Executive Director, Friends of the Earth, who delivered Operation Noah's annual lecture on 21st November on the theme '*Overcoming fossil fuel addiction - the next moral revolution?*' said that "*human suffering*

now [as a consequence of climate change] and the certainty that this will increase in the future makes this a moral issue. We are breaking our contract with the future if we don't act now". Operation Noah welcomes the news that the bill will introduce £7.6bn a year to help fund what the government classes as low-carbon energy by 2020-21 (which includes renewables, nuclear and biomass). But the Government's announcement also makes reference to the imminent publication of the Chancellor's forthcoming gas generation strategy. Although gas is required to help the UK make the transition to renewable power, long-term reliance on gas will cause us to fail to achieve our Climate Change targets.

In referring to the draft Energy Bill, Atkins commented: *"The coalition has caved in to Osborne's reckless dash for gas and banged the final nail in the coffin of Cameron's pledge to lead the greenest government ever. This decision will help keep the nation hooked on increasingly expensive gas, drive away green jobs and investment and jeopardise UK climate goals."* The consequences of this Energy Bill will lock us into an unsustainable energy scenario based largely on gas. Whilst this might be good for short-term economics it fails to deliver a secure energy future for our children. In addition, it commits the UK to rising carbon emissions that will continue to contribute to rising global temperatures. "By failing to act now to curb our carbon emissions," comments Isabel Carter, Chair of Operation Noah, "we are sacrificing the future of our children for short-term economic benefits".

As the Bill comes before the House of Commons, it will be vital for people to make their views known to their MPs. The Methodist, Baptist, United Reformed Churches and Quakers have been working together to challenge the Energy Bill in its current form. Massive public response helped push through the Climate Act in 2007. Similar public pressure could ensure this Energy Bill looks to the future, sets clear decarbonisation targets and brings massive support for renewable energy, with all the jobs and economic boost this will bring. [Back to top](#)

Poverty & Homelessness Action Week: Get your church working to Close the Gap!

Poverty & Homelessness Action Week 2013 will run from 26 January to 3 February. Church Action on Poverty organises the Week jointly each year with Housing Justice and Scottish Churches Housing Action. During the Week, hundreds of churches across the UK run services and events, and raise tens of thousands of pounds to fund projects and campaigns tackling poverty and homelessness.

In 2013, the theme of the Week is *Can you cast the first stone?* We're challenging the stigmatisation and blame that is increasingly attached to people experiencing poverty. It's part of our 'Close the Gap' campaign aim to ensure that everyone in society gets a Fair Say. Click [here](#) now to find out more and download your free Action Week resources!

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Pastoral Liturgy Day: Mothering Sunday

Mothering Sunday is a difficult day. It is surrounded in emotion – joy, failure, bereavement to name but a few. It is often impossible to hold all of these conflicting pastoral demands with integrity in the face of the expectations of the day. Part of the reason for this may be because our focus has alighted on biological mothers and has moved from the origins of the day and the traditional elements of a Mothering Sunday service.

This study day will explore varieties of liturgical practice associated with Mothering Sunday, identifying those which express both the celebration and the ambiguities of the day. It will also explore the history of Mothering Sunday and in so doing reorient our approach to this popular festival. £45, including lunch and refreshments

Contact Alison Ogden for booking enquiries: aogden@sarum.ac.uk ☎ 01722 424826 Course Details: Date & Time: Tuesday, 29 Jan 2013, 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM at Sarum College, Salisbury. Tutor: Em Coley is Associate Priest in Kennington, Oxford. She is the author of *Mothering Sunday* (Grove Books, 2005).

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Making Sense of Salvation

The Very Revd Dr Jeffrey John, Dean of St Albans, will be returning to B.E.L.I.E.F. to speak on *Making Sense of Salvation* on Saturday 16th February 2013, 10.00 am to 1.00 pm, at St Andrew's Church, Kimbolton Road, Bedford MK40 2PF. £10 per person is payable on the day. To book a place, please register in the 'Contact' section of www.beliefbeds.org or phone 01234 212164 or 01525 860875.

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Making Sense of the Census

Contextual Theology Centre Director Angus Ritchie responded on December 11 to the newly-released Census figures on religious affiliation:

Today's Census figures show a much-heralded decline in Christian affiliation, and a significant increase in the number of English and Welsh citizens declaring themselves to be of no religion. In advance of their publication, there was

much speculation as to which side of the psychologically crucial 50% the number of Christians would be (in the end, the figure was 59.3%).

In the midst of the debate which these figures will provoke, it is worth getting some perspective. The majority of English and Welsh people identify themselves as Christian, at a time when wider social pressures give less and less encouragement to such identification. There is no room for complacency – and no point in denying that this number has declined substantially in the last decade. But these figures tell of a striking *persistence* of religious belief and practice. The public square continues to be a place where people of faith and people of no faith coexist in large numbers – with people of faith forming the substantial majority.

In London in particular, the public square has been a very diverse place for many years, with a significant (and growing) number of people of other faiths. In particular, here in Tower Hamlets, there is a sizeable Muslim population. So it is no surprise that the borough is one focus of a major University of Notre Dame study of how people with Christian, Muslim and secular worldviews negotiate and promote a common good.

This study is illuminating the unique role of faith in engaging people in action for the common good, and the on-going relevance of the national church. In Tower Hamlets – the one London borough where Christianity is not the largest faith – the Church of England is at the heart of a wide range of social action. Among the many examples are Foodbanks and money management services (which meet the needs of the people most vulnerable to the on-going recession and the increasingly intense welfare cuts); Community Organising (which seeks to address the root causes - through campaigns for a Living Wage and a cap on payday lending rates), and "Near Neighbours" – an imaginative programme to build relationships across faiths and cultures, which is proving that the parish network can reach and support people far beyond the church's walls.

The most casual observer of the news headlines would see that faith is more in the spotlight than ever. A substantial proportion of the public still turn use language of faith to ask the 'big questions' about the meaning of their individual and common life. This is evident from the increasing numbers of people who darken the doors of our Cathedrals (as well as the members of Occupy who camped outside several last year). In London, there are signs of church growth which buck the national trend, and is occurring across a variety of social groups – with church planting and migration both identified as significant causal factors.

None of this is to minimise the task which faces the church: to articulate a constructive, distinctive voice in the public square, and so to present Christian Gospel in a way that is accessible and compelling. But many churches in the most religiously diverse contexts are doing exactly that.

The wider church and the wider society have much to learn from these congregations. They show that it is possible to combine action *together* on issues where there is a common mind with peaceable, respectful debate on issues of fundamental disagreement. Christianity and Islam are both missionary religions – we each believe ourselves to have distinctive truths to share with people outside the faith. Part of what it is to respect and care for another person is to engage with them on issues of *disagreement*: to seek to share what one believes to be true, and correct what one believes to be mistaken. (The same is true, of course, in the relationship between people of faith and atheists – which is why I spent last Thursday in debate with the atheist writer Julian Baggini. For each of us, respecting the other involves seeking to share with them what we see as the truth.)

Whatever else we make of the Census figures, this much is clear: pluralism is here to stay, with a growing array of religious and secular worldviews commanding significant allegiance. Whatever challenges this presents to the churches, it is hardly the world the 'New Atheists' have been campaigning for. The task for us all is to negotiate and build a truly common life – bearing witness with confidence and generosity to that which we believe most deeply.

The Centre's Presence and Engagement Network (PEN) is holding an event in Southwark on Making Sense of the Census on the afternoon of Monday 18th February – before the PEN 2013 Lecture, to be given by the Dean of St Paul's, the Very Revd David Ison.

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