



8 April 2015

News:

Baptist Union Council: March 2015

In March the latest Baptist Union Council took place with 70 Baptists, drawn from Baptist Churches, Associations, colleges and specialist teams, gathering together at The Hayes Conference Centre in Swanwick, Derbyshire, for two days (16-17 March).

Christ and Scripture at the heart

As always there was business to process and many conversations to have. Business items included issues as diverse as finances, housing for retired ministers, the future formation of Ministries and resourcing Mission.

Nothing happens in council without firstly focusing on prayer and scripture. The worship for Council was led by Revd Beth Allison-Glenny, one of the ministers at John Bunyon Baptist Church in Oxford. During the opening worship, Stephen Keyworth reflected on the opening of Mark's gospel urging us to focus on scripture as we seek the authority of Christ. "Long before Baptists gathered round the worship band to worship it," Stephen said, tongue-in-cheek, "we used to gather round the Word to seek the mind of Christ... Everything else will flow from an attention to Christ-like authority. Recognising the person and authority of Jesus in all things can only mean healthy churches equipped for participation in God's mission... The authority – 'that' authority which should continue to inspire and amaze us – is still and forever will be – found in the person of Jesus Christ..."

He went on to encourage all Baptists, particularly those attending Council, that "early Baptist meeting houses always had a pulpit as a central focus. Now, I have no desire to reinstate the pulpit as an architectural feature – but I do hold on to the vision of a healthy church gathered round a Bible asking: 'What does God want us to do next?'"

Prayer

Prayer punctuated Council's deliberations throughout the gathering. On the second day we used the '40 days of Home Mission' resource to pray for the churches, Associations, and specialist teams of our Union. Following council postcards of greetings were shared back to the churches and teams that people had prayed for during these prayer times. It was good to focus our praying on local churches and mission initiatives. More details of 40 days can be found at www.baptist.org.uk/40days

People matter....

We have started a new process that will help us find people who will serve the Union in different ways. This included the advertising of roles and a discernment process that enabled Council to consider nominations of people to fill current vacancies. These roles were open to anyone in a Baptist church.

Council affirmed the nominations of:

Richard Webb – Moderator of Trustee Board
David Mayne – Moderator of Council
Phil Jump – Ministries review project leader

Council was also informed that David Locke, the Shared Services Team Leader had accepted a new role with the Oxford Diocese as Chief Operating Officer and CEO designate to oversee their multi academy school trust for C of E schools in Oxfordshire and surrounding areas.

Ministries project

A major part of the Council's discussion focused on the Ministries review. Roy Searle, in presenting what stage the review is at, and looking to the future, issued a call to imagine a different world and, in fellowship with Christ, to live towards achieving it.

The Ministries review is not new; it is building on the work of the review of ministerial formation and other work done over the past few years. These pieces of work and continuing conversations will be used to enable the fuller review of ministry which will be presented to October Council. During Council, Phil Jump facilitated a session enabling Associations to consider ways of how they might encourage participation in the Ministries Project.

Roy Searle called on the Union to hold on to its values:

- Seek to be a movement of spirit-led communities
- Feel like one team
- Embrace Adventure
- Inspire Others
- Share a hunger for God's coming kingdom

Project Loaves and Fishes

Recently, changes have been made to how we spend our money as a Union. These changes have been significant and can be summarised as follows:

The national resource has faced budget cuts and restructuring
Home Mission grants are now administered by the Association Partnerships
An agreed formula has been introduced to allocate financial resources to Associations

The next task is to consider our income. The Project Loaves and Fishes is seeking to find ways to increase our income so that our Union might be even more effective in mission through healthy local churches.

We have a responsibility to be as wise as possible in raising funds. However, we must recognise that our role is simply to bring the little we have to Jesus and believe he can multiply it beyond our wildest dreams.

The goals of Project Loaves and Fishes are:

- To keep the focus on supporting local churches in local mission
- To encourage, excite and inspire all stakeholders with regard to the future
- To stay strategic
- To maintain and build unity and a sense of ownership
- To work in a way that embodies our vision and renewed culture as Baptists together

Mission

Stuart Davidson, regional Minister Team Leader of the South Eastern Baptist Association and member of the mission forum, shared about 'Fit for Mission'.

Every morning I reach down and touch my slippers 10 times – and then, if I feel up to it, I get out of bed and put them on. So goes a very old joke. But maybe there is a kernel of truth there in the way we approach our fitness for mission. We say we are a missional movement, but how much time, money and thought do we give to this; how should we invest in the future?

Baptists Together are doing a major piece of research on mission in and through the local church. This is being done through the Associations. How are we doing? Are we fit for mission? This research is not just a one-off piece of work. We are seeking to gain on-going knowledge to advance the mission of our churches. Where are we declining, and why? Where are we seeing growth?

We hope that churches will be co-operative in responding to the survey (which should take about 10 minutes to fill in). We can then answer some of the questions that will lead us to understanding where we are as a Union and how we should go forward.

The fields are white unto harvest... but are we putting on slippers or limbering up to put on our work boots?

Priorities and projects

Revd Lynn Green, the General Secretary, presented to Council what is seen as the priorities and associated projects for the Union for the next five years.

By 2020 it is hoped that:

- Our vision for Baptists Together is clearly embraced and understood and our renewed culture has become the norm.
- We have a clear grasp of the health of our churches and a clear understanding of what needs to be done and where to enable mission across Baptists Together
- We have established structures for relating that reflect our governance report and enable relationships of trust to flourish and mission to be enabled as easily as possible
- To have implemented the Ministries Project recommendations
- To navigate well the issues of human sexuality and find a settled place
- To implement the Loaves and Fishes project to identify new income streams
- To ensure that a strategy is developed and implemented to stabilise the Pension scheme
- To complete and implement the review of our safeguarding
- To develop the database to incorporate the needs of Associations and our Union as a whole
- To develop a communications strategy

Presidency

The Revd Rupert Lazar, minister of East Barnet Baptist Church, was nominated as the next Vice-President of the Baptist Union. The nomination was made at this Council meeting, and will be voted on at Assembly on 16 May in Peterborough. If elected Rupert will serve as Vice-President during 2015-16 and become President of our Union in 2016-17.

Nominations for Vice-President were invited during November and December 2014, with completed nomination forms to be received by 31 December.

As no nominations were received, the Vice-President was nominated by Council, in line with the Baptist Union constitution. This was the first time a new streamlined process was used for nominations, which were sought mainly online.

For more details about Rupert, please see the fuller report here.

Assembly

Stephen Keyworth shared the vision and excitement ahead of the Baptist Assembly on 16 May at Kingsgate Centre in Peterborough. More details can be found at www.baptistassembly.org.uk

Embracing Adventure

As mentioned above one of our key values is 'embracing adventure'. At Council we heard from four people who are part of churches doing just that. Stories varied from barista training and opening coffee shops to difficult discussions on topics that are normally avoided by churches. The four stories were told by Andy Goldsmith, Karen Golder, Danielle Leigh and David Steell.

Precious moments

At the end of Council, members were asked to share precious moments from the meeting. These included:

- Hearing how "One Church" in Brighton has set up Barista apprenticeship training.....great job guys.
- Hearing great stories of adventure in mission from Karen, Danielle, David and Andrew.
- Getting to share communion with a really special guy; being blessed by him and being able to bless him.
- First time as a member of BU Council and blessed by the conversations and stories. Precious and prophetic words spoken by Roy Searle yesterday.
- Stephen Keyworth's reflections on the beginning of Mark's Gospel –wise and challenging words. And many moments around meal tables with people I know well and others I've just met.
- Giving thanks for the service of Sheila Martin as Council Moderator.
- So many precious moments this time. Much to reflect on.
- Thoughtfully and carefully worded worship. The Franciscan Blessing of Discomfort offered to us at the end of closing worship was wonderful. Thank you
- The worship was particularly good this time. I really appreciated it.
- Sharing the bread at communion with George Ayoma and simply being prayed for and affirmed by a minister I am privileged to serve as his RM.

Franciscan benediction:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.

Council nominates Rupert Lazar for Vice-President (2015-16)

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Rupert was born in Trinidad in May 1956 and came to join his family in Edmonton, North London, when he was 14 years old. He has been married to Joanne for 22 years and they have two children – Ainsley (19) and Sarah (16).

In his teenage years, as a young Christian at Edmonton Baptist Church, Rupert was involved in youth work and prison ministry. In 1989 whilst working as an insurance underwriting clerk, he heard, and responded to God's call on his life and went to Spurgeon's College. At the end of his training and formation, God led Rupert to West Croydon Baptist Church where he served for 17 years, the last eight of which he was the Team Leader. Rupert is currently serving God as a Minister at East Barnet Baptist church where he has been since 2010.

Presently, he serves the Baptist family in various capacities: District Minister (LBA); mentor; Supervisor of Minister-in-Training; Ministerial Recognition Committee and Moderator of Nomination Committee. He has also served the Union in the past in the following ways: Agenda Committee; National Strategy Forum; Black and Minority Ethnic Ministers' Forum (LBA) and President of Spurgeon's College.

Rupert particularly enjoys working in partnership with Jesus in building multi-cultural churches. He has a passion to nurture Christians to be vibrant and confident in their faith. He longs to see Christians growing in their openness to the Spirit and using their spiritual gifts to serve the Lord. Rupert says that he loves many, many things including watching/listening to cricket, Star Trek and relaxing with a good book.

The Revd Dr Chris Ellis is currently Baptist Union President. He will be succeeded by the Revd Jenni Entrican at this year's Assembly. For more about the President, visit <http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220617/President.aspx>

Releasing money for mission

Project Loaves and Fishes: a small working group is looking at how we generate our income, and whether there are other/better ways to collectively raise and release money for mission

As Baptists one of our Five Core Values is being a Missional Community, a value that is given life through our churches as well as our personal actions. For some, this is about direct evangelism, for others it is shown in projects and activities that demonstrate God's love to those around in a variety of ways. For inspirational and often very creative examples of this, see the [40 Days of Home Mission programme](#).

But in order to increase our collective capacity to share the good news of Jesus with others, we need to understand our responsibilities towards one another at both church and individual level, as well as

being good stewards of the “family purse”. To this end Baptist Steering Group has commissioned a small working group to look at how we currently generate our income and whether there are other/better ways to collectively raise and release money for mission here at home.

Known as “Project Loaves and Fishes”, the team carrying out this work is led by David Locke and includes the Revd Rich Webb of Scunthorpe Baptist Church and Anne Bishop, a charity consultant who is also married to a Baptist minister. One of the key features of this is widespread consultation with Baptists across the UK, and they would particularly like to hear from those within the congregations of our Baptist churches.

There are two main ways to let Project Loaves and Fishes have your views – [by clicking here to complete an anonymous online survey](#) (and encouraging others to do the same) or by emailing the team via Fivebarleyloaves@gmail.com.

They are also very keen to get out and about to hear from people directly, so if you would like to invite them to come and meet you, your church, your local District or leadership team, please contact them via the email address.

Council debt-collection tactics 'leaving children scared'

Councils are sending aggressive and intimidating bailiffs to knock on the doors of family homes leaving children frightened and worried, according to a report by The Children’s Society.

The report, *The Wolf at the Door: How Council Tax Debt Collection is Harming Children*, finds that councils are threatening increasing numbers of struggling households with court action for falling behind with their council tax. And many local authorities are choosing to send bailiffs rather than helping families get back on their feet.

Most families receiving a knock at the door say their children were home at the time, with a majority of those families saying the experience left the child frightened, sad or worried.

Based on a survey of 4,500 parents and Freedom of Information responses from local authorities, the report reveals that councils across England sent out bailiffs 1.3m times last year. One in five families in council tax debt received a visit from a bailiff.

Councils which use heavy-handed debt collection practices are impacting directly on the emotional health and well-being of children and young people. For example, a child whose family has been visited by a bailiff is far less likely to ask his or her parents for things they wanted because they do not want to make life difficult for them. And some young people told us they suffered sleepless, stressful nights as a result.

Adults are affected too, with four in ten describing bailiffs as scary, three in ten aggressive, and two in ten report feeling anxious, stressed or depressed as a result.

The Children’s Society is today calling on all councils to:

- Stop sending bailiffs around to families with children
- Give struggling residents a chance to negotiate affordable repayments
- Make sure that every family getting a final reminder notice is also offered help from an independent advice agency.

Council tax debt is widespread – more than one in ten families in the UK have experienced it, with average arrears reaching £420. That means up to 1.6m children will have been affected.

And the problem is getting bigger. Government cuts to council tax support have coincided with a 25% increase in households falling behind on their council tax, a 33% increase in court summonses and – among almost 100 councils – a rise in the use of bailiffs.

The reasons for falling into council debt can include family emergencies, losing a job, being unable to manage household bills and unexpected costs like a broken boiler.

Councils can be one of the most uncompromising creditors – in just 14 days, families can go from missing a council tax payment to losing the ability to pay in instalments and then face court proceedings and enforcement on unpaid bills, such as bailiff visits.

More than half of families who have faced council tax debt have to borrow money to pay off their debt, and others are forced to cut back on essentials for their children.

Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of The Children's Society, said: "Our report reveals that far too many families are failed by their council when they fall behind with their council tax. Councils are more likely to refer a family in council tax debt to a bailiff than to an independent debt advisor, which is not acceptable.

"Bailiffs should simply not be sent round to families with children. Instead, councils should give struggling residents a chance to negotiate affordable repayments."

One mum in council tax debt spoke of her inability to hide the impact of her debts from her children. She told us: "They just knew that mummy was stressed and there were strange people at the door wanting things and most of the furniture and that got taken at that point."

Dying... for chocolate?

The team behind Easter Icons, a mini contemporary stations of the cross, take the message onto the streets

'Some may shock, some may amuse, but hopefully all will catch the eye as a means of bringing the story of Jesus to a wider audience.'

That's the view of the team behind Easter Icons, a series of artworks and signs depicting a modern take on the Easter story placed in around Southend.

The images feature [a magazine cover with Jesus on the front](#) alongside the message "Body to die for?", chocolate wrappers shaped into a cross with the words ["Dying for chocolate?"](#) and a newspaper board with the headline ["Dead Man Walking"](#).

They have been assembled by Baptist ministers Andy Goodliff and Steve Tinning and Hannah Bucke, the Methodist town centre minister.

Last year the team [took over an empty shop](#) in Southend to host Easter Icons. It's all about an attempt to share the Easter story outside a church building, they say.

'As Giles Fraser said in his [Saturday \(Guardian\) column](#) last week "This story does not want to be trapped in a church."

'The small team behind Easter Icons think he's right.'

Visit <http://www.icons-on-sea.blogspot.co.uk/> or like [Icons –on-Sea on Facebook](#).

Opinions / Reflections:

Hope for the Homeless

With private rents soaring and a national housing shortage, homelessness is on the increase. More than 81,000 households* were found to be homeless in England last year. What more can churches do to meet the needs of such a vulnerable section of society? Ed Walker, Baptist church member and founder of charity Hope into Action, has an innovative way

It was getting late but Linda decided to try another hotel – maybe she would have success with this one. She spoke to someone on the reception desk, they barely looked up before dismissing her, 'No, we don't have any jobs available.' Linda left, disheartened. She found a doorway and spent the rest of the night watching the night-time buzz of London peak and then dip as clubbers and workers disappeared home. This was the first night of many that Linda, fleeing an abusive relationship, would spend on the streets.

For Linda, homelessness led to drink, led to prostitution, led to drug addiction. What hope did she have? Who was going to help her now?

Not how it should be

It was stories like Linda's that made Ed Walker wonder why the church wasn't doing more to support the homeless and vulnerable. Returning to live in the UK after spending nine years working overseas in disaster response, Ed became acutely aware of the often unintentional but very real separation of the church and the poor. "Surely this is not how it should be," he says. "Churches should be full of vulnerable people."

"Christian wealth can be the answer to the homeless situation in this country"

One day, while taking his young daughter to a local park, Ed met a guy who'd just left prison and had nowhere to go. "I couldn't find him anywhere to live," Ed recalls. "No churches were doing anything. He had nowhere to go because he had no one to go to – a lot of people experience relational poverty. And yet the church can provide a richness of relationships people have not had before."

This experience prompted Ed to think and pray about what he should do. He sought advice from his minister, Revd David Whitlock of Bretton Baptist Church in Peterborough. David encouraged him to continue to pursue the ideas and dreams that God was seemingly stirring up in Ed's heart.

Sharing wealth

And so, with the support of the church, and using up their savings, Ed and his wife bought a house in Peterborough and rented it out to an ex-offender and a man who'd been living in a hostel for eight years. Bretton Baptist Church helped support the tenants. Soon, more houses were bought, more vulnerable people were given homes and more churches got involved providing mentors, meals, friends and a place for the homeless to belong. After one year they had four houses up and running. And Hope into Action, a charity whose vision is to enable churches to house the homeless, was born.

"If we can use the capital in people's bank accounts we can unleash a revolution," says Ed. "Christian wealth can be the answer to the homeless situation in this country. Just imagine what our mighty God could do if we shared our wealth with the poor."

"Success is both getting people out of church and getting people into church"

The model is fairly simple – an investor (an individual or a group or a church) buys a property with the express purpose of renting it out to people who may have little hope of living in a decent home; people coming out of prison, out of rehab, former sex workers, the homeless. A house is only ever purchased with the full support of a local church – volunteers from the church provide practical and spiritual support to enable the tenants to thrive in a community again. And Hope into Action takes care of the more specialised needs – such as referrals, benefit applications and needs assessments – provides a keyworker and looks after rent collection.

The first house was opened in 2010, now Hope into Action has 28 houses in eight cities in partnership with 24 churches.

"We want Christians to use their wealth and share it with the poor," explains Ed. "It's still a sound investment but it's also a social investment – it serves the poor and the church long term."

Closing the gap between the church and the poor

For Ed, Hope into Action serves two purposes; it transforms the lives of vulnerable people and it closes the gap between the church and the poor. "Success is both getting people out of church and getting people into church," Ed says. "When we engage with vulnerable people we meet Jesus."

"Poverty alleviation means journeying with people not just handing out donations"

But engaging with vulnerable people can be a risky endeavour. "People who take this on need to prepare for disappointment," Ed says candidly. "The concept that people get sorted over night is a lie – it sets us up for disappointment. At a Hope into Action conference in March I told the story of two girls who were sharing one of the houses – one got baptised, the other I met in jail recently. It's tough. It's part of what we're calling churches to do."

Alongside the lows, come the highs of seeing lives transformed. One such life is Rob's – a man who was on drugs for 20 years. Now he's been clean for 14 months. "He's led a Christianity Explored course," Ed shares. "People have paid off his debts. He's working as an intern with Hope into Action.

He's been reunited with his son. He's found a home and security. His dream now is to help others. Poverty alleviation means journeying with people not just handing out donations."

New family member

For Angie, a volunteer mentor from Peterborough, journeying with someone has meant gaining "a new family member". Angie had always had a heart for the homeless, so when her church got involved with Hope into Action, she was excited. "The person I mentor feels part of the family and is now volunteering himself," Angie says. "The project is giving him hope, and he is beginning to trust people. He is now part of the church, which has given him a new beginning and new friends, and has significantly changed his lifestyle. I helped him to get in touch with his mother so hopefully that will signal a new beginning for that relationship."

"I think it's been an eye opener for members of the congregation," says Revd Adrian Holdstock, vicar of the church Angie attends, St Mark's, Peterborough. "They sometimes find it difficult to understand how people can get into a situation where they have dropped out of the bottom of the way society works. One of our tenants said to us, 'please can you take me shopping? I don't know what I'm looking for.' It's not complicated support that's needed – it's tender loving care."

"At some point in the future we want to go into a church and expect them to run a house for the homeless"

"It's really exciting to see a practical way that we can do mission," Adrian continues. "We can serve our neighbours and learn about people whom we often just walk by on the street because we don't know how to engage with somebody who's addicted, or somebody who's homeless."

But what of Linda's story? Projects like Hope into Action didn't exist in Linda's time of need. She could so easily have been overlooked but two dedicated women told her how much Jesus loved her. They supported her and cared for her. Now, she is happily married, works for a housing association and runs a celebrate recovery course. But perhaps best of all she is using her experience to support a Hope into Action house through her church. "What a great opportunity it is to help support someone who wants to turn their life around but doesn't know how," she says.

"We want to give churches the belief that they can do this," concludes Ed. "Thirty years ago if you went into a church you didn't expect to see a microphone, or an Alpha or Christianity Explored course but you can now find these in most churches. At some point in the future we want to go into a church and expect them to run a house for the homeless. Often homeless people go to churches to ask for help and the church refers them to the council; we want it to be the other way round."

For more information, visit <http://www.hopeintoaction.org.uk> email info@hopeintoaction.org.uk

*Source: DCLG Homelessness Statistics

Conversations - Nicodemus

Continuing the series of reflections in which Baptist minister John Rackley seeks to describe a possible response of some of the people who were intimately involved in the 24 hours before the death of

Jesus.

Nicodemus: [John 3:1-10](#); [7:45-52](#); [19:38-20:1](#)

I am always known as the one who met him at night.
I am not making excuses but it was just better that way.
I was too well-known in Jerusalem.
If it was known I had met Jesus I would have lost my reputation.

I was known for my caution.
I did not take sides.
Jesus gave me a problem.
He created division.
He polarised opinion.
He made it difficult for others;
especially people like me.
I tried to be a voice of calm
In stormy times;
but it was not easy.

And then it all came to an end.
He wanted it as much as accusers.
He was trouble.
It really was best that he died rather
than many Jews pay for the disorder he might cause
at the hands of the Occupiers.

I could never be a disciple like Joseph.
I was a follower.
I was curious.
I kept a record.
I was keen to know what he did and said;
Even when he left Jerusalem.
So when Joseph asked me to help him with the burial
It was the obvious thing to do.
I would follow to the bitter end.
I would see where he was laid and maybe
I would be asked to collect his bones for his burial.

So I came with the spices.
Women's work I know.
But I didn't know if anyone would bother.
I had never wanted to be included in his inner circle.
So I brought them.
Got some strange looks too!

I wanted not only to overcome the stench
but also to honour him.

He had been a good and faithful servant.
I shall not see his like again.

Unless ...he is born again,
a new creation,
another Adam in the garden.

Is that a possibility?

Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ – provocative teacher of faith - pour out your compassion on
all who know they are stifled by the faith of others
all who are curious but not convinced by you
all who treasure their reputation before all else
all who visit the graves of their loved ones with only flowers and memories
Guide the people who bear your name into Easter paths of joy and strength which entice others to
follow Christ and expand their own understanding of discipleship.*

John Rackley is a Baptist minister who blogs at windingquest.wordpress.com
Further conversations can be found on his blog

Christ is Risen He is risen indeed!

Phil Jump reflects on the political consequences of Jesus' life alongside our response as Christians to the intensive electioneering that awaits after Easter

This traditional Easter greeting will resound through many churches on Easter Sunday. It captures the excitement of the first disciples as they began to realise that Jesus, whose death they had witnessed, true to his promise had risen again.

But the greeting is more than a celebration of an historical event.

Those with an eye for detail will notice that it communicates in the present tense; it is a declaration of Christ's identity in the here and now; an affirmation that those who gather in his name today, encounter the living Jesus. The events of the first Easter morning have implications for every generation of Christian believers.

I remember some time ago being on a pre-Easter retreat with a group of church leaders. One of our conversations centred on how our various traditions tend to place emphasis on different parts of the Lent and Easter narrative.

Some spoke of the importance of Good Friday, valuing the image of a God who could experience the depth of human suffering. Others emphasised Easter Day with its powerful declaration of Christ's victory over death itself. Some spoke of the practice of foot-washing, based on the events of Maundy Thursday, and its intense expression of mutual fellowship and servanthood; some from the Orthodox tradition shared their experience of spending Holy Saturday in silence and darkness, reflecting on Christ being contained by the tomb.

After a while, one of our number announced "the most important day for me is Bank Holiday

Monday!" The room filled with laughter, assuming it was simply a quip – the words of a busy minister who was looking forward to a well-earned rest after a heavy schedule of services and celebrations. But as the laughter died down, he qualified his comment with a profound observation "because what really matters is not how we remember the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus, but how we then live the rest of our lives in the light of them."

This year in the United Kingdom, Holy Week has coincided with the formal start of the General Election campaign. This is likely to dominate the everyday life of the world into which we emerge as an Easter People, and its result could affect the kind of society in which we find ourselves in the months and years ahead. And this is the world into which the risen Christ commissions us to go as his messengers.

John's Gospel records a miraculous encounter between Jesus and his disciples on the evening of Easter day. Jesus announces "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you". This commission does not simply place the message of Christ at the heart of our Christian discipleship, but roots our response to it, in his life and death. We are sent, just as Jesus was sent – our engagement with the world is to be modelled, inspired and informed by his engagement with the world.

And when we observe the "word become flesh," we cannot avoid the conclusion that the coming of Christ had political consequences. His death on a cross, was not a religious execution, but a political one - arranged by the ruling authorities of Rome.

In the years before, as Jesus had won affection and acclaim from the masses, it was the political rulers of his day who were most at odds with what he said and did. His life and message impacted kings, governors and ruling councils; his parables addressed issues of racial tension and multi-culturalism; marriage and family life; wealth and poverty – all issues that will find their way onto today's election agendas.

Jesus was to be found in conversation and debate with teachers of the law; locked in controversy about work-life balance and the use of the Sabbath, declarations about oppression, justice and equality; he was eventually crucified with the politically volatile notice above his head "this is the King of the Jews".

And with the scars of execution on his hands and his sides, breathing the power of his Spirit into his bewildered disciples, Jesus declared – "in the same way, I am now sending you." The commission to his followers, is to declare that same Gospel, with all of its political and economic consequences, with a renewed authority and confidence because Jesus has engaged with and overcome the principalities and powers that were mustered against him.

The resurrection of Jesus points us to a life beyond this world, but resurrection only makes sense if it is preceded by death. Christ could not declare his victory over death, if he had not first subjected himself to it – and his death on a cross was the earthly climax of a ministry that confronted, challenged and engaged with the political narratives of his day.

"In the same way," he declares "I now send you". We are called to engage with this world, to apply our Gospel truths and vision of God's Kingdom to the issues before us.

Bank Holiday Monday will quickly give way to just over four weeks of intensive electioneering. In its

midst, our encounter with the risen Christ does not distract us, but focuses our attention at its very heart.

The Revd Phil Jump is Regional Minister Team Leader of the North Western Baptist Association

What is truth...?

And where do we find it? Heather Skull looks at lies, spin and exaggeration. Who can we believe?

I love *Yes Minister*. And its successor, *Yes Prime Minister*. One of my favourite bits is when Jim Hacker realizes he will have to go back on something he'd promised to do.

His private secretary Bernard Woolley listens sympathetically, before offering these words, 'They were only political promises Minister.'

'What do you mean?' asks a bewildered Hacker. 'I mean, like your manifesto promises, people understand,' explained Bernard.

It makes me laugh again when I think of it. But I was reminded of that sketch this week when some friends were talking about politicians.

'It doesn't matter who you vote for,' said one friend, 'Whoever gets in always forgets about their promises or says the previous administration have mucked things up so badly that they need to sort that out before they can start making new things happen. How can we believe a word they say when they never do anything they promise to?'

If you live in the UK, you cannot fail to notice that we're now into the rush towards the election.

I've already found myself putting my head in my hands as I hear yet another politician explaining how their party will be the ones to sort out the economy, grapple with immigration, help the homeless, do away with the need for foodbanks, give compulsory days off when the sun is shining and unlimited chocolate supplies to writers of blogs.

I may have made a couple of those manifesto promises up, of course. But there is a feeling of cynicism that the political manifesto doesn't contain real lasting truth. Just short-term promises that may or may not last the course.

And our distrust isn't just limited to that.

Politicians. Estate Agents. Journalists. Three professions that people associate with spin and often accuse of bending the truth to suit their own purposes.

'Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story,' is often bandied about as a joke in newsrooms. Except that sometimes it isn't a joke. And sometimes however much we pretend otherwise by calling it a fib, a bit of spin or an exaggeration, it is – in fact – a downright lie.

I once said – not very kindly I admit and in a rush of frustration – to a friend whose relationship with honesty had always been at best sketchy, 'You wouldn't know the truth if it got up and bit you.' But sometimes I wondered whether this person truly believed their own lies and whether the ultimate success of the untruthful person is to believe their own spin. Or – perhaps as we're being honest and

transparent here – they need to believe their own lies to justify their behaviour to themselves.

But what is truth? And how do we find it? How do we pick out the truth in the spin and skewed words that fill our ears and our minds every day?

I'm not sure these are the right questions. We believe what we want to hear. We search for a truth that we want to believe. Or as one of my friends – quoting his father – often says, 'We can only be easily led in the direction we want to go.'

So where is truth found? I believe that truth is only really truth when it's backed up with action. Let me explain: I wrote previously about my friend Alan and how he showed his love for his daughter by fixing her car ([The Mechanics of Grace](#), January 2015). Alan might tell his daughter he loves her and I'm sure she knows that. But the truth of that love is shown through his actions towards her.

That truth of a father's love is easy to unpick. The truth of a political manifesto is harder to find.

Also the perfect political party is like the perfect church or a seat on the Friday afternoon train service to where I live: impossible to find. Finding truth in the everyday whether it is in the workplace or amongst our friends is also a tough place to be. Avoiding lies and half-truths and fibs and spin is also tough. If you think I'm wrong, wait until one of your friends says, 'I've had my haircut. What do you think?' Or you have to fill in your next timesheet or tax return.

We should still search out the truth. We should still tell the truth in a society that's made an acceptable habit of avoiding it.

It is said that many years ago a group of monks wrestled with how to make an anagram out of the question asked by Pilate when Jesus was put on trial before him. The question – 'What is truth?' – apparently translates into Latin as 'Quid est veritas?'. It's said that the monks worked long and hard to create the answer 'Est vir qui adest.' Those words translate as 'It's the man who is here' or 'The man who stands before you.'

Jesus was and is a man who inspired truth. His own disciples burst out with things they couldn't help themselves saying.

Faced with that honest truthful gaze, lies would be impossible and more than once people walked away rather than face it and its gentle challenge. And he also pointed out that it was truth that would set us free.

And on a bleak Friday many years ago a hard-bitten centurion watched a cruel execution and was led to shout out a truth he had only just realised: 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'

So by all means, let's challenge our politicians, governments and business leaders to be transparent and open in what they say and how they work. But let's also remember that a commitment to honesty needs to begin a lot closer to home.

Now... ain't THAT the truth...

Heather Skull is a former BBC Radio Wiltshire journalist and a member of Trowbridge Baptist Church. She blogs at tractorgirl66.wordpress.com, where this article first appeared

The mission of the Church in the shadow of the Israeli election

The events of the last Israeli election are a wake-up call to the church, a challenge to find ways to be more effective in its mission, argues Azar Ajaj

The famous theologian Karl Barth once said, “We should carry the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand”.

This will help us, on the one hand, to understand what challenges our community is going through, and, on the other, to consider how the Word of God might help the church relate to the challenges. However we as evangelicals have often failed to carry this through; instead we have carried the Bible with both hands.

We are well acquainted with Scripture, but are strangers to our people, community, and country. As a result, our message is often seen as irrelevant, and we are unable to give answers to the questions and needs of the people. With respect to the current needs of society, the events of the last Israeli election, in my opinion, are a wake-up call to the church, a challenge to find ways to be more effective in its mission.

Many friends from abroad have asked my opinion about the elections. My answer is that these elections were significant: what happened before the elections, as well as the results, should have a direct effect on the mission of the church in Israel.

There are two major points from the elections that I would like to identify and reflect on.

First, the unity of all the Arab parties under what was called the “Joint List”. Almost 80 per cent of the Israeli Arabs who voted in this election voted for this party, and in my opinion most of those who abstained from voting did so not out of disagreement with the platform of the Joint List, but out of disenchantment with the political system itself. But, what were the main issues of the Joint List agenda that motivated Arab voters to vote for this party?

Many said that the fact that four major parties united for the List was itself the main achievement; this unity attracted many people to vote. The next important issue on the agenda was a Two State Solution to bring peace and dignity to both Israelis and Palestinians.

The issue of equal rights for the Arabs in Israel and the fight against racism and discrimination was also a major item on the agenda. All this together, plus other social issues, made the Arab people believe that the Joint List is the best party to represent them in the Israeli parliament.

Second, the “victory” of the right wing parties. In fact, this is not unprecedented; they have long been here, and, unless a deep change happens in Israeli society, they will be there for many years to come. What was different this time was the competition between the right wing parties to bolster one’s credentials as “least tolerant” to the Palestinian Israeli community. This sadly included, a few times, the use of racist expressions, and certainly involved using words that do not promote respect to Arab

citizens, words which present them as strangers and enemies of the country.

Furthermore, they were vying with one another in more adamantly opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state and in defiantly working to increase the number of Israeli settlements. This attitude was prominent among the leaders of the right wing parties, including Prime Minister Netanyahu himself. The election campaign struck a distinctively negative chord.

Having said that, the question the Church (and I here relate more to the evangelical churches) in Israel should ask herself is how can we better serve the Arab Israeli community in particular, and the Israeli community in general, in the light of these elections?

I believe the Church in Israel is doing a good job on the spiritual level by presenting the Gospel message of salvation and hope we have in Christ. However, we have very little involvement on the social level and almost nothing on the political one. Just to make it clear, I am not saying the church should be directly delving into the politics of the country; rather she has to have a prophetic voice in the following directions:

First, the church should identify with the pain, the suffering, and the challenges of its own people, in order to be able serve them. In fact, this is exactly what Christ did with His incarnation--He became one of us. That does not necessarily mean that we agree with everything our people do to face their challenges and solve their problems, not at all. At times we need the courage to criticize what we believe is wrong. But "identification" gives us the right, as part of the people, to relate to the challenges in a Christian way and with Christian values.

Second, as Christians we are called to "act justly and to love mercy" (Micah 6:8). When the prophets of Israel raised their voices against injustice and the oppression of the poor, they were not called "politicians" but "prophets". I believe the church should have the same prophetic voice today. We should be advocates for justice and call and act for mercy for the oppressed and the poor. We are called to pray "for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." (1 Tim 2:1-2)

But might we not, besides praying with them, also have the opportunity and the right to share with God's heart, love, mercy and justice with our leaders? It seems, according to these verses, that Paul teaches us that we have a role in achieving "peaceful and quiet lives". Why should we withhold this blessing from our leaders, our people, and our country?

Third, as I mentioned before, much hatred was promoted during this election campaign. A major part of the election's propaganda was calculated to frighten people, to alienate one's constituents from an alleged "enemy". This shocked me as well as many people. Nevertheless, are we not asked to be the "light and salt of the earth"?

How important, then, in such circumstances to promote and show love to those who have been styled as our "enemies". In fact we are asked to be peacemakers. Therefore, it would be important that the church at this dark time seek to build relationships and establish a dialogue with the Jewish community in Israel, as well as the Muslim one. If we want a better future for ourselves and for our children, a future built on respecting and loving "the other", then let us take part in building it. Otherwise, those with other values will determine what this future will be.

Finally, among other reasons, the issue of unity between the different Arab parties was an important reason for the support they enjoyed.

Clearly, Arab people in Israel were looking for such a development. Arab Israelis have been a divided minority for many years, and this division has not helped their case. And I wonder, "Is there not a lesson here for the church too?"

We as evangelicals are a minority within a minority within a minority; yet still we manage to divide from one another. Is not this lesson of unity a lesson for us, the people of Jesus? I believe it is, and I hope we will seek more and more ways of uniting in order to be a light, salt, and a blessing to the Arabs and Jews in Israel. God willing, one day we will speak of an election in the shadow of justice, mercy, love, and respect.

The Revd Azar Ajaj is a Baptist minister and President of the Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary

Baptisms:

Barrow upon Soar Baptist Church, Leics: Greg Dunn, Matt Taylor
Battle Baptist Church, Sussex: Katherine Weeks and Craig Weeks
Bishop's Stortford Baptist Church, Herts: Louise Parker
Dereham Baptist Church, Norfolk: Heather Edmonson, Robert Spice
Hearsall Baptist Church, Coventry: Flori Roman
Margate Baptist Church, Kent: Jude Mulcahy and Nick Gore
Warley Baptist Church, West Mids: John and Carrie Pearson
Dagenham Baptist Church, Essex: Mona Prince
Amphill Baptist Church, Beds: Ruth Baker
Portrack Baptist Church, Stockton-on-Tees: Jonathan Wright
Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, Northampton: Stephanie Muncherji and Tom Sabey
St James Road Baptist Church, Watford: Alice McDermott
Watchet Baptist Church, Somerset: David Lyttle, Amy Parker, Millie Smethurst
Madeley Baptist Church, Shropshire: Jake Bennett, Aaron Davis, Tanya Love, Carrie-Anne Baker

Baptism stories:

Hearsall Baptist Church in Coventry is happy to announce that, after several years with no baptisms, we had a believer's baptism on Easter Day. The candidate, Flori Roman, is a student originally from Romania. She has found a deep sense of peace in the church fellowship and is ready to commit her life to following Jesus.

Deaths:

In memoriam

TYDEMAN Garwood (Revd) - In loving memory of our dearest Dad and Granddad who died on 4th April, 2001. Always in our thoughts. Love from all his family.

'Great was his faithfulness'

Events:

Baptist Assembly 2015

16 May, Peterborough

We warmly invite you to gather with us for our 2015 Baptist Assembly at the KingsGate Conference Centre, Peterborough, for a day which will allow us to explore and be inspired in mission and discipleship.

You can book online and find out more information at

http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/247895/The_Baptist_Assembly.aspx

Exploring bi-vocational ministry

14-15 July

Trinity College, Stoke Hill, Bristol, BS9 1JP

Increasing numbers of people are involved concurrently in work related to ministry and work in a 'secular' field. For some this dual involvement is not through choice, but presents a practical way of sustaining church-based ministry. For others it offers a welcome opportunity to engage more creatively in mission.

Through this event we aim to explore the key questions and challenges that patterns of bi-vocational ministry are presenting by drawing together people from a wide variety of interested groups: those involved in bi-vocational ministry and mission; regional ministers and leaders; representatives from colleges; theologians.

The programme for the two days is designed as a structured conversation that will enable a thoughtful and rigorous exploration of the key issues. The intention is that this will be the beginning of an extended process of exploration and research that will shape and inform the work of the groups and organisations that you represent.

Book online at <https://eventbrite.co.uk/event/16232405562/>

For further details, or a paper booking form, contact conferences@bristol-baptist.ac.uk or phone 01179 469 209

<http://www.webassoc.org.uk/exploring-bi-vocational-ministry/>