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The Magazine of the United Reformed Church
Stratford-upon-Avon



Worship, Witness and love for others through Jesus Christ

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Thoughts for the Month

Finding Jesus

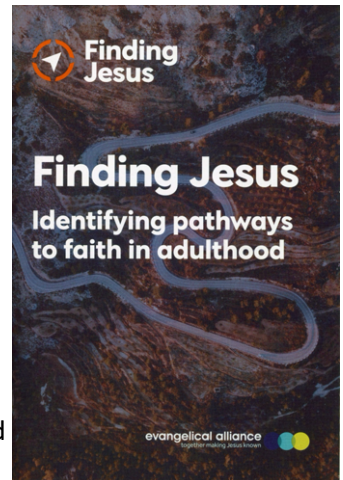
Later in the Magazine you will find a report about research carried out this last summer by the Evangelical Alliance. It's called 'Finding Jesus'. It is instructive for us as committed Christians, because it gives us pointers as to what we should be doing - *all the time* - how we can pursue our mission to help people around us find Jesus.

What we say, what we do, how we welcome people, how we treat people and how we share our own faith is very important in bringing people to recognise Jesus and invite him into their lives. I like to think that as a church community we are pretty good at welcoming people, but we should always be conscious of the effect that our actions might have on newcomers.

According to the research, the vast majority of people who found Jesus started their journey because of some form of crisis or doubt in their lives. This means we need to be very positive in helping people in difficulty. It has always been said, for instance, that a funeral or thanksgiving service is a great opportunity for mission.

The following facts are important too: 29% of participants said that their faith journey started as they saw how Christians' faith impacted their life. 29% also said it was after a Christian spoke to them about their faith. And 36% said it was time and conversations with a specific Christian friend that helped them. So, we do have the capability to influence people's journey of faith in a positive way. We need to continue to develop that capability.

Many people interviewed said that they came to faith quickly: 59% within one year and 32% within six months. What they wanted was time with people, patient discussion, seeing the authenticity of how life and faith go hand in hand, generous hospitality, and practical kindnesses. 59% of individuals reported the fact that attending a local church helped them significantly on their journey to faith. So, what we do in our own church does make a difference. However, I am not sure that this short journey into faith is the case for everyone. In my own life, I don't recognise a single discrete episode where I found Jesus. My faith built up over many years and many episodes: it has been a progressive process. My being raised in a Christian



home, my experience of the Church of England as a boy and teenager, a visit to a Billy Graham Crusade, the vicar in my church as a teenager, meeting my wife and her family, practising medicine and, in my work, seeing how serious illness and death impact on people have all contributed to my current Christian faith.



I think Finding Jesus is very relevant to all of us as we approach the Christmas season and we remember the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. The shepherds found Jesus in the manger in a stable, the three wise men found Jesus by travelling many miles across the Middle East. Mary, herself was introduced to the concept that her child would be the son of God, by the angel Gabriel. Think how strange, and maybe frightening, that must have been for an ordinary woman like Mary. She didn't need to find Jesus literally, but she found the concept of who he was to be.

The true meaning of Christmas can often get lost amongst all the hubbub of Christmas – the searching for presents, the parties, the food preparation, the decorations, the excitement and the arranging of special church services. So, let us remind ourselves of the true meaning of Christmas. Jesus the son of God came into this world to share our human existence. How great is that?

Let us this Christmas 'Re-find Jesus'. Let us find him in the manger, let us find him again in our lives. Let us re-discover the wonder of God's gift to the human race. Let us experience the wonder. Let us remind ourselves how important 'Finding Jesus' is in our lives, and in the lives of other people.

Peter

N.B. The full text of the 'Finding Jesus' report can be found in a booklet at the back of church.

Family News

Lesley has fully recovered from her operation and is delighted to be back driving.

Geoff is struggling a bit and thoughts are to be given as to his future situation. His daughter, Tracy and family, are of great help to him.

Margaret S. has settled in well for her stay at Hylands House.

Updating Birthday/Anniversary Slip

This information slip was first introduced in 2000 and now obviously needs updating. Your Elders will be offering you the chance to fill in one of those - you are under no obligation to do so. These will replace any currently in use. The information is helpful to me when noting special birthdays and wedding anniversaries when compiling Family News for "Link".

Flower Rota 2026

Firstly, very many thanks as always to those who have supplied/arranged flowers over the past year in Church for our services. The rota for 2026 will be available on the notice board on Sunday 30th November. Please enter your name on the rota when you wish to provide flowers. As I have said in the past, if you are not happy to actually put flowers in situ or indeed not physically able to purchase flowers for any chosen date, I will be happy to do so for you and put them in place.

St. Basils Tree

This will be in place from the service on 30th November. We will continue to support St. Basils Charity as we have done now for many years at Christmas to enable them to continue their valuable work supporting young people across the West Midlands providing advice, accommodation, support and engagement services to assist them back into education, work and training so they can move on successfully with their lives. Place one card on the tree and place a donation in the box provided in lieu of saved postage and cards or indeed any amount you choose. Thank you.

Ileen Fisher

Have you any unwanted Hats / gloves?

We have received a request from the Fred Winter Centre for gloves needed by their clients over the winter. If you do have any hats or gloves, surplus to requirements, could you give them to Linda, please.

As well as the Fred Winter Centre, Street Pastors are always in need of warm hats gloves and socks, to give out on a Friday evening.

What's on at the Bear Pit

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: 5th-14th December
Various times – see website



All Performances Sold Out

Tickets: £15 (under 25's £13)

Bear Pit Community Cinema



19th December 7.30pm: Bridget Jones: Mad about the Boy (2025)

20th December 7.30pm: Matthew Bourne's Nutcracker (2003)

21st December 7.30pm: Elf (2003)

Tickets: £6 (4 for 3 discount)

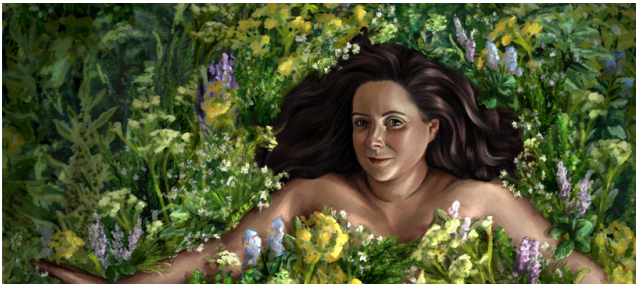
The Fifth Step – National Theatre Screening: 10th January 7pm.



A gripping tale of recovery, confession, and fragile trust, *The Fifth Step* explores the emotional terrain of addiction and redemption with dark humour and raw honesty. This provocative and subversively funny production delivers a powerful meditation on guilt, redemption, and the human need for connection.

Tickets: £24

The Herbal Bed: 27th – 31st January 7.30pm



The Herbal Bed by Peter Whelan is a compelling historical drama based on real events that took place in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613. The play centres on Susanna Hall, the daughter of William Shakespeare, who finds herself at the heart of a scandal when she is accused of having an adulterous affair with Rafe Smith, a local haberdasher and family friend. Susanna and her husband Dr John Hall decide to sue for slander, but the stakes are high. Susanna's reputation, Dr Hall's medical practice and the family reputation are at risk. Whelan's script is rich with period detail and emotional nuance, offering a vivid portrait of life in Jacobean England and the personal cost of maintaining honour in a judgmental world.

Tickets: £15 (under 25's £10)

A Refugee's Personal Story

The following article was submitted by Kirsty. It was written by her mother, originally for her own Church Magazine, in Newcastle.

Have you ever wondered what it must be like to be a refugee? We are bombarded these days with news of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers from all over the world desperately looking for safety and a better life. The governments of many countries try to decide what to do about the situation, which causes so much unrest at home, and is a huge drain on its resources. There is no easy answer!

This is the personal story of my own husband's time as a war refugee. The family lived in Rangoon in Burma where Colin's father was in charge of setting up the telephone cable network throughout the country. The Japanese invaded Burma, and advanced south to Rangoon, arriving there in January 1942, where they started bombing the city and its surroundings. The family lived just outside the city, but slit trenches were dug round it and Colin's earliest memories were of hiding there armed with his kukri (a curved Nepalese knife) to protect his 4 year old sister while watching for Japanese soldiers ! Colin's mother had just given birth to their third child and had left the hospital literally the day before it was bombed and where many had died. Just 3 weeks later, his father was advised that the harbour was to be closed and that the last ship would leave that night, so that if the family were to have a chance of escape, they would have to be on it. He had been seconded to the British army and given the job of destroying all the communication lines he had already had installed, to deny the Japanese the use of them., so could not leave with them. You can imagine the fear that this news gave to Colin's mother: having to leave her husband, and travel with three small children (aged 6, 4, and 1 month old) and their ayah, who had agreed to go with them to help with the children as she was still very weak after the baby's birth. They landed in Calcutta in India, staying with friends for a few days in order to recover from the sea crossing and get money and further supplies, before taking the long train journey north to a small village called Takktah in the Himalayas. Colin's father told her to stay there and if he could manage to travel north through Burma itself safely, he would meet them there. If not, the family were to stay there till the end of the war, after which, when possible, they should embark on the first ship available and return to Scotland, which turned out to be a troop ship, to young Colin's great delight.

Colin Senior did manage to get to Takktah, though it took him a year to walk out the

length of Burma. He was so emaciated and unrecognisable that the two older children did not recognise him! He was able to stay a few days with them, then had to report to the army, and did not see them again until 1948 when he joined them in Scotland for a holiday before being sent back to Burma, to reinstall the telephone and cables network, finally returning for good to the UK in 1952.

Colin's mother never really recovered from the trauma of those years, nervous, always worrying and terrified of being late. Colin also found the Burmese memories so frightening that he would never talk about those days. That is, not until 18 years ago when, while we were visiting our younger son and his wife who were living in Singapore at the time, our daughter-in-law took us to the Changi prison, notorious during the war for the cruelty shown to the many expats who had been sent there when the colony was invaded, but now a most moving memorial museum. When Colin saw the pictures and photos on the walls it opened the floodgates and he started to talk about what he remembered, reliving the fear and anxiety he had felt so many years before, and they then were uppermost in his mind till shortly before his death.

Eilidh Scott.

Stratford Churches Together

Statement on Refugees - Draft

The following is a draft copy of a statement to be put out by Stratford Churches Together about refugees. It was discussed on 26th November and some changes were added (as in this version). It will go out to the leaders again before being finally agreed.

As we witness the agitation about refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants which is being fomented nationally, we consider ourselves blessed that Stratford-upon-Avon, the town we serve, has shown itself to be a kind and compassionate place.

Refugees have been settling in our town for the past ten years. Existing residents have made them welcome and supported them – acting as good neighbours, helping them to find the services they need, supporting them as they seek to improve their English, offering them friendship. As individual churches we too have sought to help those who have settled among us.

We can do no other. The Bible tells us in many places to care for the stranger and the sojourner. In one of his best-known parables – the Good Samaritan – Jesus tells

us to help everyone who needs our aid – not just family and friends but also strangers and foreigners.

We have also listened to the stories of those who have come among us as refugees. We know they mourn for the land from which they have been driven by war and violence, as we would mourn if we were forced to flee to another country. We also know that they want to contribute to their new home and community, to give back to the place that has been kind and welcomed them.

Sadly, some people are hostile to our new friends. Some people and some media portray refugees as unworthy of help, as people seeking to take our jobs and homes. For people who are suffering from unemployment or low wages, from poor housing or difficult neighbourhoods, this can seem a plausible reason for the problems they face. Our challenge as churches is to help these as well – to make them feel a valued and welcomed part of our community.

Many people in Stratford-upon-Avon have shown their compassion for refugees. Others have shown their willingness to help others: those facing poverty, ill health or mental strains. All are entitled to our support and kindness. As churches we will continue to seek ways to help all those in our local community. As churches we will encourage everyone in our town to treat others with kindness and compassion.

Family Trees

My mother always told me that envy was a sin; but she knew her family tree. When I was 4 and about to go to school, she also told me that I was adopted in case anyone else let this nugget slip. The latter did not matter because she emphasised how she and Dad had chosen me. I presumed it was like going to the Co-op (our local supermarket) and choosing me off a shelf of babies! What a joy it was to be naive in 1949!

I had a wonderful childhood and felt greatly cared for and loved. Discussions of family trees were never referred to in our family, which is hardly surprising.

I remember being fascinated by Jesus' family tree and how "begot" came into my



language. My godmother explained to me that it just meant that a mother or father was an ancestor. It never occurred to me to ask about an ancestor in our family.

As I grew older I sometimes wondered who my birth mother was and whether Prince, now King, Charles was a brother-rarely thought about my birth father. It wasn't until I was in my late fifties that it became an obsession.

I belonged to a Pilates group and one evening the others were talking about their family trees and somebody asked me about mine. They suggested that I obtained a birth certificate and found out who was my birth mother. This done, I began investigations. I discovered that my mother had died in a nursing home a year earlier only 300 yards from where we were living in Weston super Mare. The death was reported by a half sister whom I later met.

Unfortunately, we had little in common so my story didn't end with violins and roses but it did give me the start of a family tree.

Now, I can listen to Christmas readings from Matthew 1 or Luke 3 which tell of Jesus' genealogy with understanding. I can truly relate to ancestry and the obsession for family trees.

Carole Sampson

Finding Jesus

Finding Jesus research - identifying pathways to faith in adulthood was launched by the Evangelical Alliance in June 2025. Here is a summary:

Much has been written about the decline of the church in the West. However, over the last few years, a different story has started to bubble up amongst non-believers, a surprising interest in Christian faith in all sorts of unlikely places. From celebrities and students to those in prison and on the margins of society, many people are discovering and choosing to follow Jesus.

The Finding Jesus research was carried out try to understand what was going on in the stories of adults in the UK finding Jesus. They wanted to find out:

- Who were they?
- What prompted them to explore faith?
- What happened in their journey towards Jesus?
- Who was alongside?

- What happened at the point of decision and what's happened since?

From the stories of 281 individuals, followed up with hour-long interviews with twenty of these, the key findings were:

1. People are wanting help with life. When asked what initiated people's journey of faith 37% of our participants said it was because they wanted help with life, 34% were searching for meaning, and 32% said it was borne out of a place of pain – something that was proving challenging in their life.
2. People observe and listen to Christians. 29% of participants said that their faith journey started as they saw how Christians' faith impacted their life. 29% also said it was after a Christian spoke to them about their faith. 36% said it was time and conversations with a specific Christian friend that helped them.
3. The impact of spiritual encounters. 28% of participants accounted for the fact that their faith journey was started by a spiritual experience and 39% of people said it was an experience of God that led to them actually making the decision to follow Jesus.
4. The impact of previous encounters with the Church and Christian message. 72% of those surveyed spoke of some form of residual Christianity – i.e. they had received some form of Christian input previously, via a toddler group, Sunday school, holiday club, youth group/young adult ministry or similar. We should trust that what is sown when people are young may result in their coming to faith in later life.
5. The life-transforming impact of the Bible. 47% of participants said that the Bible was what helped them on their journey of exploring faith. 27% of people stated that the Bible was pivotal in the moment that they made the decision to follow Jesus.
6. People are coming to faith quickly. Contrary to what many praying Christians might anticipate we saw that 59% of all participants surveyed said that they had explored the Christian faith and made a decision to follow Jesus within less than 1 year, 32% within 6 months. People's stories showed us that the decision to follow Jesus was deeply impactful and real even where knowledge of the whole gospel was limited.
7. People found reading the Bible and learning to pray most challenging. Since becoming Christians 49% of people said that it was learning how to pray that had proved the most challenging. A further 49% said it was making sense of the Bible. 36% said that changing aspects of their lifestyle was the hardest since coming to faith and 36% said dealing with the sometime negative responses or question from

non-Christian friends/family members was deeply challenging.

8. What drew people to the gospel? In a society of broken relationships and loneliness people's desire to be loved was very clear. 48% of people said that it was the truth that Jesus loves me that drew them to the gospel. 46% of people (particularly those on lower incomes) said it was the promise of hope and wanting their lives to have meaning that drew them. 49% of those under 25 said that it was because the gospel was true, profound and beautiful.

9. What people found helpful as they explored faith? Participants shared that, as they explored faith, what they most wanted or valued was: time with people, patient discussion, to see authenticity of how life and faith go hand in hand, generous hospitality, and practical kindnesses.

10. The Church is doing a great job. 59% of individuals account for the fact that attending a local church helped them significantly on their journey to faith. Story after story in the research speaks of how individuals felt well-welcomed, valued, loved, listened to by people within church-based toddler groups, courses, and in conversation with Christians. As the church we need to recognise however the discipleship challenges around the messiness of transitions, especially with people coming to faith so quickly, and the challenges they often face with the reactions of close friends and family after they have decided to follow Jesus.

A quote from the Mission Specialist at the Evangelical Alliance:

"When I first read this report I wept with joy upon hearing the stories of so many changed lives. It is not only profoundly encouraging, but incredibly insightful. As well as some expected well-trodden paths, there are some glorious surprises. Our deep hope is that it inspires prayerful action and shapes fruitful mission in individuals, churches and organisations."

There is no "I" in Team

Unsurprisingly, when a church service commences the eyes of the congregation are drawn to the person taking it. Most frequently in our church this is Peter but on two occasions recently it has been me! However, I am only the tip of the iceberg! Unseen beneath the ocean is a considerable team seldom seen in other churches. Interestingly, although both times there has been an air of expectation for everyone as the vestry elder enters with the Bible but my predominant thought is that



worship is actually a joint effort.

This team ethos starts when the congregation enters the porch to be welcomed and given orders of service. In church they will notice the person taking the service, the organist, the reader and the vestry elder. Will they remember the rather isolated figure at the back behind the desk making sure they can both hear and have something to see? Are they even aware of the time and skills needed to produce the images on Powerpoint that enhance our services? Will they remember those who served their coffee or put their cups into the dishwasher?

Services are rightly known as “acts of corporate worship.” When you think that on a Sunday around a third of our congregation which is usually approximately 30, are actively involved it is an accurate description. So as another year approaches its end, let us remember all the “teams” in our prayers.

David Sampson

Noel

A seasonal poem written by J.R.R. Tolkien:

*Grim was the world and grey last night:
The moon and stars were fled,
The hall was dark without song or light,
The fires were fallen dead.
The wind in the trees was like to the sea,
And over the mountains' teeth
It whistled bitter-cold and free,
As a sword leapt from its sheath.
The lord of snows upreared his head;
His mantle long and pale
Upon the bitter blast was spread
And hung o'er hill and dale.
The world was blind,
The boughs were bent,
All ways and paths were wild:*

*Then the veil of cloud apart was rent,
 And here was born a Child.
 he ancient dome of heaven sheer
 Was pricked with distant light;
 A star came shining white and clear
 Alone above the night.
 In the dale of dark in that hour of birth
 One voice on a sudden sang:
 Then all the bells in Heaven and Earth
 Together at midnight rang.
 Mary sang in this world below:
 They heard her song arise
 O'er mist and over mountain snow
 o the walls of Paradise,
 And the tongue of many bells was stirred
 in Heaven's towers to ring
 When the voice of mortal maid was heard,
 Glad is the world and fair this night
 With stars about its head,
 And the hall is filled with laughter and light,
 And fires are burning red.
 The bells of Paradise now ring
 With bells of Christendom,
 And Gloria, Gloria we will sing
 That God on earth is come.*

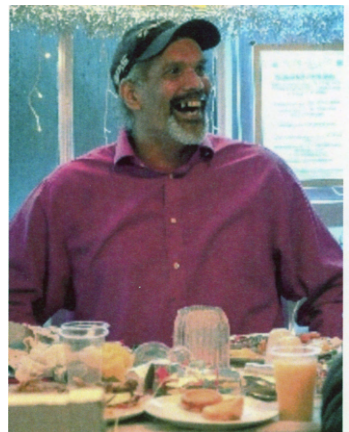


The wonder of Christmas

Dan Holland

Dan Holland died on the 23rd October 2025. He was just 47 years old. It was a sudden death, and the day before he was happy and joking and going about his life normally. The service to celebrate his life was held at Oakley Woods crematorium on 18th November. The service was directed by his stepmother.

Dan was born in Bangladesh and lived there till the age of three. At that age he was adopted by Rowan and his then wife. Subsequently he lived in the UK.



And was brought up by Rowan and his second wife (with whom Rowan had four other children). Dan therefore had four siblings who all spoke about him at the service. They all loved him, and sometimes that was 'rough love': Dan called a spade a spade. He was very keen on modern music, especially Rap.

Dan was an integral founder member of the Charity, Stepping Stones, which runs meals for the 'vulnerable' in our church. Richard Heathcote, Joy Heathcote and Dan were a team. Richard has kindly given us the text of his eulogy, which he delivered at Oakley Wood. It seems appropriate to print it word for word:

Dan is Dan, is Dan – what can we say? Dan was a true grafter never afraid of sheer hard work to get things done. And he got a lot done.

Joy & Dan first worked together back in 2020 at HR Coffee Bar, serving takeaway breakfasts and later lunches, and where Stepping Stones all began in 2022. Bear in mind that the food service for the homeless, ~15 meals a day, 4 days a week at that time, was done after Dan had already sorted his outside catering orders for the day - often up to 100 working lunches! - before opening at 8.30 and running the café until 2. He never stopped.

When HR Coffee Bar finally had to close as a result of Covid, Dan had nowhere to live and came to stay with us for a few months. In our home he was a model guest and spent his time actively looking for work and accommodation or helping out around the house – he sometime even cooked the odd meal!

For us Dan was kind and thoughtful, and always aware and respectful of others' vulnerabilities, even if this wasn't always obvious to all, and he was always a gentleman.

For Stepping Stones, Dan was yang to Joy's ying, or vice versa; Joy's alter-ego. Dan and Joy were the beating heart of Stepping Stones, now broken in two. Both relied on each other for support and guidance. Both also spoke plainly, very plainly, which sometimes led to sibling like squabbles, always soon mended over a cup of tea or occasionally something stronger.

At Stepping Stones, as well as being able to turn out a simple tasty meal with seemingly no ingredients and no time, Dan produced some beautiful meals.

With Joy they catered for up to 15 to 35 people each service session, with highlights being our Christmas dinners, Chinese New Year banquet, Diwali celebrations and Summer Picnics; always with everything fresh cooked from original ingredients. Dan had a real talent as a chef and whatever was the crisis of

the day he would jump, not from the frying pan into a fire, more from that ‘fire’ into a frying pan, or saucepan, or oven or whatever was needed and rustle up something tasty.

Through his aura and experience Dan was able to help us with our security. Though we’ve never seen Dan have to ‘get physical’ on those rare occasions when security was needed. These were always dealt with calmly and effectively; professionally, leaving the rest of us feeling safe and secure – quietly our hero.

Dan was always firm but diplomatic in these situations. Maybe less so when dealing with the local politics of Stepping Stones where others’ inability to get things done were a source of frustration – he was just too far ahead in his thinking, and just ‘did stuff’ too fast for many.

These who knew him in Stratford upon Avon have all basically described Dan as a lovable rogue with a heart of gold, and that just about feels right. Although for us, you could replace rogue with good friend, just one with a few rough edges now & again.

All that Dan accomplished was always, well nearly always, done with humour and kindness, and good intentions (provided no one ever asked for eggs more than one way – woe betide HR Coffee Bar customers who asked for poached, and scrambled, and fried!).

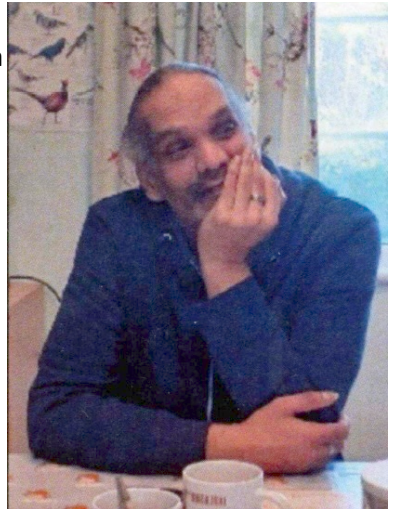
In summary, I’ll paraphrase one of our clients who said

“I’ve had my ups and downs with life. You were Dan, the tough but kind parent. You made a big difference to me and always wanted the best for us. You were always a rock if I needed you.”

This pretty much sums up how Joy feels too.

Thank you, Dan. We do, and will, miss you.

Rest in peace.



Richard Heathcote

What are you carrying?

Following on from Dan's eulogy it seemed appropriate to print this small thought about life:

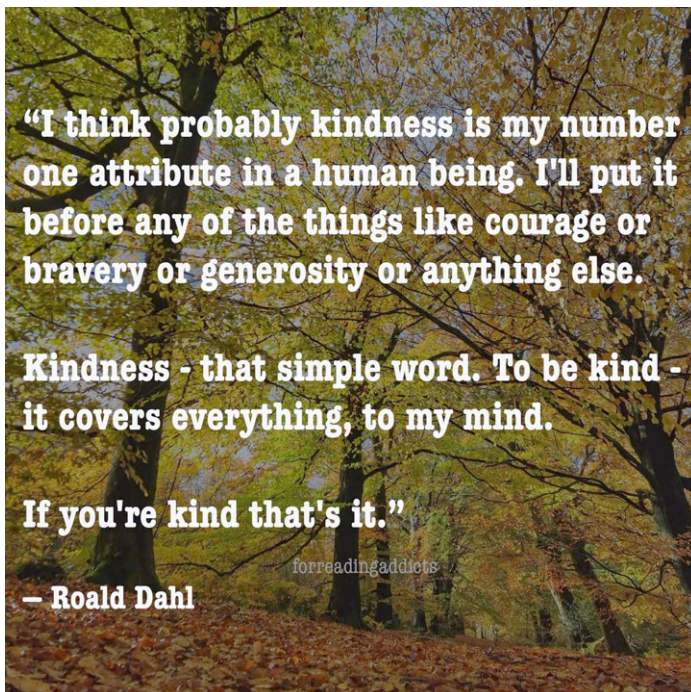
A Buddhist monk asked his students a question: "If you are carrying a cup of coffee and someone bumps into you, why did you spill the coffee?" Well each and every one of the students said: "Because someone bumped into me", and he said "No – the reason why you spill the coffee is because that's what you were carrying in your cup. Now, if you were carrying water you would have spilled water.

Then he said something profound. He said: "Whenever life shakes you, whatever you are carrying is going to spill out. So, if you are carrying fear or jealousy or anger or greed, that's what 's going to spill out. But if you are carrying love, compassion, kindness, or empathy, that's what's going to spill out. So each and every day you should pause, and think to yourself what am I carrying in my cup today?"

Hmmm – think about it!

Taken from Facebook

This thought has been added to by a quote from Roald Dahl:





October in Ukraine

I couldn't have been further from the fighting but I was in the Ukraine. Uzghorod, is a not unattractive town with a river dissecting it and a hilltop castle and the Orthodox Cathedral overlooking a centre of quaint shopping streets. No drone has so far penetrated this town on the Slovakian border but you're aware you are in a country at war.

In a small park not far from the river, surrounded by heavily trafficked streets, over 200 canvas panels six feet tall commemorate soldiers from the area who have died in the conflict. Each panel bears an image and the men are aged from their late teens to the mid sixties.

At 9am each morning a small crowd converges on the streets alongside the same park; police stop the traffic and there's a minute's silence followed by the playing on loudspeakers of the National Anthem. It's a simple but poignant act of remembrance. No anti-government demonstration this; just a gesture to honour the dead and maybe to allow a second or two to pray for a just end to the war.

If you want to trace the effects of the war on the town further you enter the Baptist



and Pentecostal churches and listen to the way these organisations reformed themselves following the arrival of thousands of IDP's (Internally Displaced Persons) in 2022 when Putin's forces pushed into Eastern Ukraine. Church pews became beds and kitchens turned out copious amounts of food that would have seemed impossible beforehand. Some of the IDP's have stayed on in the town while others have moved away. Some are still arriving. The ministers of these congregations spend one week a month at the Front listening to and praying for the men who've seen action.

An English friend and fellow member of my church in Stratford when he's in the UK has been involved in mercy work in Eastern Europe since Ceaucescu was deposed in Romania in the late 1980's and television cameras filmed the harrowing scenes in orphanages around that country. Thus began for him a series of journeys transporting bedding, children's toys and play equipment, health products and electrical goods to



the orphanages until a time came when he was spending a good proportion of each year in Romania. Then in 2022, with Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, drivers were needed to move mothers with children with special needs out of the war zones. My friend answered the call. Some families were to stay in Ukraine but some went to Germany. Since this time my friend and a team of Ukrainian co-workers have begun serving families with special needs children in the Uzghorod area. All the team members are Christians and they've named the ministry 'Father's Heart' emphasising in doing so the loving care God has for all people.

The purpose of my trip to Uzghorod was to build upon the friendships I'd made with people on an earlier visit in March '25 and help with the work if possible. In fact my contribution came in visiting wounded soldiers in 'rehab' wards of several general hospitals in the town. All of the men had incurred serious limb injuries and many were bed bound. There were men with amputations and others wired up to metal contraptions designed for limb support. Some were in pain. In each bay I was introduced by the Military Chaplain who also spoke English and in all the bays I was received with warmth and humour. I suppose in a war one retains a special appreciation for ones allies.

I found many of the men in upbeat mood. For many their war was over though

some were still hoping to get back in the fight. The camaraderie between them was strong though some must have been haunted by questions about their future. Would their families take them back ? And did their future offer any possibility of returning to gainful employment? Many soldiers mentioned that they'd been on training in the UK, and one said he'd been operated on by a British Army surgeon. Several gave me small mementos. One soldier gave me the casing of the first bullet he'd fired in anger; another a small tool kit that featured a pair of pliers, knives, a pair of scissors and probably several screw drivers. Badges off uniforms were also thrust into my hands. They were a good lot of men who'd been willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for their country. It was a great privilege to have been in their presence.

Just before I left to go to Ukraine I had heard that Dmitri, husband of my friend Zhenya in Uzghorod, had been abducted by the army. Those looking for a way to criticise the Government of Ukraine (and there are more Russian sympathisers among the British population than one might believe) cite this as an example of anti-democratic fault lines in Zelenski's Government. But does Zelenski have an option given Russia's seeming inexhaustible ability to replenish their front-line team?

Zhenya has visited Dmitri on two occasions each time travelling 12 hours by car to see him and return. Dmitri is the soul breadwinner and Zhenya has a daughter at home. This year I'll save the money I would have spent on Christmas presents and supply my friend with a donation towards Zhenya's rent.

Through my friend I've had an amazing privilege to visit this beleaguered land. Nothing I've seen and no one I've met suggests to me that Ukraine deserves to be robbed of its sovereignty by a bully of a neighbour. We keep praying for a just peace and maybe next year I can return. May your remembrance experiences these coming days be meaningful.

Rob Hearnden

A Christmas Release

I have decided to release a new song for Christmas. It's called 'Duvet know it's Christmas' — it's a cover version.

Christmas Groaners

Who hides in the bakery at Christmas? – A mince spy!

What kind of photos do elves take? – Elfies!

What do snowmen eat for lunch? – Icebergers!

What's worse than a reindeer with a runny nose? – A snowman with a fever!

Why wouldn't Ebenezer Scrooge eat at the pasta restaurant? – It cost a pretty Penne!

How many letters are there in the Christmas alphabet? – 25 – there's noel!

What's the best Christmas present? – A broken drum – you just can't beat it!

Why is it getting harder to buy Advent calendars? – Their days are numbered!

What did one snowman say to the other snowman? – Do you smell carrots?

What did Adam say the day before Christmas? – IT's Christmas, Eve!

What do you call an elf wearing ear-muffs? – Whatever you want – he can't hear you anyway!

What did the bald man say when someone gave him a comb for Christmas? – Thanks, I'll never part with it!

What do Christmas Trees get when they go numb? – Pines and needles!

Where do you find a Christmas tree? – Between Christmas two and Christmas four!

How do Christmas trees get ready for a night out? – They spruce up!

What happens when you eat Christmas decorations? – You get tinsel-itis!

Which former US president planted the most Christmas trees? – Wood-row Wilson!

What did Luke Skywalker say after he planted a Christmas tree farm? – May the forest be with you!

How did the bauble get addicted to Christmas? – He was hooked on trees his whole life!

How do you invite Santa to a party? – You ask for his presents!

Why does Santa use GPS? – He doesn't want to be a lost Claus!

How much did Santa's sleigh cost? – It was on the house!

Knock, knock! Who's there? Honda. Honda who? Honda first day of Christmas my true love sent to me

Knock, knock! Who's there? Anna. Anna who? Anna partridge in a pear tree.

Invitation to sing CAROLS FOR CHRISTMAS

Outside the White Swan at the top of Wood St.

3.00-4.00pm Saturday 20th December

Stratford Town Centre Chaplaincy



stratfordchaplaincy.co.uk

Only five shopping praying days
'til Christmas



11.00 Saturday 20 December at St Gregory's,
Stratford-upon-Avon

The "Great O Antiphons"

The acclamations for the last seven days of Advent - the
origins of the hymn: "O come, O come, Emmanuel"

A talk by Fr Oliver Holt OSB

11.00 Tea/Coffee Talk 11.30 -12.30

No charge but please sign the list at the back of church or contact the parish
office if you would like to attend:

01789 292439 stgregorygstratforduponavon@rcaob.org.uk



At the November Stratford Churches Together Leaders' Meeting we enjoyed a visit from the relatively new manager of the

Stratford Foodbank - Asher Deakin, who has been in post three months. He's a committed Christian who is a member of the Redditch Elim Pentecostal Church.

Although the Foodbank has reached out to Churches in Stratford in the past, there hasn't been a strong working link between the Foodbank and the churches. Asher is very keen to change that. He wants to encourage more interaction and he's looking to appoint a Christian on the Board of Trustees.

He told us that the Foodbank is looking to move from its current location in the Fred Winter Centre, because it no longer meets their needs. They are currently in legal negotiations about a new site which will be much bigger. It will allow them to distribute food from it (which is impossible in the Fred Winter Centre) and also provide storage for all their supplies of food. It will have offices and space for other organisations to be able to work in concert with the Foodbank.

Their Christmas drive for food donations has been in Tesco's for three days from 27th to 29th November - you may have seen and made a donation, already.

They are also launching a Christmas appeal for monetary donations. They are putting out a letter from a previous user of the Foodbank - Joanna - who had suffered domestic abuse, to encourage people to donate cash. The Foodbank has moved on from just handing out food parcels to also giving valuable advice and support.

Here are a couple of extracts from Joanna's letter to give you a flavour:

"Hi, I'm Joanna, and I found myself walking through the doors of a foodbank with my little girl at the beginning of a new year. I hope you'll take a moment to read my story"

"When we arrived at the Foodbank, my worries lifted. We were greeted with such warmth by a team of volunteers in green. We were offered a drink, a snack and a place to sit. My daughter played happily with a kind volunteer who was showing her books she could take home. My shame lifted. I could breathe. My child could eat. And for the first time in years, someone saw me. They listened. They cared. This was

possible because of supporters like you"

- **£25 funds a specialist welfare and debt advisor to attend a Foodbank session**
- **£40 covers the cost of feeding a small family like Joanna's for three days over Christmas**
- **£180 covers the cost of one food distribution session**

"The volunteers didn't just hand me supplies: they took the time to ask thoughtful, compassionate questions. They listened without rushing, without pity, and without judgement. They understood that my worries went far beyond hunger. I was anxious about rent, bills, and how I'd make it through the next month. They saw that. One of the volunteers gently suggested that I could be referred to a specialist welfare advisor"

"For the first time in months, I felt like I had a path forward. Now in December 2025, I have my own home. My daughter is settled and making friends. Our fridge is full. Our future feels possible. And it's all thanks to the Foodbank - and to people like you".

"After fleeing domestic abuse and finding myself in this town, Stratford-upon-Avon became my sanctuary"

"Today, I have my parcel of hope, and that's because of you. But many others in Stratford-upon-Avon are still facing hardship this festive season. That's why I am reaching out to you as someone who truly cares. about others and our community, to ask if you will consider making a donation to Stratford-upon-Avon Foodbank this Christmas. Your generosity could be the lifeline someone needs to find hope again".

"Every donation, however large or small makes an enormous difference"



IF YOU WANT TO DONATE NOW, SCAN THIS CODE WITH YOUR SMARTPHONE OR VISIT

WWW.JUSTGIVING.COM/CAMPAIGN/APARCELOFHOPE

IF YOU WISH TO DONATE A DIFFERENT WAY, PLEASE USE THE ATTACHED FORM...

YES, I'D LOVE TO MAKE A DONATION TO STRATFORD-UPON-AVON FOODBANK'S CHRISTMAS APPEAL

BY CASH OR CHEQUE:

Please complete and return to:

Stratford-upon-Avon Foodbank, Christmas Appeal, Fred Winter Centre, 41 Guild Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 6QY

NAME:

ADDRESS:

EMAIL:

I ENCLOSE A GIFT OF: £5 ☐ £10 ☐ £50 ☐ OR

CASH ☐

CHEQUE ☐

Please make cheques payable to
Stratford upon Avon Foodbank

BY BANK TRANSFER

Account Name:
Stratford upon Avon Foodbank
Account number:
92142538
Sort Code:
40-43-19

Please write 'Christmas Appeal'
as the reference and email
fundraising@stratforduponavon.foodbank.org.uk
to let us know you've donated.

MAKE YOUR GIFT GO FURTHER AT NO EXTRA COST

The *giftaid it* Scheme allows us to reclaim 25p of tax for every £1 you donate at no extra cost to you. All you need to do is tick the box.

*I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less income tax and/or capital gains tax than the amount of gift aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year, it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

☐

KEEP IN TOUCH

If you would like to sign up to our mailing list to receive occasional emails, please tick this box.

☐


Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

Stratford-upon-Avon Foodbank is a registered charity in England and Wales (1153294). Our registered address is:
Stratford-upon-Avon Foodbank, Fred Winter Centre, 41 Guild Street, CV37 6QY



You could change lives for people like
Joanna and her child

This is a real story shared with permission. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Images are for illustrative purposes.

Sunday Services

| | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------|
| 7th December | Holy Communion | Revd Colin Offor | 9.30am |
| 14th December | Carol Service | Peter Horrocks | 6.30pm |
| 25th December | Christmas Celebration | Peter Horrocks | 10am |
| 4th January | Holy Communion | Revd Geoffrey Roper | 9.30am |
| 18th January | Morning Service | Sheila Brown | 9.30am |
| 1st February | Holy Communion | Revd Brian Mason | 9.30am |

F&F Rota December & January

Please report any problems with the buildings in December to:

Sarah Salmon 01789 295976 / 07816 565371

or Ashley Pettifer 01789 293578

In January to:

Brian Douglas 01789 296290 / 07899 777432

or Ann Jones 01789 266177 / 07580 557163

Flower Rota

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 7th December | Jill Fradley |
| 14th December | Christmas arrangements |
| 25th December | Christmas Arrangements |
| 4th January | } |
| 18th January | } Check flower rota on notice board |
| 1st February | } |

Link

The February edition of Link will be published on the 1st February.

The deadline for submission to the next edition is Monday 26th January.

Please send us your articles, pictures, humour etc.

Editors contact details:

Telephone: 01789 750971 Email: peterhorrocks@doctors.net.uk

United Reformed Church, Rother Street

CHRISTMAS TREE FESTIVAL



**Friday 12th & Saturday 13th
December**

From 9.30am till 3.00pm

**Come and see the Church decked out
with over 30 trees,
and vote for your favourite.**

Display by Heart of England Woodturners.

**NO CHARGE, but donations welcomed.
Refreshments available**