

# Christians Aware *Magazine*



Spring 2026



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# IN MEMORY OF BRIAN MACDONALD- MILNE

Brian first came to Christians Aware when we published his first book, 'The True Way of Service.' Twenty years later we published 'War in the Pacific.' Both books are well appreciated by many readers and they have found places in many libraries.

Brian was a wonderful person to work with. He was full of enthusiasm and deep commitment to the people of the Pacific region. He joined the Melanesian Mission in 1964 and stayed there, in spirit in later years, until his death in September 2025.

We have always benefitted from working with Brian. He was enthusiastic, committed and with an eye for detail.

A number of members got to know Brian when he joined the summer schools when they were held in Ely, near to his Waterbeach Home. He always joined our webinars and asked thought-provoking questions.

We will miss him.

## VISITING THE CRIB<sup>1</sup>

You in your crib have raised your hands to me –  
As if you know what I have come to see.  
So small and poor, but full of love and power,  
You've come to save us in our darkest hour.  
Your hands are deeply human.

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<sup>1</sup> First verse of Brian's poem, 'Visiting the Crib'.

### Front cover:

Spring photograph taken at Launde Abbey by Jeremy Purseglove

### Back cover:

Summer School poster



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## EDITORIAL

Spring 2026

**T**he Future of Christians Aware' is the title of a recently formed working group. The members are looking at new possibilities for the work of our charity.

We are exploring many areas. At the last meeting it was agreed that before we can offer more opportunities, events and resources we must grow the membership. It was also agreed that the best way to gather more members will be to ask our current members to create local groups. This need not be a difficult task and meetings need not be too often. Some groups might meet once a month perhaps and some a little less often.

The key to success is to enjoy forming a group and to have a focus that members will value and which may benefit their communities. The focus will not be hard to find. Our country and world have so many needs.

We realise that some of our members are not able to form a group. We also know that many members could do this. We are hopeful that those who could form a group will respond. The office is ready with resources

There are many focuses to choose from. Have a look at the books page in the annual report, as a beginning. The study of one of our books would be a good start perhaps. A complete list is available from the office.

Some groups might begin by reading one of our 'Faith Awareness' books. There is a separate leaflet for these. Just ask the office to send you one.

We were so disappointed when the Interfaith Network closed down when the government withdrew its support. We had been a member body for many years. We have learned so much from our friends of other faiths and we continue to meet and work with many of them. The women's group is one example and events in Interfaith Week are others.

There is fortunately recent good news on the interfaith front. A new interfaith commission has been formed from the Woolf Institute in Cambridge. It's remit is to identify and go on to diffuse potential areas of conflict. This news is very encouraging.

Our society faces many conflicts. Some arise in local areas and others have national origins. We are also deeply affected by many of the troubles around the world. The new commission will be alert to conflicts locally, nationally and internationally and will try to diffuse them.

My hope is that Christians aware may make a contribution to the creation of a more peaceful country and world. Listening to others and understanding them is vital and we can do this in many different ways, not least through local groups.

*Barbara Butler*

# THE ICONOGRAPHY OF EASTER

Mark Roberts

Our word Easter is derived from the name of a Germanic goddess, Eostre, who according to Grimm in his *German Mythology* is the divinity of the dawn. The Venerable Bede, writing in the kingdom of Northumbria early in the eighth century, tells us that the Anglo-Saxons of his time called the spring month 'Eostermonath'. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins uses the word Easter as a verb: speaking of Christ he says, 'Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east'. The non-Germanic nations all call Easter by some variation of Pascha, the term that the Latin Church uses in her liturgy. This word is of Hebrew origin, and refers to the feast of Pesach, or Passover, from which the Christian festival in some sense derives. It commemorates the Resurrection of Christ on the third day after his Crucifixion, counted inclusively in the ancient manner. Easter is a happy festival after the sombre re-enactment of the events of Holy Week, and at the physical level it is a release from the long period of Lenten penitence. As someone called O'Sullivan noted in 1828: 'Easter Sunday and Christmas Day: the two best days for the stomach'.

In the early Christian period the actual Resurrection of Christ was never represented in sacred art, probably because it is not described in any of the four Gospels. Rather, in the art of the catacombs it is alluded to by some such story as that of Jonas spending three days in the belly of the sea monster, or else it is represented symbolically. One way of doing this was to show the Chi-Rho monogram – the first two Greek letters of the name of Christ – inside a laurel wreath, the symbol of victory borrowed from the Olympic Games and later applied to the brows of conquering commanders. This was a kind of ideogram expressing Christ's victory over death, in as much as he raised himself from the dead by his own Divine power.

Fig. 1 shows a small metal ampulla made in Palestine to hold holy oil, of the kind that was given to the Cathedral Treasury of Monza by Queen Theodelinda



Fig. 1

in the early seventh century – there are about sixteen of them and they are still there after fourteen hundred years. (When I visited Monza recently I saw that on the modern labels it says '*donazione della regina Teodolinda*', just as though she might be some modern museum benefactress.) They are very tiny and have Greek inscriptions. This particular one, showing the two Maries at the empty Tomb with the Angel, is not in Monza but in nearby Bobbio. One of the women, possibly Mary Magdalen, is carrying a smoking censer or thurible. The inscription reads *anesti o kyrios*, 'the Lord is risen'. Outside of the catacombs, this is one of the earliest evocations of Easter known to us.

A mosaic of *Christus victor* in Ravenna (Fig. 2) shows the risen Christ as a young and beardless Roman commander, holding a book and a Cross, trampling on two creatures in accordance with a verse from the 90th psalm: 'Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the dragon'. This trampling, for which the Latin word is *calcatio*,



Fig. 3

was sometimes ritualised in a rather literal-minded way. In Constantinople in 705, for instance, the eastern emperor Justinian II made two deposed rivals grovel before him in the dust of the hippodrome, as he set his foot upon their necks and the sycophantic crowd howled the verse from the psalm, 'Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the dragon'.

Fig. 3 shows a highly poetical panel by Jacopo di Cione, painted around 1370, with a hovering Christ and a closed sepulchre. The point here – made by numerous medieval



Fig. 2

writers – is that Jesus was able to pass out of the closed sepulchre just as he had earlier passed out of his Mother’s virginal womb. (The stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the Maries in with their now unnecessary ointments and spices.) The guards in their delightfully coloured garments are all fast asleep, higgledy-piggledy. In his commentary on the Psalms, St Augustine asks sarcastically: ‘If they were asleep, what could they have seen? And if they saw nothing, how could they be witnesses?’

handed gesture is a visual equivalent of the words recorded by St Mark: ‘he is risen, he is not here, behold the place where they laid him’.

Fig. 6 shows the Resurrection by Andrea Mantegna.

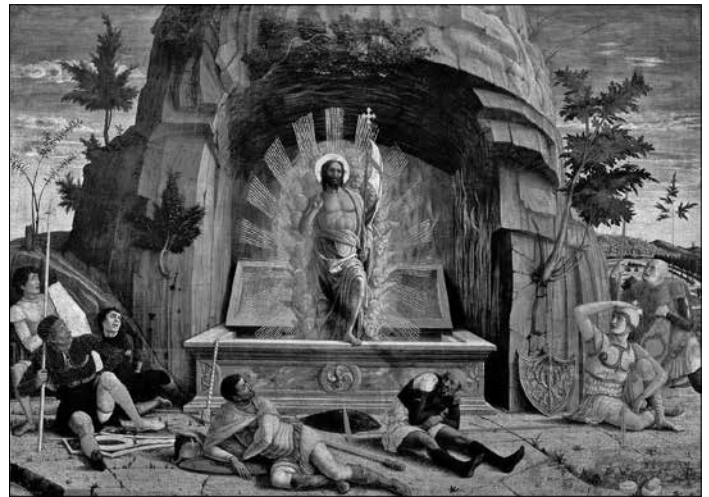


Fig. 6



Fig. 4

A painting by the so-called *Maestro dell'Osservanza* dates from around 1445 (Fig. 4). It shows some absolutely terrified guards, and the glorified body of Christ floating in an oval of golden rays. Medieval writers such as Ludolph of Saxony explained that Jesus’ body after his Resurrection was endowed with the special qualities of agility, clarity, impassibility and subtlety. We find almost the same oval with golden rays in the fresco that Fra Angelico (Fig. 5) painted in cell number 8 at the Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence. Jesus holds the palm branch of martyrdom as well as the customary standard with flag. St Mary Magdalen peers into the empty tomb as three more women approach with jars of ointment. A Dominican saint kneels at lower left. The Angel’s two-

There are no fewer than seven soldiers in imaginatively reconstructed Roman armour, all looking suitably astonished as Christ rises majestically from a sarcophagus set inside a cave hollowed out of the living rock. Jesus is surrounded by angels red and gold, possibly intended as Cherubim and Seraphim, and golden rays emerge from his glorified body, suggesting – to me at any rate – the Sanctissimum displayed in a monstrance or ostensorium.

The harsh Palestinian landscape is wonderfully evoked, with strange spiky plants bursting out of cracks in the rock. The lid of the sarcophagus has been flung back; Christ blesses with his pierced right hand while his left grasps a processional cross from which flutters the usual red and white pennant. He sets his left foot on the rim of the sarcophagus. Mantegna’s hard-edged, sumptuous *Romanitas* is everywhere in evidence. One of the reasons why Christian artists poured out the treasures of their imaginations in such profusion on this particular subject is that it was perceived as being the keystone of the whole Christian edifice. St Paul the Apostle did not hesitate to stake everything – everything! – on this one card, making belief in the Resurrection the centrepiece of the entire Christian economy of salvation, writing in his first epistle to the Corinthians ‘if there be no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen again. And if Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain... But now Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.’ For believers, those final exultant words have reverberated down the centuries.

**Mark Roberts is an art historian living in Italy.**



Fig. 5

# CHRISTIANS AWARE ANNUAL CONFERENCE TO LISTEN TO MINORITIES, JANUARY 2026

A report by Ellen Teague

The nine 'listening' ears on the Christians Aware poster for its annual conference last weekend was a constant reminder of the theme: 'Ears to Hear – Listening to Minorities.' Artist Beate Dehnen said they represented "all of us who are willing to lend someone an ear." Well, that was certainly true of attendees at this conference, particularly with their very international outlook. Around 60 participants from around England, Wales and further afield studied this theme at the Highgate House Conference Centre near Northampton.

The opening speaker **Canon Andy Thompson** addressed, 'Christian Minorities Living in the Gulf Region,' based on his lengthy experience of ministering in United Arab Emirates and developing interfaith engagement. He highlighted the **Al Amana Centre in Oman** which builds bridges and fosters peace between faith communities. It is one of the few Christian-led organizations in the Muslim-majority world working toward sustainable peace and security for minorities. One interfaith dialogue practice involves people from different faith traditions gathering in small groups to read passages from their holy scriptures. He highlighted the **Marrakesh Declaration of 2016**, which was a Muslim call for protection of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim-majority communities. It also called for the leaders of other religions to confront intolerance towards Muslim minorities in their countries. Now a team vicar in the Uxbridge team ministry in the Anglican Diocese of London, Canon Thompson handed out a flier for The Hillingdon Faith Roadshow which promotes understanding and respect between faiths in West London.

**Clare Amos**, a Middle East specialist, spoke on 'Christian Minorities Living in the Middle East'. She

highlighted the diversity of Christian communities, including Copts (Egypt), Greek Orthodox (Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon), Maronites (Lebanon), Armenians, and Assyrians, alongside Eastern Catholics (e.g., Chaldean) and Protestant groups, primarily concentrated in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Cyprus, facing significant challenges like emigration and persecution but maintaining a vital presence. Many do not like the term minorities, preferring to see themselves as the original Christian communities going back millennia. She pointed to the work of **Sabeel**, an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians, offering information about Palestinian Christians today. And noted last December's release of the Kairos Palestine document: 'A Moment of Truth: Faith in a Time of Genocide,' supported by the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Palestine.

**Ellen Teague** of the Columban Justice, Peace and Ecology Team, spoke on '**Listening to the Poor**' in the context of the call in Pope Francis' Laudato Si' encyclical to 'hear the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor.' Among vulnerable



groups identified were migrants and refugees in the US and UK, civilian victims of conflict in Myanmar and Sudan, and indigenous communities lobbying COP30 in Brazil. Also, the vulnerable natural world where the climate crisis and diminishment of biodiversity threaten the common good of the whole Earth community. She quoted Pope Leo at last October's 'Raising Hope' conference in Castel Galdolfo, organised by the Laudato Si Movement: "God will ask us if we have cultivated and cared for the world that he created (cf. Gen 2:15), for the benefit of all and for future generations, and if we have taken care of our brothers and sisters (cf. Gen 4:9; Jn 13:34). What will be our answer?"

So, what signs of hope do we see? Advocacy on behalf of refugees, peace and victims of the global debt crisis were highlighted. For example the recent petition handed into Downing Street by peace groups – including Pax Christi and the Quakers – calling for the UK government to support the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Educational initiatives mentioned included the Columban 2026 Schools competition

on 'welcoming refugees,' and the 'Women in Black' street vigils. Liturgy mentioned included faith vigils outside refugee detention centres in the US and UK and climate prayers at Westminster. The scaling up of Church charitable outreach such as food banks was applauded but it was accompanied by a call for more engagement with structural issues, such as supporting the right to protest and the development of environmental rights. During group work, issues identified as holding back sensitivity to and support for minorities included Racism, fear of losing our own comforts in a more equal world, and despair over the scale of injustice and the power of elites.

Seminars with smaller groups included Bishop Mano Rumlshah, former Anglican Bishop of Peshawar

diocese in Pakistan, reporting on listening to minorities in Pakistan, particularly the Christian community. He said Christians Aware "has given me hope over the years" that Christians in UK are listening to the experience of Pakistan's Christians. In another seminar, Kate Hayward spoke about listening to disabled people and facilitated discussion about how UK society can be more inclusive.

Stalls offered at the conference included Olive Oil and other products from the Zaytoun company, which markets Palestinian products, and Christians Aware cards and books. Columban missionaries were amongst the Catholic groups running a stall. The National Justice and Peace Network was represented.

Musician Geoff Weaver led worship music on the conference theme

from the piano. Participants enjoyed singing hymns from Pakistan, based on Psalm 62, and from Malawi, titled, 'Night has fallen.' Theologian and artist Adam Boulter gave a presentation on 'Art and Faith' and exhibited some of his artworks.

Canon Rana Khan, the Christians Aware Chair and an Anglican priest from Pakistan now based in Wales, led one of the biblical reflections based on the Book of Jeremiah. He pointed out that after listening to minorities, the next step is "becoming mouthpieces." He highlighted that "minority voices enrich society."

Christians Aware events this year are all planned to promote greater respect for other peoples, religions and cultures.

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# CHRISTIANS AWARE CONFERENCE SEMINAR GROUPS

## **Monika Doering: Stories from the edge – listening on the margins**

Monika Doering shared two 'Out of the Box' stories. This powerful way of storytelling (very much in Jesus' footsteps) invites profound wonder, deep reflection, and subversive creativity. The community play helps us create the kind of landscape where we feel at home both as individuals and as a community. **"Whoever has ears to hear, [come and] hear."**

## **Kate Hayward: Listening to disabled people**

Disability as a minority – Challenging attitudes to disabilities and how we treat the disabled as a minority. (15%

of the world's population or around one billion have disabilities, the world's largest minority. UN 2025). Looking at cultural differences and how disabled people are treated globally. **'How we can be inclusive and accept disabled people without 'special treatment'.**

## **Eleanor Nesbitt: Listening to Sikhs**

Eleanor is Professor emeritus at the University of Warwick. She is a Quaker who has travelled widely and written many books about interfaith dialogue and Sikhism. She was able to introduce Sikhism from an academic perspective.

## **Bishop Mano Rumlshah: Listening to minorities in Pakistan**

Bishop Mano is a former bishop of Peshawar, a diocese in Pakistan which, placed near the frontier with Afghanistan, has faced persecution over many years, including an attack on a church in 2013 when many people were injured or killed. Bishop Mano has always worked for the church all over the world to be a supportive community for the suffering and persecuted. Since retirement he has worked in the Diocese of Lahore.

# CHRISTIAN 'MINORITIES' IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Clare Amos

**I was honoured to be asked to speak at the Christians Aware conference about 'Christian Minorities in the Middle East' – though I am not sure that people were quite expecting what they got from me!**

Because when I received this invitation my mind immediately remembered a visit some colleagues and I paid back in June 2011 to the offices of Sabeel near Jerusalem. Sabeel is a Christian based organisation which is committed to sharing the insights of Palestinian Liberation Theology.

A few days before our visit Dr Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury had given an interview on BBC Radio. He had been speaking about the situation of Christians in the Middle East which even then, some years before the dreadful destruction wrought on the Christian communities in Iraq and Syria in the middle of the following decade, was not unproblematic. What he had said provoked rage (that is not too strong an emotion!) among some of the Sabeel staff; myself and my colleagues who were perceived, not altogether accurately, as coming from Lambeth Palace, were the recipients of that anger.

When I spoke at the Christians Aware conference I showed people the BBC report on Archbishop Rowan's speech and invited them to work out what it was he had said that had caused such a negative reaction. Not totally surprisingly, nobody actually 'got it' – although one person was quite close. The Archbishop's offending remarks were, "In the long term, of course, a real participatory democracy in the region is bound to be in the interests of minorities because good democracies look after minorities," He had gone on to warn that people were using the chaos brought by

the Arab Spring to attack Christian minorities... He commented that even in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, Christians who had once been in the majority were now a "marginalised minority". It was the word 'minority' that was the bugbear for our Sabeel hosts: it was not a term that they were prepared to allow themselves to be described by.

Although not all Christians in the Middle East would consider the word 'minority' quite as negatively as this, their dislike of the term is certainly widely shared. For example a few years ago Fr Khalil Samir of the Pontifical Oriental Institute asserted that Middle Eastern Christianity is significant 'due to its cultural richness, its pride in apostolic origins that go back to the beginning of Christianity, its rejection of the term "minority," and its understanding of its vocation as a unifying bridge between cultures, civilizations and religions, both East and West.'

That view is asserted even at the highest echelons of the church leadership. In 2018 Patriarch John, the East Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch stated, 'We as Christians have never been factionalists, and we refuse to be *dhimmi*s. We have always been concerned with fateful issues related to our country. We are not a minority, and we refuse to be called a minority, because a nation is not built on the logic of majority and minority, but on the logic that the little leaven leavens the whole lump. We are from the yeast of this East, and our message is not restricted to a specific denomination or community. If Iraq suffers, our churches suffer, and if Lebanon suffers, our most holy shrine of the Shaghoura suffers. If Syria cries, our church bells ring in sadness, and if the Holy Jerusalem grieves, our hearts are troubled. We are from Syria, and Syria is part of

us. Syria is the country from which we draw our identity, our sense of belonging and existence."

I am aware from my work at the World Council of Churches and elsewhere that in some other parts of the world Christians are not only prepared to be called a 'minority', but are actually glad to be labelled with such a description, as it means, for example, that they can call on the protection of international legislation which affirms the importance of the human rights of minorities, including religious minorities. That would certainly be true of Christians in Pakistan, for example, for whom the description acts an assurance. Indeed I suspect that there are some Christian groups in the Middle East, perhaps particularly in Iraq or coming from the Syriac Christian tradition whose particular history and culture means that they are also quite happy to own the term.

All the same it is important – in terms of understanding the lives and vision of Christians in the Middle East to understand why, for many the term 'minority' is not one they would choose for themselves. I suspect that a large part of the answer is that for many it plays into and reinforces a *dhimmi* model of historical Middle Eastern political relationship between Islam and religious 'minorities', which has its origin in the history and theology of Islam. Such a model was institutionalised in Ottoman times in the *millet* system, through which each minority religious community was organised as a discrete entity within wider society. This system both acknowledged that the ultimate governance of a country or political region was in the control of Muslims, and according to Muslim principles; it also gave the minority communities a considerable degree of autonomy, particularly in terms of social, personal

and religious issues. There were varied consequences of this; the 'minorities' did not have a fully equal citizenship with the Muslim community, they were encouraged to feel themselves to be a distinct and separate part of society, there was considerable and even quasi-political power given to the religious leadership of minority communities, and it was effectively legally impossible for a person to be an atheist.

The vision of the 'Arab Awakening' at the beginning of the 20th century, in which Christians played a prominent role was very different. The aspiration was for the creation of a society not divided along religious lines, but rather for a common citizenship in which shared Arab identity was of more significance than any religious disparity. But even though that 'vision' was a driver in several political developments in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century – I think of the ideology of Baathism or the PLO's repeated insistence in the 1970s on the mantra of 'a secular democratic state of Palestine' – it never really realised its full potential. Perhaps the counter-understanding of Israel as a 'Jewish state', certainly after the 1967 war, was a major factor in encouraging the idea of a link between religion and political structures in other parts of the Middle East as well.

But among Christian Arabs, and especially those of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and perhaps quite a number of Palestinian Christians, the vision of the 'Arab Awakening' has never been entirely lost. And back in 2011 those early days of the Arab Spring offered – at least to some – a renewed hope that such a non-sectarian ideal of nationhood might at last come to fruition. Such an ideal



*Clare Amos with Rana Khan, Chair of Christians Aware.*

does not distinguish in citizenship terms between majorities and minorities, hence the dislike of the term 'minority' that we encountered. Such an ideal of common citizenship may be held more strongly by Christians in the Middle East than by 'minority' Christian communities in other parts of the world, in part because many Middle Eastern Christians are conscious of the historic nature of Christian presence in the region. Christianity in the Middle East is not a product of the Western

missionary movement of the 19th century and pre-dates Islam in the region by several centuries. But such an ideal of common citizenship can also feel threatening to some even within the Christian community, because it removes or decreases the powerful space which has often been occupied by hierarchical religious leadership. If all Christians and

Muslims – and those who wish to describe themselves in purely secular terms – are equal citizens of their society there is not the same need for religious community leaders to play a quasi-political role. Such an ideal also means that when we speak to the issue of religious freedom it is the human rights of individuals that we are primarily concerned with rather than the traditional rights of a religious community. For better or for worse 'minority' is a loaded word.

**Clare Amos was a speaker at our recent annual conference. She is a biblical scholar who has lived in the Middle East for many years, including Jerusalem and Beirut. She has worked for the World Council of Churches and the Anglican Communion Office, and now works with the Diocese of Europe.**

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# CHRISTIAN MINORITIES IN THE ARABIAN GULF

**Reverend Andy Thompson**

**M**uch attention has been paid to the restrictions on Christian minorities in the Arabian Gulf. It is well known that proselytization is forbidden, a Christian man cannot marry a Muslim woman and that priests cannot conduct services of any sort involving Muslims.

It was illuminating then, that a few years ago, when I hosted an interfaith breakfast for a visiting dignitary from the UK that a Muslim guest wept after hearing about the experiences

of religious minorities in their country. "You have more freedoms than I do, as a Muslim in an Islamic country to practice your religion." The reason, they went onto explain, that this was because the biggest security threat to ruling families in the Arabian Gulf can from extremist Islam. Organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood were proscribed, and consequently there was a lot of regulation and monitoring of the Muslim religious space.

I described that what Christians had in the Arabian Gulf was freedom to worship, but that is not the same thing as freedom of religion. So no evangelism allowed and conversely no freedom for Muslims to change their religion if they wanted to.

Yet the public discourse of Gulf governments was promoting the value of religious tolerance. The UAE even had a Year of Tolerance, showcasing this value as a core principle of living as a diverse community. Pope Francis visited the UAE, Bahrain and Iraq in quick succession, with each nation affirming the presence of the Christian community in each place.

The UAE even enshrined their commitment in the building of the House of Abraham, a garden in which was located a state-of-the-art mosque, church and synagogue. The latter is the first purpose built Jewish place of worship to be erected in decades in the whole region.

So, who are the Christian minorities in the Gulf and where do they come from?

## History

The first Christians in the Gulf date back to the expansion of the church during the apostolic era. It is credible that St Thomas travelled through the region on his way to India following the ancient Jewish trading routes. The Church of the East (also described as Nestorian), have archives documenting the early church experiences and encounters with the rise of Islam. A bishop from the Diocese of Beit Qatraye

(located in what is now Bahrain and Qatar) laments the fickle nature of his congregation as they gradually abandoned the Christian faith to assimilate into the economic, cultural and religious hegemony of Islamic empire.

## Trade

Recent discoveries of ancient monasteries located in southeastern Arabia trace a route from Kuwait, down the east coast of Saudi Arabia, hopping over to Bahrain, then to an island called Sir Bani Yas off the coast of Abu Dhabi. The route continues to Ras Al Khaimah and to present day Sohar in Oman. This suggests a well-established trading route in which Syriac Christian mission followed all the way to India and China. Archaeology reveals trade with the Persian and Chinese empires dating back centuries. Marco Polo was astonished to discover a thriving Nestorian church in China which had arrived from the Arabian Gulf, centuries before his arrival.

Ancient records document that Christian monastic communities in Bahrain held a monopoly on the wine trade for the region, with a special trade dispensation granted to them by the Sassanian empire. Later on, the Sassanians turned against them with a cruel and vicious season of persecution, encouraging many Christians to flee further East.

Yet, the evidence that under the rapidly expanding Islamic empire, the church co-existed peacefully with Islam for at least two centuries. The ancient monasteries bear no signs of violence or destruction.

The last mention of Christianity was in the 9th Century which was an anecdote about Christian pearl divers praying to God for the removal of a man-eating shark.

## Western colonialism

Then silence, both in written and archaeological records until the 1600s when the Portuguese navy brutally dominated the trade routes to India. Their marines used facial and bodily

mutilations as a tool of terror and established forts and churches as a sign of presence, in which some of them still remain in Oman especially.

After the Portuguese, the British was the next naval power who established treaties in the region with tribal leaders, forbidding them not to impede British trade or political interests. This was enforced by the British with 'gun boat diplomacy'.

Given this aggressive and negative encounter with western Christianity, it is no small wonder that there is a church allowed at all in Arabia today.

## The 20th century

Two things drove the establishment of the modern church in Arabia today. Firstly, the medical missionaries of the late 19th century who built the first clinics and hospitals in the region. They introduced modern technology, education and were instrumental in connecting Arabs to the west through diplomacy and trade.

Secondly, the discovery of oil bought in a massive flux of skilled expatriate workers from all over the world, many of them belonging to the global strands of Christianity, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. The local rulers eventually permitted churches to be built in bricks and mortar. Significantly, they were all built in cities in Arabia located on the coastline. Each city a historical centre of maritime industry, each holding a cosmopolitan mindset in which the activity of international trade demanded a level of religious tolerance.

Trade was and is a key factor in shaping the treatment of Christian minorities.

## Security

None of the Gulf countries pretend to be a democracy. Instead they are tribal monarchies in which the sheikhs strike a 'ruling bargain' with the other tribes who make up their citizens. The deal is essentially, 'allow us to control the oil and other trade assets and we will take care of your needs'.

Security threats are rooted in local

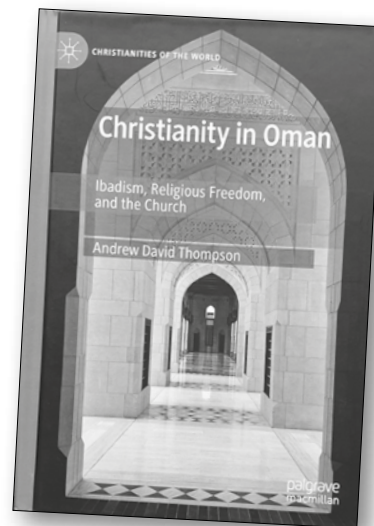
tribes or Islamic groups who want to undermine this ruling bargain. The expatriate church and Christians are excluded from any political involvement and are therefore seen as a low security threat. Until now.

Today, a new security threat is perceived by Arabian governments in the rise of American Christian nationalism and Zionism. This has led to increased regulation of the Christian space.

Historically, Islamic empires and nations 'managed' non-Muslim minorities by protecting them under

a system described as 'dhimmitude'. In practice this had the effect of controlling Christians, by impacting their access to political decision making, trade and education. They effectively created an underprivileged second-class citizenship. The Ottomans introduced the millet system in which non-Muslims were largely left to their own devices in managing their religious community life but still excluded from the mainstream governance structures.

Arguably, what we see in the Arabian Gulf today is a continuation of both the dhimmi and millet systems



in regulating the churches. The implementation of these vary from country to country (Saudi Arabia forbids the presence of a visible church, whereas Bahrain and the UAE are the most liberal in allowing non-Muslim places of worship to be built. The talk closed with an in-depth case study of Oman, highlighting features mentioned above as being the lived experience of Christian minorities in the Arabian Gulf today.

**Andy Thompson is Vicar of Uxbridge. He was a speaker at our conference.**



*Reverend Andy Thompson.*

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# THE HOLOCAUST - LEARNING FROM THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

**Aubrey Newman**

**T**he passing of Holocaust Memorial Day – the time each year when all over the world many remember the murder and the physical destruction of some six million Jews in Europe – raises more questions than it answers.

Until recently the 'conventional' way of remembering has been through the interviewing and



questioning of individuals who were survivors and actual witnesses of

these events. But the passage of time inevitably means that there are fewer and fewer survivors to describe their own ordeals, and so the weight of remembrance falls upon persons who have had to learn about these events.

Yet even 'Holocaust education' is presenting problems, and the latest statistics indicate the nature and extent of the problem. The study of the Holocaust has been

for many years an integral part of the National Curriculum. Three years ago, it has been estimated, over 2,000 schools specially marked Holocaust Memorial Day; last year it was apparently 864. It is shocking.

Two factors are involved. One of them, undoubtedly, has been the Gaza situation which has had a polarising impact in the United Kingdom and has even made the commemoration of the Holocaust seem 'controversial'. In some circles an anti-Israel sentiment, shading into outright antisemitism has made objective teaching about the Holocaust unlikely. Historical truths about the Holocaust have been distorted, and the very word has been trivialised by applying it to causes such as animal rights or even denying that it ever happened.

Recently the Shadow minister of Education has urged the Education Secretary to tackle the issues of 'extremism and antisemitism.' He said: **'It is imperative that schools across the country mark Holocaust Memorial Day and learn about the darkest chapter in human history.'**

As we see antisemitism on the rise on our streets, not long after one of the worst and most repulsive attacks on the British Jewish community in Manchester, it is more important than ever to bring the country together to understand where division and hatred can lead us, especially in our schools. 'The UK Government needs to urgently get a grip on the extremism and antisemitism which has become too common in our education sector and to ensure our school leaders are prepared to ensure that we learn the lessons from our past and never allow Jews, or anyone else, to be persecuted for their religious beliefs.'

Another educationist said: **'The sharp decline in the number of schools marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day should be a cause for concern for every British citizen, not just the Jewish community. This day reminds us of what happens when hatred and indifference are left unchallenged.'**

Memory does not sustain itself. 'Remembrance is not automatic. It depends on conscious transmission, on future generations choosing to carry it forward. That insight speaks directly to the crossroads we have reached in Holocaust remembrance. We are no longer merely witnesses to living memory; we are becoming its custodians.'

### **How should we teach about the Holocaust today?**

In some classrooms, the decision to address this subject no longer seems obvious, and what once seemed like a natural part of the curriculum can now provoke tension and even lead to accusations against Jews – or against non-Jewish teachers, merely because they intended to teach this history. And beyond that, rising antisemitism prompts some to ask an even starker question: Should we continue teaching about the Shoah at all if the world appears not to have learned from it?

The answer, of course, is yes. Holocaust education is more relevant than ever. We see in recent events how antisemitism spreads, how easily it takes hold in societies, and we see the clear link to the denial or distortion of history.

### **How are personal stories about the Holocaust a pathway to relevance?**

Personal human stories will always matter. When approached thoughtfully and authentically, human dilemmas – explored through an empathetic lens – enable deep moral reflection. Such dilemmas touch on fundamental questions of identity, belonging, responsibility, and meaning, allowing learners to relate without resorting to simplistic comparisons, simulations, or shortcuts.

While the number of living witnesses to the Holocaust sadly dwindles their experiences remain powerful platforms for education and challenging generations to come. Some have seen on television, the programme being instituted by the Holocaust Education Trust of

interviewing survivors, of creating a large bank of question-and-answer sessions through artificial intelligence and tying these sessions to images of past survivors so that it appears that it is these images that are giving answers. How far that could take students I don't know. But it is clear that deeply felt involvement in understanding the events of the Holocaust, or a repetition of the descriptions of what those who experienced the liberation of the camps – such as the very moving account by Richard Dimbleby of what he saw and experienced in Belsen – is an essential to appreciating to what depths persecution and intolerance can go.

Here in Leicester University, with the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide studies at its centre, we are actively pushing the continuing need to teach students the facts about the Holocaust and to research further aspects.

### **Can we risk forgetting where prejudice and persecution can ultimately lead when normalised and actively encouraged?**

By understanding the steps that led to the unique and extraordinary tragedy of the Holocaust and other genocides as well we equip ourselves with the knowledge necessary to identify and challenge similar threats in the present and future. Antisemitism and other forms of prejudice will not vanish merely with the passage of time.

The next fifty years will see enormous strains in our society. Housing, medical services, education will all face enormous problems, and if society is to meet them properly the first thing we need to do is to beware of prejudice and discrimination.

### **Differences of religion, different colours of skin, differences of origin should all be recognised as basically irrelevant.**

There has developed an increasing pattern of visiting the various death camps in Europe. But we should not be going to the camps as tourists, out of curiosity. **We should go determined to understand how**

**discrimination and prejudice lead inevitably to persecution and destruction.** We are often told that those who cannot remember the past

are condemned to repeat it; the last thing that we want as a society is to repeat the horrors that culminated in Auschwitz.

**Aubrey Newman is Emeritus Professor of History at Leicester University.**

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# PEACE BE WITH YOU ALL: TOWARDS AN UNARMED AND DISARMING PEACE

**Kevin Burr**

**W**hen I first read Pope Leo's 2026 Peace Message I thought 'WOW! I don't think I had ever read anything so riveting, so straightforward, so simple, so challenging.

**In one way, it says nothing new. I'm sure I've read most of this before in one form or another.**

This is 'just' Jesus' teaching to his disciples, surely? 'To those who would defend him by force: (*para 6*) "Put your sword back into its sheath"', but in other ways Pope Leo uses the basic building blocks of peace-making that we all, especially Christians, intuit, into a compelling call to action.

He writes (*para 3*) 'This is a call that Jesus' disciples are invited to live in a unique and privileged way; yet it also finds its way into every human heart.'

But if we have been so unsuccessful in building peace in the past, who reading this, is there? Who is he expecting to act on this, to make the outcome different this time? One could almost weep at the naivety of this challenge. By the way, I'm not in any way disparaging the selfless work of so many peace groups throughout the world.

Speaking of the state of mind we can so easily fall into he says (*para 7*), '...(We) have hearts ready for peace, (but) they are often overcome by a great sense of powerlessness before an increasingly uncertain world. ...(*para 8*) When we treat peace

as a distant ideal, we cease to be scandalised when it is denied, or even when war is waged in its name.'

Putting his finger on how parlous our current state is (*para 8*) '...it could even be considered a fault not to be sufficiently prepared for war, not to react to attacks, and not to return violence for violence... Consequently, quoting Pope John XXIII, "people are living in the grip of constant fear." ' Pointing out that even education policies are promoting the notion that defence and security rely on an armed response.

'And yet' (quoting St Augustine), he says (*para 10*) 'those who truly love peace, also love the enemies of peace.' Pope Leo reminds us that way back at the end of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* implored political and military leaders '....to give unceasing consideration to their immense responsibilities before God and the whole human race.' Yet the temptation and opportunity to delegate 'life and death' decisions to machines, increases (*para 11*).

So is there a way back? What is the path to disarmament?

Our own experience, when in the presence of a baby, is that we can be *softened*. 'Is this why God became a child', he asks, but he doesn't draw any further inferences concerning King Herod's response, except to remind us that 'Goodness is disarming'.

However, the build-up to his final paragraphs firstly highlights what Pope John XXIII wrote in *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, (*para 13*). '**Everyone**, (my emphasis,) must sincerely co-operate in the effort to banish fear.....' and that the principles on which peace is based must be **utterly** changed, and be based on mutual trust.

Then turning to the role of religions, it is for them to embody solidarity not just with our own groups but to all. However, he suspects that the opposite trend is still playing out. (*Para 14*) 'Believers must actively refute, above all by the witness of their lives, these forms of blasphemy that profane the holy name of God... alongside action, **it is more necessary than ever to cultivate prayer, ...ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, as paths of peace...**'

I would have liked Pope Leo to be less tentative than to say (*para 14*) 'it is to be hoped' that every community (throughout the world) become(s) a 'house of peace'. Surely, this is essential, for us to become 'the city on a hill'.

As I said earlier, we've heard this before. Why hasn't it produced the fruits of lasting peace?

Why do I feel challenged afresh in reading these reminders and exhortations? Because in the prayerful reading of the truth, the Holy Spirit

has a greater opportunity to raise the probing questions like: How much am I prepared to act prophetically? I can't expect politicians to act boldly for a change of world order, unless they know I will stand by them. Do I have faith enough to truly believe that Christ is my peace? And if I'm not enough, it has to be a very determined group of us, as Pope John said 'Everyone' has to be on board.

Pope Leo rightly says that politicians play a crucial role, and we have the blessing of being able to choose our political leaders, and for most of us, to raise these big issues with them.

We have to work together, in prayer, in action, in goodness and love. Our peace groups are out there ahead of us. More of us need to show up, with our portion of faith in the Risen

Christ and commitment to his version of peace.

Link: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/peace/documents/20251208-messaggio-pace.html>

**Kevin Burr is General Secretary of the National Justice & Peace Network.**

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# GAZA - FINDING LIGHT AMID RUINS: A REFLECTION ON HOPE, SUFFERING AND COMPASSION

**Brian O'Toole**

In a world scarred by conflict and despair, ***"Christ Among the Ruins: Finding Light in Gaza's Darkness"*** offers a powerful beacon of hope. The Webinar – a collaborative effort by faith-based peace groups – draws on spiritual reflection, images of destruction, and voices of resilience to confront the human cost of war and to invite a deeper call to solidarity.

Set against the backdrop of bombed buildings and smouldering rubble, the Webinar does not shy away from the harsh reality faced by civilians, especially children and families caught in the crossfire. But it does not end in despair. Within the ruins, glimmers of compassion emerge: a gesture of sharing bread, a person comforting another, a prayer quietly uttered. These quiet acts of humanity suggest that even in the darkest despair, "light" can be found – a light born of empathy, faith, and unwavering solidarity.

This contrast – between devastation and compassion – is the beating heart of the message. The wounded landscapes of Gaza serve as a

stark external reality; the prayers, reflections, and quiet acts of kindness become internal beacons. As the webinar progresses, we are drawn into a prayerful solidarity with suffering, an invitation to see beyond statistics and headlines, and to remember the face of the oppressed is always human.

## **Prayer, memory, and solidarity**

Drawing also on the themes from careful inputs and accompanying prayers, the webinar encourages a communal spiritual response. The prayers speak of lament – mourning for the deceased, yearning for justice, asking for healing – but also of hope: "Let your peace descend upon the broken," they call; "Let compassion bloom where grief has hardened hearts."

These spiritual elements serve not only as a personal expression of sorrow or hope, but as a shared act of solidarity; as an invocation that transforms passive bystanding into active empathy. The memories of lost

homes, lost lives, lost futures become more than tragic footnotes – they become responsibilities. The prayers urge listeners to hold the memory, to acknowledge the injustice, and to let that acknowledgement spur commitment: commitment to justice, to peace-building, and to human dignity.

## **From witness to compassion in action**

"Christ Among the Ruins" asks the viewer not just to observe suffering – but to respond. By juxtaposing images of destruction with human compassion, it challenges complacency. The video, the prayers, and the reflections call us to ask: What does it mean to stand with the oppressed? How can faith lead to justice?

For faith communities, this means more than ritual prayer or distant sympathy. It suggests tangible solidarity: raising awareness, offering practical support, advocating for ceasefires, humanitarian aid, or simply maintaining the memory of

those who suffer in everyday prayer and conversation. For individuals, it may mean small acts of kindness – sharing resources, giving, or offering hospitality to those in need – or using one’s voice to speak up for justice and dignity.

### **Hope beyond ruins: a vision for peace**

Most profoundly, the video invites a vision: that amidst destruction, hope can – and must – arise. The ruined buildings of Gaza, while

heartbreaking, are not left as empty monuments. Through human compassion, remembrance, prayer, and deliberate action, they are transformed into catalysts for peace and for solidarity that transcends borders, religion, and politics.

“Christ Among the Ruins” does not promise easy answers. It offers instead a call: a call to witness, to grieve, to remember – and to act. It places before us a spiritual and moral challenge: to let our compassion turn into concrete solidarity, to let

our prayers be not only for the lost, but for a future grounded in justice, healing, and shared humanity.

In a world often divided by fear, hate, and indifference, this film – together with prayerful reflection – affirms something far deeper: that human dignity, compassion, and hope remain visible, even among the ruins.

**Brian O’Toole is Development Officer for the Presentation Sisters and an executive committee member of NJPN.**

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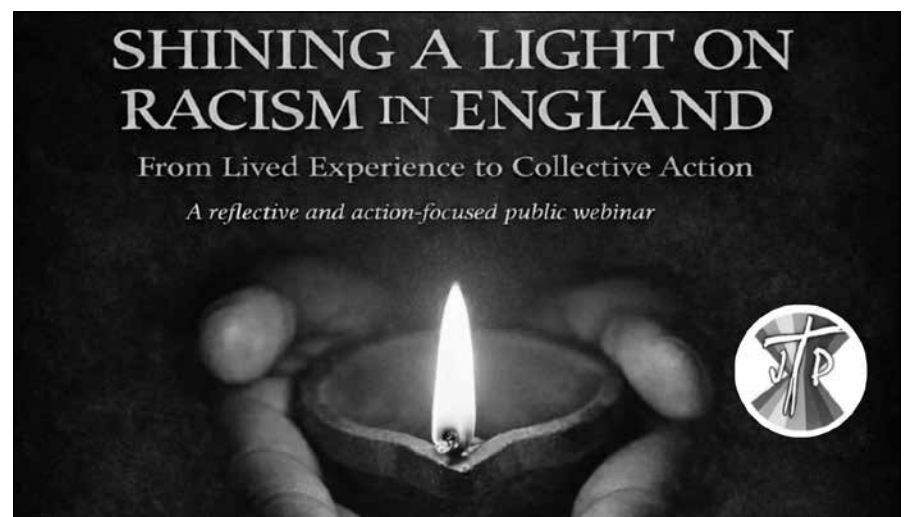
# NJPN WEBINAR CALLS CHRISTIANS FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION IN CONFRONTING RACISM

**Brian O’ Toole**

**A** national webinar hosted by the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) has urged Christians to move beyond reflection to concrete action in confronting racism in England, grounding anti-racism firmly in Gospel discipleship and Christian hope.

The online event, *“Shining a Light on Racism in England: From Lived Experience to Collective Action”*, brought together church leaders, theologians, campaigners and community practitioners just days before Racial Justice Sunday. It formed part of a wider ecumenical call for renewed commitment to racial justice under this year’s theme, “Love Your Neighbour.”

Opening the evening, NJPN Chair Anne Peacey welcomed participants and stressed that racism in the UK remains a present and structural reality, affecting employment, education, housing, healthcare



and the criminal justice system. It is expressed not only through overt hostility but also through patterns of exclusion and everyday “othering.”

The webinar combined lived experience, theological reflection and practical challenge, creating space for what Brian O’ Toole as moderator described as both honest encounter and purposeful response.

Dr Beverley Prevatt Goldstein – academic, historian and long-standing anti-racism advocate – spoke from both personal and professional experience. Born in Trinidad, she was among the first Black women from a mainstream British school to enter Oxford University in 1968. Her decades of work have focused on challenging monocultural narratives and recovering the long history and

contribution of African communities in the North of England.

She stressed that at the end of “shining a light” there must be action and consequence. Awareness alone is not enough. She urged Christians not merely to “understand” racism but to “overstand” it – to go deeper than intellectual acknowledgement toward moral clarity and committed response. Racism, she said, must be named truthfully in all its forms and not softened by language that diminishes its reality. She cautioned against the casual use of the term “micro-aggression” where what is experienced is, in fact, racism.

Dr Prevatt Goldstein highlighted the importance of encounter, recalling a sermon that began simply with an invitation to talk and listen. Genuine encounter, she suggested, remains one of the most powerful tools for change. “We are all part of the one human race,” she reminded participants, despite belonging to many overlapping groups and identities.

She encouraged participants not to avoid difficult conversations in their parishes and communities. “Too many people know racism, live racism and feel it,” she noted, adding that allyship is essential because there must be a gathered and collective reaction to the outrage of racism. Persistent love, she said, remains a force capable of overcoming it – but only if it is active and organised. Attending a webinar, she warned, is not the work; it must lead to what

follows.

The second keynote speaker, Richard Reddie, Director of Justice and Inclusion at Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, addressed racism in the context of migration, asylum and public discourse. He spoke candidly about the social and political climate, arguing that progress on racial justice has stalled and, in some respects, reversed over the past two decades.

He warned that political rhetoric increasingly presents toughness toward migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as strength, while portraying compassion as weakness. Such narratives, he said, distort both social reality and Christian teaching. For the Church, anti-racism is not optional but integral to discipleship and public witness.

Mr Reddie, who has helped develop national Racial Justice Sunday resources, suggested that racial justice should not be confined to one Sunday each year but embedded in the Church’s weekly life. Christians, he said, are called to be “justice seekers” whose actions are intentional and prophetic, not merely rhetorical.

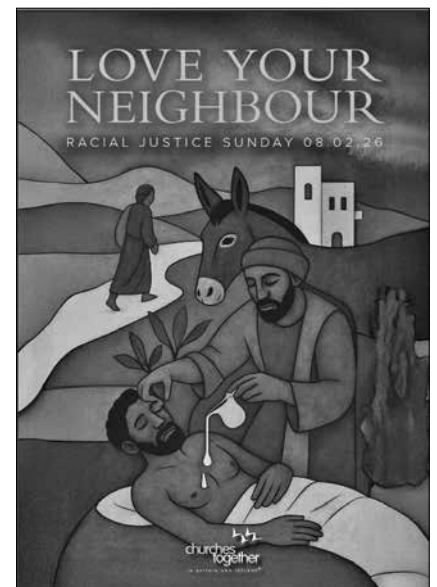
He challenged participants to carry forward three questions – the “3 Rs” – after leaving the comfort of the webinar: What will you remember? How will you reflect? How will you respond?

Participants then moved into breakout groups to consider a practical question: how they could “shine a

light on racism” in their own local contexts during the coming year. Feedback highlighted the need for deeper listening, parish-level education, stronger allyship, and partnerships with communities directly affected by racism.

Reflective feedback framed the evening, emphasising that Christian hope is not passive but transformative. Beverley reminded us that activity does not amount to transformation unless it redistributes power, shifts risk and interrupts harm.

The consistent message throughout was clear: confronting racism is intrinsic to the Christian calling to love one’s neighbour and uphold human dignity. Churches were urged not only to speak but to act – with courage, persistence and hope as we strive to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God.



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# SISU VIKAS SAMITI IS WORKING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION, JUST A DROP IN THE OCEAN

**Shanti Ranjan Behera**

We, at Sisu Vikas Samiti, have not made much progress according to our expectation from what we had written last time.

We had planned to start 20 **Adult Learning Centres** – ‘Women for Women’ i.e., women Learners and women Instructors. Sadly we did not

make much progress due to the non – availability of Women Instructors. We did manage to run 14 centres.

We have been introduced to new technology in our **learning system**. To make it simpler, education will be imparted in a class room setting and everyday photos with GPS tagging will be uploaded onto the website. This means that the supporters can see the position of the programme just in a click. Our teachers were trained in the technology and also methods of teaching through Zoom meetings. We worked in Scheduled Caste areas, Muslim and other marginalized communities. The Rotary Club members have been reaching them in the small streets and photos have been uploaded for 60 sessions.

Our **Hospice project** which is attached to our Cancer Detection Camp has not taken off yet in spite of our best intention and efforts.

Negotiations are with our potential supporters including Rotary Clubs. In between we have also improved our strategy. We are willing to share some of this **if Christians Aware would be willing to raise some support for our Hospice cause for which we are sincerely trying.**

Regarding our support and help to Cancer patients we have not managed on a mass scale due to shortage of resources. One of our trainers husbands is suffering from cancer and now undergoing treatment in chemotherapy.

We are working for a **Tobacco Free School Programme in Odisha.**

**Mental Health** is also one of our concerns and one of our four core activities which we have planned

in our Long Term Objectives. Interestingly the new Government has understood the issues after Covid 2019 and is willing to work on the subject at least to create an awareness in the minds of the general public to reduce the stigma around mental health. Mental Health is not confined either to Odisha or India , it is a worldwide problem due to urbanization ,industrialization, work culture, life style and stress. We are willing to help without shame and by early intervention.

**Shanti is a long standing friend of Christians Aware. His pioneering work in Odisha is vital for the future of India.**

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# ISTEN HOZOTT! GOD BROUGHT YOU TO US

**Brian McHenry**

**T**his is a traditional Hungarian greeting. In September 2025, nine Christians Aware members were the happy guests of St Margaret's Anglican church, Budapest. In return to the greeting, we could have said that God brought us to St Margaret's and Budapest!

St Margaret's is blessed currently with four priests:

- Father Frank, the chaplain, is an American of Hungarian heritage. He was formerly a Roman Catholic, before becoming an Episcopalian (Anglican). He retired, then was appointed chaplain in Budapest and is still in post 15 years later!
- Father John, the full-time curate is from the US Midwest. He has lived in Budapest for 20 years.
- Father Adam is Hungarian. Like Father Frank he was a Roman Catholic priest but subsequently moved to Anglicanism. At the

time of our visit, Father Adam was between full time posts.

- Father Dan moved from Russia when war began in 2022. Like so many he finds the Hungarian language a challenge. He is a school chaplain.

Anglicans have been in Hungary since the 17th century. The English and the Hungarians have a shared history in horse breeding. The first Anglican chapel in Hungary, in Tata, was built because of the nearby Stud!

During the communist era, Anglicans worshipped at the British Embassy. After communism, the Anglican

Bishop of Europe was keen to have a permanent chaplaincy in Budapest and so St Margaret's was established. St Margaret's has worshipped at different venues since then and now shares a Lutheran church. It is a flourishing community. There were about 20 in the congregation in 2010 and now there are about 50. It includes Africans, South Asians, Koreans and Iranians. The congregation is migratory. It does not label itself with the different traditions of the church. The chaplaincy tries to welcome everyone.

We were given fascinating presentations by Father Adam, the Reverend Aaron Stevens, who is the minister of St Columba Church of Scotland in Hungary, which is a congregation of the Reformed church,

and Dr Vilmos Fischi, who is the Secretary General of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary. In the presentations and during our visits to sites in and around Budapest, we learned the following:

- Hungary, in central Europe, is a border country, and this can be seen in its religious heritage. Hungary has three main Christian traditions – Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran.
- Saint Stephen I was the first King of Hungary, reigning from around 1000 or 1001 until his death in 1038. He established Christianity as the state religion and founded the medieval Hungarian state. He is venerated as Hungary's patron saint. Hungary was heavily Catholic until the Reformation. The last coronation in Hungary was that of Charles the 4th, as the country's king, in 1916 at St Matthias church, Budapest. There is a replica of the Holy Crown of Hungary at the church. The original Crown is on display at the Hungarian Parliament. The Catholic church is weaker than in the past. It has been said that two thirds of Roman Catholics are Roman Catholic atheists!
- During the Reformation Lutheranism and Calvinism spread in Hungary. The Hapsburg monarchs were opposed to the Reformers and instead promoted the Catholic (or Counter) Reformation. In 1606 the Peace of Vienna allowed Protestants to worship.
- The Serbian Orthodox Church has a small following in Hungary. During our stay in Budapest, we travelled to the lovely town of Szentendre, where we visited an Orthodox cathedral.
- The Greek Orthodox, Armenian Catholic and Pentecostal also have a presence.
- The Scottish Presbyterians are in Hungary because of a literal accident. Scots missionaries in the 19th century led a mission to Jews in Palestine to advance the

second coming of Christ. One of the missionaries was injured in Palestine. He and his companion came to Budapest to recuperate. They were encouraged to bring their missionary enthusiasm to Hungary. This led to the Scots working with the Jews in Hungary, work to revive the Hungarian Reformed Church, work with Scots who were in Hungary -e.g. engineers, and work with children. A school for Jewish children was established in 1910. Jane Haining worked at the school. During the Nazi era, she refused to leave it and return to Scotland and later died in Auschwitz in 1945. In 1997 she was recognised by Yad Vashem in Israel as Righteous Among the Nations for having risked her life to help Jews during the Holocaust. Currently St Columba church is an international congregation, offering ministry to all and hospitality to refugees.

- Under communism the churches flourished. Since then, it has been a struggle. The current relationship with the government is not helpful. Most but not all the churches are closely aligned with the state. Nationalism is present in all the churches. As the churches are seeking to get back properties lost in the communist era, there is an incentive to cooperate with the government. Although Hungary is a secular state, the churches play a major role in its life – charity work, schools, hospitals, care homes, issuing media statements about e.g. Easter and the resurrection of Christ. The Hungarian national anthem is a lovely and moving hymn.

We visited Ukrainian Space, which is run by the Ukrainian Hope Association.

- We heard from Vladimir Pukis, the director of the project. Vladimir told us that when the Ukraine war began, Budapest was one of the first destinations of the refugees. They were mothers, children and grandparents. There are now about 30000 Ukrainians in Hungary. St

Margaret's response to the crisis was the project. Vladimir was working in the Black Sea wine industry at the time. His family left for Hungary and later he joined them.

- The project is a non-profit association. It employs four part time teachers. The aim is to provide supplementary education to that provided to the Ukrainian children in Hungarian schools, to help them partake of their heritage in their own language, and to help them adapt to Hungarian schools. Ukrainians qualify for special educational support in Hungary. The project has about 40 children on its books.
- At the project the children have art and IT classes and are given help with their school homework. On the day that we visited the project the children were painting shopping bags. They have made an Advent calendar and Christmas decorations. They have illustrated a book on flowering plants in Ukraine and Hungary. We were shown a tragic picture made by an 8-year girl of snow drops which never bloomed because of the horrors of the war.
- The project gives language lessons to the adults. It provides help with translation and with navigating Hungarian bureaucracy.
- Many of the adult refugees are well educated but they can only get work as cleaning ladies and chars.

We returned to England inspired by our new friends in the churches of Budapest and in Ukrainian Space. We will continue to pray for them as they seek to live out the Gospel in what can sometimes be challenging circumstances.

# BUDAPEST

Jeannie McMeekin

**T**he public transport was excellent: frequent, clean and reliable and free for the over 60s! As the residential part of Budapest had not been bombed by the Germans, the city has kept a delightful range of buildings in many architectural styles. Plus of course not being allowed to build anything higher than the Parliament buildings has kept everything on a more human scale.

Clearly the economy is not that robust with a certain shabbiness evident everywhere with uneven pavements and maintenance not being carried out on buildings. Having lived in India, I was used to not knowing what signage was saying because the scripts are different so it was a very odd experience being able to understand the alphabet but still not being able to understand what was being said, as Magyar is not an Indo-European language!

The Counter Reformation still leaves its mark on Hungarian life. There are two interesting linguistic shibboleths:

slightly different words for Protestant or Catholic Christians, and two different forms of greetings. The architectural shibboleth appears to be the way Catholic churches proclaim themselves by topping the building with a cross whereas Protestants use a more discrete star.

Another historical reality has disappeared largely from Hungarian life: the Ottomans ruled this part of the world for 150 years. It was the Turkish government which manifestly restored the tomb of Gul Baba, the Sufi saint who allegedly brought the rose to Hungary. Whilst popular

with Turkish pilgrims, it seems less important to others. However, it was well worth the climb to taste the wonderful rose tea in the little museum cafe. Presumably some residual anti-Muslim feeling remains, making it easy for a populist politician like Victor Orban to garner support for his anti-migrant policies. Currently the only refugees Hungary accepts are persecuted Pakistani Christians or Ukrainians. However, the subtle difference between the two groups is that Pakistani Christians are granted refugee status enabling them to eventually gain Hungarian citizenship whereas Ukrainians merely have protected status which has to be regularly renewed and can never lead to citizenship. Presumably the Hungarian government's support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine makes any change unlikely.

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## THE TOMB OF GUL BABA AND ISLAM IN HUNGARY

Richard Truss

**O**n our recent Christians Aware visit to Hungary a few of us took the steep climb up what is purportedly the oldest street in Buda to the shrine of one of Islam's most revered figures, Gul Baba.

Baba was a dervish who lived in Ottoman Buda in the sixteenth century. His book the Hurufi-Ostad, was an esoteric interpretation of the Koran, akin to the Jewish Kabbalist use of the Hebrew Bible, His shrine was built just two years after his death and quickly became a place of pilgrimage, the northern-most Islamic pilgrimage site in the world. Not only was he given a magnificent

tomb which still stands today but he was declared the patron saint of Buda by Suleiman the Magnificent. The shrine is octagonal and within it is Gul Baba's tomb, very much like those you can see in Konya in Turkey, the home of the whirling dervishes.

The tomb has survived because the Hapsburgs after their conquest of Hungary in 1686 turned it into a Christian chapel which was looked after by the Jesuits until the Empress Maria Theresa suppressed them and it then fell into disuse until the state authorities came to an agreement with the Turks that it should be restored as an Islamic centre, though this had to wait till very recently when the site was expanded to provide

a library, a museum and a mosque alongside the original shrine. Though its adoption as a church secured the shrine's survival it came at a price for the local Muslim population. Hapsburg rule through the bishops who enforced religious matters, laid many burdens on them including the following:

- If someone catches Ismaelites fasting or keeping away from pork or in ritual washing or in other false practices these Ismaelites have to be sent to the king and whoever sued them shall receive a share from their properties.
- We command all Ismaelite villages to build a church and finance it.



*The Shrine of Gul Baba, Budapest.*

After the church is built the half village should move and settle elsewhere in order to become similar to us in living together and also in Christ and in Church (i.e. become similar in faith).

- Ismaelites should not marry their daughters to their nation but only to our nation.
- If an Ismaelite has a guest, or he invites someone to his house to eat, he and his guests should all eat only pork.
- On the merchants called Ismaelites, if it becomes evident from them then after their baptism they return their old laws based on circumcision they should leave their homes but if they prove innocent they should stay.

These prohibitions may seem of merely historical interest and that would have been the case up to very recent times. The restoration of the Gul Baba shrine was sponsored jointly by the Hungarian and Turkish governments in an agreement in 2015. and even the more right-wing elements in Hungarian life seemed to view the Muslim world positively and in many ways as an example to what they perceived as a degenerate Europe. Islamic societies reflected just those "Christian" values which traditionalists held dear – family, country, and set gender roles.

However more recently things have

changed, with the populist right using the language of a cultural war between the Christian West and the Islamic world. Muslims in general are now often stereotyped as fundamentalists, jihadists, terrorists and a threat to white Christian values. So we find the Hungarian President, Viktor Orban, defining a Hungarian as being "someone whose grandchildren will be Hungarian as well", by which he means a society which is ethnically homogeneous in contradistinction to Western multi-culturalism. Orban has stated his aim thus: "I am doing my best to convince Europe's leaders that the Balkans may be further away from them than from Hungary, but how we manage the security of a state in which two million Muslims live is a key issue". The reaction to this particular outburst was sharp, with the head of the Islamic community in neighbouring Bosnia, Grand Mufti Husein Kavazovic, calling his statement "xenophobic and racist." Orban's concerns are particularly inappropriate when it comes to the Sufi dervishes of Budapest who follow a long tradition of meditation, asceticism and pacifism.

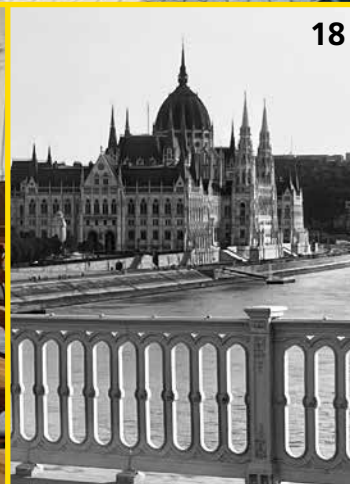
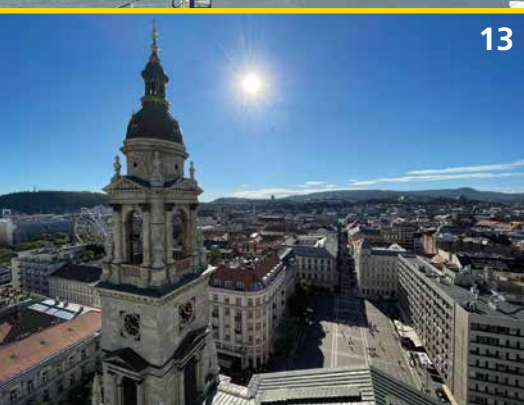
To visit Gul Baba's tomb today with its surrounding rose gardens – Gul Baba was known as the "Father of the Roses" – is to be drawn into an arena of peace and tranquility, and a reminder that religions should not be judged by their often grievous faults, but by their search, albeit by different

pathways, for the God of peace and love. In his own day, says the brochure "Gul Baba professed and represented values such as love, for all living things, humanism, tolerance, brotherhood and harmony" .. At a time when we are facing something of the same in this country with a vociferous populism seemingly on the rise, it is just those virtues, shared by people in all faiths, that we too need to recover and promote.

### KEY TO PHOTOGRAPHS ON NEXT PAGE

*(All by Brian McHenry)*

- 1 *The central market.*
- 2 *Outside St Matthias Church, where the Kings of Hungary were crowned.*
- 3 *A replica of the Crown Jewels of Hungary at St Matthias Church.*
- 4 *The Danube.*
- 5 *A painting depicting a violent scene in Ukraine by a Ukrainian child refugee, displayed at "Ukrainian Space" in Budapest, which provides extra education for the refugee children.*
- 6 *The interior of St Matthias Church.*
- 7 *St Matthias Church.*
- 8 *The central market.*
- 9 *The iconic Chain Bridge.*
- 10 *Castle Hill.*
- 11 *Szentendre Serbian Orthodox Church.*
- 12 *The Christians Aware group awaiting the beginning of the Anglican Eucharist.*
- 13 *A view from the roof of Budapest Cathedral.*
- 14 *The Christians Aware group with our Budapest hosts.*
- 15 *The banner of "Ukrainian Space" (see caption for photo 5).*
- 16 *A presentation by one of our hosts on Hungarian church history and church life in Hungary today.*
- 17 *Before the Anglican service.*
- 18 *The Hungarian Parliament.*
- 19 *The Christians Aware group outside Szentendre Serbian Orthodox Church.*
- 20 *Memorials to Jews who died in the ghetto during World War Two.*



# VISIT TO BUDAPEST

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ANNUAL  
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2026







# ST MARY'S FOOD BANK

**Neville Jacob**

The pioneer city of Phoenix in Arizona stands on a large arid plain in the midst of what is commonly called the Sun Valley. The plain stretches across hundreds of square miles of desert and to its north it is bounded by a low mountain range. In summer, the city bakes in 50 degree heat and only the toughest, prickliest plants survive. The desert is coursed by a network of dry arroyos that when the rains fall are swiftly filled to overflowing. When storms break nature does not hold back with vivid flashes of lightning and dark thunder clouds. The word tempest finds its true meaning in Phoenix. When it is not stormy you are confronted by a wall of heat. It is impossible to survive the dry heat of the desert without functioning air-conditioning and in the pre air-conditioning days of the 19th century citizens would sleep outside in temperatures close to 100 degrees at night. The best that could be managed was to sleep beneath blankets soaked in water.

It is a harsh environment where in truth humankind has no right to exist, and yet from a population of 1.6 million there are people (up to 10,000) who are designated homeless. 'The increasing number of people without shelter in Phoenix can be attributed to various causes, including the soaring cost of housing, high eviction rates, and a lack of affordable housing options (ASU News, 2023)'. Visiting friends in the city I wondered what you did if you were poor. Here in Britain, we may see people sleeping on the streets or begging outside our supermarkets. In Phoenix, there isn't the same passing trade, it would be virtually impossible for people to do likewise. Instead, it is more common to find folk at the top of the freeway off ramps, they wait until the lights change before either begging a few bucks or offering to clean your windscreen for a fee. Like every city around the world there is also a precariat who constantly stand on the edge of complete

financial, social and economic oblivion.

Having spent large sums of money travelling to the city I don't know whether it was guilt, inquisitiveness or altruism that drove me to find out more about the lives of those that my trip might otherwise barely touch. A visit to a church one Sunday in downtown Phoenix brought me into contact with St Mary's Foodbank, a foodbank with the proud but sobering reputation of being the first foodbank in the world. Founded in 1967, it was established by John van Hengel 'who volunteered at a local soup kitchen, serving dinner to those in need when a young mother told him that she depended on soup kitchens and food from grocery store dumpsters to feed her children'. So he came up with the idea of a "Food Bank," where individuals and companies with excess food could "deposit" it, and those in need could "withdraw" it. His local parish church, St. Mary's Basilica in downtown Phoenix, gave him \$3,000 and an abandoned building where he was able to turn his dream into reality.' (from St Mary's Foodbank website)

I discovered that there was scope to volunteer as long or as little as time would allow. Today, the foodbank has outgrown its roots and now covers a number of blocks in the Glendale area slightly to the north of the city. I have volunteered a couple of times and was amazed at the scale of the operation. There isn't space here to detail everything about the project and in many ways the tasks can be readily imagined, sorting food, filling trolleys that are then wheeled to those waiting outside and whilst there was an attempt to balance the food offered much depended on what had arrived in the warehouse. Apart from the scale of the operation, I was amazed that every recipient arrived at the centre in a car, there is a vast car park where those who are early can wait for their designated slot. In Britain, we would say that if you can afford to run a

car then you are not in need. In fact in Phoenix, and much of America it is impossible to live without a car, Americans never build to minimize space as there is so much of it, so you need wheels. Those who drive up to receive a parcel of food are treated with courtesy by the project. Firstly, you would greet the driver with a friendly word and then ask permission to load their trunk. There might even be an opportunity for a brief but friendly conversation. Amongst the volunteers, there was also conversation and light-hearted banter, friendships were born. Despite the fact that capitalism rules in the US, there is a very strong volunteer ethic that derives from faith, politics and neighbourliness.

I also had the opportunity be a part of the citrus harvest which is organised by the foodbank and teams go to neighbourhoods where householders have citrus trees ripe for harvest, grapefruit, oranges and lemons. Being a nosey person, it was fascinating seeing individual gardens in a desert context. Dry, dry earth with little pools of rocks and a few trees laden with fruit, one garden was home to a Roadrunner. I invite you to view the short YouTube video I made of citrus fruit picking, it gives a good insight into what the work involves, just look for: 'Citrus Picking with St Mary's Foodbank in Phoenix' for those viewing online there are links below.

From John van Hengel's original action a mighty network has grown across the world. It is of course a stain on our society that such places exist but there is practical help available, from food provision to education and work schemes on offer and van Hengel saw his work grow into the 'Feeding America' organisation that has spread far beyond the long, dusty, busy road where it all started. In my view, van Hengel deserves to be remembered as one of the great saints of the 20th century.

I close with these facts from the St

Mary's Foodbank website pertaining just to Arizona, described thus:

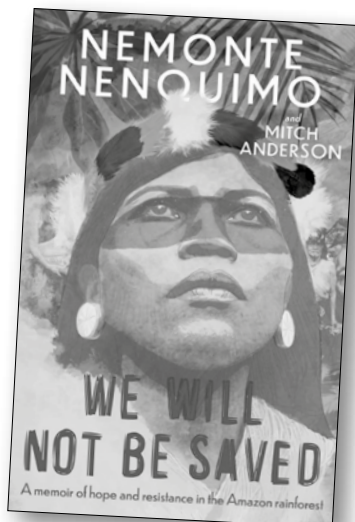
- 'Nourishing hope across Arizona's Communities
  - 250,000 meals served each day
  - 76.000 square miles served
  - 600+ non-profit partners (volunteers)'
  - <https://youtu.be/jiLgszrxMq0> – Citrus Picking with St Mary's Foodbank in Phoenix
  - <https://www.stmarysfoodbank.org/> – the foodbank website
- 



# BOOK REVIEW

**Alison Skinner**

**'We Will Not Be Saved  
– a memoir of my people'  
by Nemonte Nenquimo and  
Mitch Anderson.  
Wildfire paperback.**



Nenquimo was born into the Waorani tribe of Ecuador's Amazon rainforest, She was taught about plant medicines, foraging, oral storytelling and the spirits of her ancestors by her parents and relatives. Her village hosted an evangelical missionary group from America who made converts among the people and Nemonte left the rainforest aged 14 to study with the group in an urban environment and learnt Spanish. It was there however she started to see the environmental damage caused by the oil companies and met a Rainforest campaigner from California called Mitch Anderson who she eventually married. When they discovered that American oil companies, with implicit support from the government, were planning to

buy and exploit the rainforest around her home, she with others helped to form the alliance of indigenous peoples across the Upper Amazon, campaigned in the courts and helped to protect over half a million acres of primary rainforest from Big Oil.

This is a very rare account of life in the Amazon rainforest from the inside – the key aspects that indigenous people value so much as they have everything necessary for life there and know how to to harvest it in a sustainable fashion and the damage sustained to the environment and people by mining companies with only profit as their motive.

# NOTICING THE MARGINAL - THE ART OF FINDING GOD IN THE UNEXPECTED

Adam Boulter

Sketching is a foundational part of what I do and how I think. As with many artists I rarely go anywhere without a sketch book, and over the years I have built up boxes of old books.

The joy of sketching is it isn't necessarily about the drawing, it is a way of seeing. More than that it is a way noticing how you see, and then of learning new ways of seeing. When we sketch we pay attention to things, often to the marginal and overlooked.

Sketching is a way of noticing what is in the corner of your eye, on the edge of your consciousness. So it becomes a way of paying attention to how we perceive what are the filters we put between us and the experience of living in the world? It is not that we want to remove all those filters, to do that would be to make the world overwhelming. We can't cope with noticing every blade of grass in a field or taking every person we meet seriously at a deep and intimate level, that would just freeze us up and is

better left to God. Rather we can learn to be critically aware of how we see and what we notice. Sketching has given me a way to do just that as I have travelled around the world for the Church.

There is nothing quite like sitting down in a new place and sitting still and paying attention to the life and world around you. It grounds you, and helps you to find a way to be in that culture. Doing just this while sketching has given me all sorts of wonderful experiences. These include talking to street children in Madagascar while drawing the slums, to sitting with old men in North African cafes. It's not just people who relax when we do this, animals and birds emerge from hiding and if we sit and draw for an hour or more they behave like we are not there.

What is more, sketching leaves behind a very helpful residue of sketches. Going back through these triggers memories like nothing else. It also helps us become aware of what we are paying attention to, and

so what we are ignoring. A good sketch book is not necessarily a great work of art, rather it reveals new insights into what we are looking at, be it places, people, dreams, or stories. So a sketching can help us reset our assumptions, and become aware of what we are ignoring or dismissing. Yet sketching always remains personal, you are yourself drawing and responding to what you are sketching. You bring yourself to that place or people and are a part of them and it. Sketching helps us become more integrated with where we are and who we are.

You don't even have to sketch to try this, writing notes, or even just sitting still and calm will do the trick. But something that helps you take note of what is going on around and within you helps, and for me that has always been drawing. Give it a go, and don't worry too much about the quality it's not about making art, its about being there and noticing.

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## KENYA VISIT

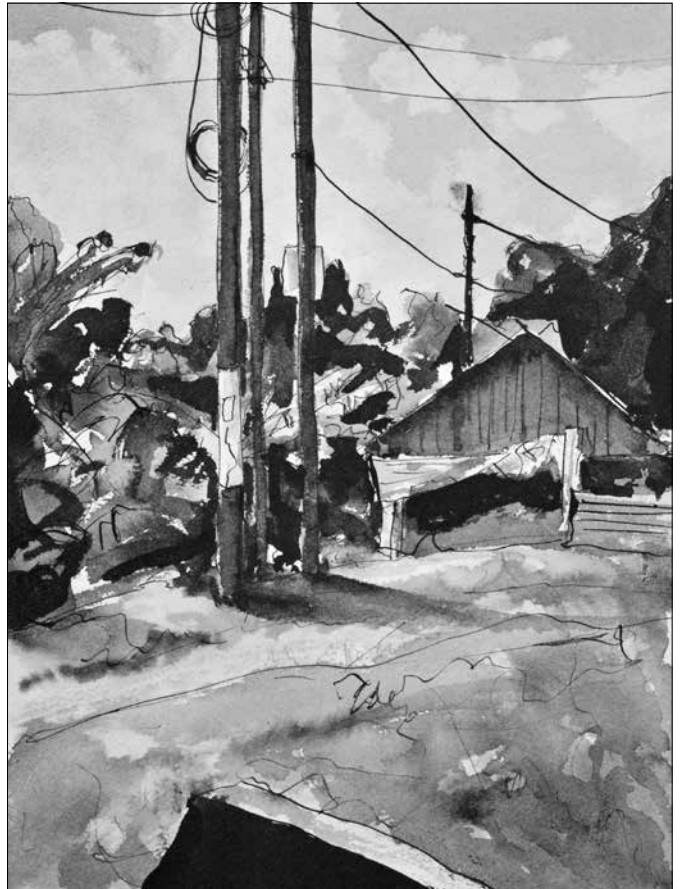
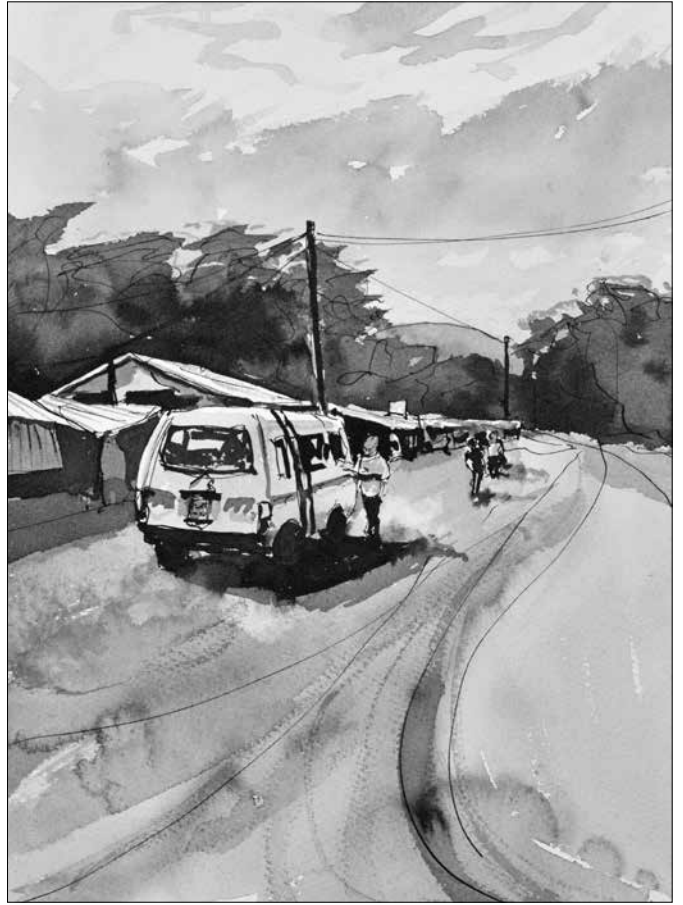
In December last year Adam went to Kenya as the guest of the newly established Christians Aware Kenya. He was hosted by Humphrey Waweru and his family and enjoyed an excellent programme. He stayed with Humphrey and Catherine in their home and then joined a Christians Aware conference held in Naivasha. There was good attendance, including Humphrey, Adam and also Captain

Samuel Mwangi. Some members may remember that Humphrey and Samuel joined our conference at Hinsley hall in January 2025.

Adam wrote of conference he attended in Naivasha –

*'The conference was a hugely enjoyable occasion, with much singing and conversation. The main theme was how to become mature*

*Christians in a fractured world, and focused on how to remain faithful to Jesus and counter a return to magical practices, and resist the pressures of the digital world'.*



*The drawings are some of Adam's creations during his time in Kenya.*

# A REFLECTION ON A VISIT FROM KENYA TO CHRISTIANS AWARE IN THE UK

Elijah Mbutia

**M**y visit to Christians Aware took place from 15th July to 30th August last year. The visit was a cultural exchange but so much more. It was a spiritual journey. It broadened my understanding of ministry and also allowed me to experience Christian fellowship across borders.

On my arrival at Heathrow Airport I was met by Sylvia Taylor whose kindness and hospitality set the tone for the entire visit. In my first days in London I visited several historical and spiritual landmarks and was able to glimpse something of the history and rich Christian heritage of the UK.

In my second week I attended the Christians Aware summer school, when we stayed at Parcevall Hall. The sessions were deeply enriching.

The third week of my journey took me to Somerset, to stay with Bob Taylor, the Vice-Chair of Christians Aware. He is a lay reader in his parish of seven churches.

I went to some of the churches, to services and bible study. Bob also took me to historic sites and to Burrington Combe where the hymn 'Rock of Ages' was written.

I spent a day with John and Molly Verity and their family. It was good to meet young children and to think of my own family.

Gerard and Margaret Crawshaw enriched my visit by introducing me to many different

churches and traditions. They gave me a fresh perspective on ecumenical fellowship.

I was welcomed to Salisbury by Tom and Jeannie McMeekin. A highlight was a trip to Stonehenge. I stayed in Bradford on Avon with Revd, Jenny and her husband. I was blessed to preach at both churches in the parish. I was challenged and encouraged by having to keep to time. We visited Bath, including Bath Abbey.

The final stage of my journey brought me to Wakefield where I was hosted by Tom and Barbara. We went to many historic sites and also the

College of the Resurrection. We joined worship in the local church. We went to Bishopthorpe, where the Archbishop of York lives. I met Captain Jim of the church Army. We visited the Church Lads' Brigade headquarters.

I visited York with Judy and Ian Carter-Brown before my journey to London, to stay with Sylvia and to fly home. My heart is filled with gratitude to God for all who made my journey possible.

**Elijah is a priest in the Diocese of Mount Kenya South. He is a Church Army Captain and in charge of the Church Lads' Brigade for the diocese. He is also in charge of children's work. He lives with his wife and their three children in Nairobi.**



*Elijah in Bradford on Avon with Jenny Nelson and her husband.*

# LIFE IN LIVINGSTONE, ZAMBIA - UPDATE

**Ali Bullivent**

I have now been back in Livingstone, Zambia for a month and have just about adjusted to the humidity! The rains are extremely heavy this year which is great for the crops and wildlife! It is so beautifully green and lush, the Zambezi is high and the Victoria Falls are phenomenal.

Humans are challenged in rainy season by rivers overflowing, floods, massive potholes filled with water (we



call them hippo holes) which always makes driving anywhere an adventure. As always, I am so blessed to have seen plenty of elephants, hippos, crocs, and monkeys round about.

Building of the Mukwa School for Music and Arts is well underway and I cannot wait to start inviting local children and adults to learn additional instrumental and singing skills in this dedicated space. I have a few guitars, a couple of violins, 3 keyboards, lots of recorders plus various other



interesting instruments that were shipped over whilst I was back in UK to get us going.

Thanks to everyone who took the time to organise! I am highly impressed by our local builders who waded through mud in bare feet or slippers, and I still heard one singing this morning as he was cementing in the breeze blocks.

Whilst waiting for the school to be built, I am keeping busy singing with early years children in a local rural pre-school, helping out at a school in a compound in town which I



am linked to through my friends at Zambezi Sunrise Trust, teaching singing and recorders with children in a rural church Saturday club, teaching piano and guitar and developing a choir with the staff where I stay and their children, plus performing at the Mukwa River Lodge with local pianist Daniel.

I am waiting for the rains to ease before starting weekly sessions at ZAWS the animal welfare organisation, where I will be continuing working with staff on presentation skills (for their outreach talks about animal welfare), song writing and

singing to the animals.

I will be starting my first in town series of performances in February which provide opportunities for local musicians to gain professional experience performing. I'm also able to do some online work with folks back home on order to earn a little food and petrol money. If anyone wants any on line music, singing or wellbeing sessions please be in touch! (I work with people dealing with stress, mental health issues, Parkinsons, lung disease, Long Covid and of course teach singing!)

I am so looking forward to seeing some of you when you come out to Zambia in the summer. There will be lots to share! Any instruments you can pack in your bags will be gratefully received too!!! It still makes me cry when I consider how we disregard or throw away instruments at home. Here they are like treasure. Please be in touch if you would like to via any of the options below!

Twalumba everyone.

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# THE LANDSCAPES OF LAUNDE ABBEY

Jeremy Purseglove

'Launde for myself'. These are the words that **Thomas Cromwell** wrote against a list of all the monastic properties being disposed of at their dissolution. Since he was effectively in charge of their fate under the orders of Henry VIII, he could have the pick of the bunch. What interests me is why he chose this one. Whenever I crest the hill and drive down into the delectable little valley in which Launde lies, I think I know the answer. The serene quality of the landscape, with the building nesting in a natural bowl, is irresistible.

I am a retired landscape architect. In 2022, I was approached by Alison Myers, the warden of Launde Abbey, to help bring Launde's landscapes back to life after a long period of neglect. These consist of three elements: the garden, the woods and the park.

I decided to start with **the garden** since it seemed like a relatively easy win and something that would quite quickly inspire an overall programme of restoration. The monastic fishponds may be the earliest survival but in Tudor times the immediate garden would probably have been a sophisticated one. Gregory Cromwell's uncle, Edward Seymour, protector of England under the young King Edward VI employed **William Turner**, the father of English Botany, as his chaplain and gardener and the Cromwells here would have known him well. Much later in 1829 **Thomas Rickman** was employed and the present big

cedars and wellingtonia were planted in the 1850s and 60s

The challenge for me here was that we have no money for garden restoration. What we do have is a head gardener, 20 volunteers and some very useful greenhouses. My priorities were to chop down dense growth of old laurels along the northern boundary, so opening up views of the surrounding countryside, to establish a generous new border against the eastern



in the early summer to create some fine meadows. For new plants the volunteers came over to my garden

and collected seeds and cuttings. Within 2 years we had literally thousands of little plants for the new borders.



**The woodlands, Launde Big Wood and Park Wood** are already well looked after since they are managed by the Leicestershire Wildlife Trust. They are



façade in place of a miserable strip of bindweed and remove the clutter of poly tunnels and other rubbish, which filled the splendid 1820s walled garden. In addition, there were a number of old lawns already dense with wildflowers so all we had to do was to reduce mowing

true ancient woodlands, which means they have been here for ever and have a rich flora of orchids and wild bell flowers as well as birds such as nuthatch and buzzard. The Trust has been clearing out alien conifers and coppicing the hazel to let in light for the bluebells. It is hoped that in time the woods will be linked with new plantings to other nearby ancient woodlands, which all formed part of the historic Leighfield Forest.



The park at the front of the house was partly created during the Napoleonic Wars when woodland on the upper slopes was reduced, leaving fine specimen trees which still survive.

these days it is hoped that this might be reduced with compensatory grant from government to encourage more wildflowers and create traditional wood pasture.



CA Christmas lunch at Launde Abbey.

It is heavily grazed by our tenant farmer.

One of

**Jeremy Purseglove is a writer and landscape architect. He is the author of 'Working with Nature.' He has given us a book full of good examples of working with nature from all over the world. Jeremy has written a chapter in the new Christians Aware book, 'Rooted in Hope.'**

# KNEPP - RICH IN BIODIVERSITY

**Cordelia Patterson**

**W**hat is "wild"? My dictionary offers "living in a state of nature" or "growing without the aid or care of man". Returning to this state then must be "rewilding". The Knepp Estate in West Sussex is famous for having done this on their 3500 acres of clay soil which made it unprofitable to farm, despite fertilizers, pesticides and conventional mechanical equipment.

Underlying their spectacular results are important issues they have wrestled with over the past 20 years. One of their choices was to examine the English countryside from prehistoric times, where they learned of the importance of megafauna (vertebrates weighing over 44 kg) particularly the largest – sabre-toothed cats, woolly mammoths and aurochs (giant cattle who could weigh 900 kg.) These animals altered the landscape by disturbing the soil, trampling excess woody plants, fertilizing the soil and spreading seeds over large distances. The resulting landscape is described as "open canopy woodland" or "wood pasture" with widely spaced mature trees and an increase in ground plants. This environment resulted in

what is thought to be the most biodiverse era in the earth history, and it was this landscape that Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree sought to replicate at Knepp.

We visited Knepp non a sunny afternoon in September 2025. Walking to a tree platform we had difficulty negotiating the hard pockmarked surface. This was the clay soil that defeated the Burrells' 15 year attempt to make a profit from farming, looking its worst after the exceptionally dry summer. The animals at Knepp are free to roam,



View of scrubland from Range Rover.

but we didn't see any until we joined our "safari" in an open-sided Range Rover seating 8 plus the guide. As we went along overgrown trails I was grateful to be in a middle seat as overhanging branches scratched those next to the windows. One of the first things our guide explained was that 2025 had been a "mast year" with an excess of acorns produced, something I had noticed

at home. These were very good for the Tamworth pigs but caused intestinal upset in the Old English longhorn cattle when eaten in excess. Thus the cattle, rather than being free to roam, were being kept in an oak free area of the estate so we only saw them grazing in the distance. We did see orange Tamworth piglets as they scooped the acorns, rootling and disturbing the soil, but their huge white mothers were more elusive. Next the Exmoor ponies gambolled in a clearing, looking



*Tamworth pigs.*

producing 45 chicks. We proceeded to park near a carefully fenced riverbank inhabited by beavers. The guide informed us that



*Exmoor ponies.*

shaggy but energetic. Further on the trail we found a pair of storks in their nest, the most touching sight of the tour. These were re-introduced at Knepp in 2016 and this year breeding pairs returned from wintering in Africa to breed at Knepp,



*Storks in their nest.*

beavers were nocturnal, which I certainly hadn't known, so we weren't going to see them, but she explained that the original pair had completely changed the watercourse in a very short time, allowing different vegetation to spring up and slowing the waterflow, preventing flooding. The couple had had kits, who were now growing up and the colony needed to be split to prevent territorial arguments – luckily the new colony doesn't need to be too far away from the first.

I think my overall impression was of the ordinariness of the landscape – it wasn't designed to please the eye and the same trees and shrubs dominated the view from different aspects. What was thrilling was the unseen changes in the soil and undergrowth that boosted biodiversity of insects which encouraged the birds who spread the seeds that changed the landscape from

overcultivated clay to a richer more productive humus. Particular successes are the increase in nightingales, from 9 singing males in 1999 to 62 in 2025 and large increases in common whitethroats and turtle doves. An unexpected result was the increase in purple emperor butterflies, so that Knepp now has one of the largest populations in the UK with a 107% increase in butterfly species richness between 2005 and 2025. It is a wonderful example of less is more –



*Wetland area created by beavers.*

by stopping farming and the use of pesticides and introducing substitutes for megafauna Knepp is now more biodiverse than almost any area in the UK and it employs more people and is more profitable than previously. Their 20 years of negotiating with government, neighbours and funding sources using knowledge based on their own research and reaching out to known experts has been unexpectedly successful.

I think we can learn from their experience in our own activism:



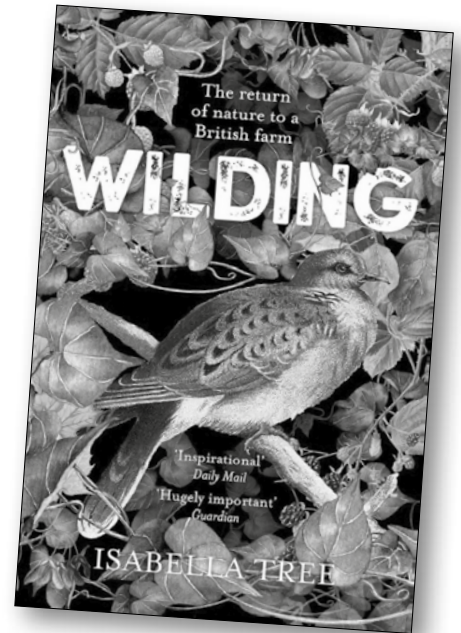
*I did not know that deer shed their antlers yearly. The arch we are under is made of antlers*

daring to try something new without any expectation of the result, trusting that the ecosystems God created can recover faster and more completely than we could expect, and that thinking of ourselves as part of the biosphere rather than its master can result in gains for the human species as well as others. The Burrells went forward with their plans trying not to have expectations but simply observing how the landscape reacted to the new conditions. It represents the true impartial scientific approach – design your experiment to answer the question you are investigating but look objectively at your results, looking for the truth behind them rather than grieving over the fact

that they aren't what you expected. As Christians, we shouldn't be surprised by demonstrations of God's overwhelming generosity and the fascinating connectivity He created on the earth.

**'Wilding' by Isabella Tree was published in 2019 by Picador**

This is the story of the wilding of the Knepp Estate and of the creatures which have benefitted. The hope is that others will follow this pioneering path away from traditional farming and towards a natural landscape taken over by nature.



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# A TALE OF TWO ISLANDS

**Sue Peachey**

I have travelled to many places with Journeying, a not-for-profit, Christian based organisation, which takes small groups of people on guided walking holidays. Several of these destinations have been islands, which all have their own atmosphere, but the two that stay in my mind are Caldey Island in Pembrokeshire and Bardsey Island in North Wales.

Both are obviously reached by boat and the amazing thing is that no two sea journeys are the same, usually due to the weather. The trip from Tenby to Caldey normally takes around 20 minutes and is relatively calm and relaxing. However, the last time I went, the prevailing wind meant that it took a lot longer to get there, and by quite a circuitous

route, approaching the island from a different direction to normal in quite an "up and downy" way! (Do not let this discourage you from visiting, however, as that was a rare occurrence.)

On reaching **Caldey**, the excitement of the crossing changed to a calm and welcoming presence, as I and

my fellow travellers made our way up to the main part of the island. Here we found the café, shops and dwelling places of those who live there, including, of course, the monastery. There are some lovely walks and places of interest, not least the chocolate factory! To spend a day there is so relaxing, but I have also been lucky enough to stay in the guest house for several nights. When the boats have stopped running for the day and the day trippers have all departed, the feeling is of blessed peace and calm. An oasis in the midst of our busy lives.





In contrast to my crossing to Caldey Island, the one to **Bardsey Island** was a pleasant surprise. Having read that it could sometimes be a bit rough, I was a little anxious, but I needn't have been. The boatman who took us over was very skilled and also knowledgeable, being a descendant of one of the islanders. Arriving on the island was straightforward and relaxing. After a short time of worship together we were escorted up to the tea room by the resident dog, Moss, who protected us from a slightly menacing flock of geese on the way! The tea room was, in fact, the back door of a farmhouse, from where the farmer's wife provided us with refreshments from her kitchen. Following this, each member of the group went



their separate ways to explore this very special place. I really enjoyed the peace and quiet of the island, broken only by the call of the seals basking on the rocks near the harbour

It is hard to describe the feeling experienced from walking the same paths on these islands as so many other pilgrims have done over the centuries. I was left with a feeling of awe that I had been able to spend time in two such special "thin" places, where the space between earth and heaven is very narrow.

If you get the chance to visit either or both of these islands, please take it. You will not be disappointed!



# GREETINGS AND A COUPLE OF INSIGHTS FROM FRESSEX! (FRESSEX = A FREEZING ESSEX)

Jonathon Doering

**M**y wife Monika (an Anglican) and I (a Quaker) recently spent a few days in rural Essex. Neither of us knew the county well but were immediately struck by the landscape.

The Boulting Brothers' first film, *Ripe Earth*, was a documentary about the changing seasons in and around the Essex village of Thaxted, and I can see what drew them to this neck of the woods. The land is open, studded with endlessly unique trees and copses. One evening, we wandered along the road to admire the misty tangerine sunset, enriching the delicate, hopeful skeletons of a row of trees in the distance. It really did feel as if the land was ripe and open, and it also helped that the winter, although still freezing, was starting to allow in some warm, mellow sunshine.

Our reason for coming to this part of the world was the dramatically named Stavropegic Orthodox Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, in the equally dramatically named village of Tolleshunt Knights. We found a small poster stuck to the front door of the Chapel on our arrival that lifted our hearts: 'God is calling you – but not on your mobile phone! Please switch it off completely during the service.'

So, nestled away down one of the many narrow country roads around here, was the delightfully sudden surprise of this orthodox community of forty or so monks and nuns living, worshipping, and working together, offering

hospitality to pilgrims (we would have had to sleep separately there, hence our staying nearby). It was established in 1959 by Saint Sophrony, a Russian Orthodox monk who had lived for some time in France before hearing a call to set up a community in England.

There was a Chapel, decorated with murals of various key moments in the lives of Jesus and Mary: the Nativity, Christ's baptism in the River Jordan, the Annunciation, the Last Supper, the Assumption, all rendered in delicate, pastel colours, with muted gold haloes.

Studding the outside of many of the buildings in the compound, there were a series of stunning mosaics: on the wall of the Chapel itself: Mary, Jesus, John Baptist, Saints Silouan the Athonite and Sophrony. On another, dozens of mosaic vignettes of church Saints. On yet another, animals queuing two by two for Noah's ark, including moose, polar bears, and squirrels (I spotted a little forlorn sparrow perched to one side in the

assemblage, and hoped that its mate was close by).

We attended the three-hour Sunday service: considering that Orthodox liturgy sits at the very top of the candle, literally just beneath the flame itself, whilst Quakers reside at the very bottom, it passed beautifully and quickly. We were also incredibly impressed by the attendance: there were literally hundreds of people packed into the Chapel space and the lobby area, spilling out onto the open area in front of the chapel, all focused on the liturgy. Some followed it in service books, others stood, sat or knelt, watching, fully invested. Afterwards we chatted with one congregant, a Romanian chef who lives in West London, who regularly travels by train for 2½ hours in order to attend this service. Theologically over many, though not all, issues Quakers and Orthodox coincide in a lot of our thinking, including universal salvation. I started this piece thinking that I would talk a little



*The mosaics on the outer wall of the chapel.*



*A lovely depiction of Noah's Ark.*



*A glorious, golden image on a shining morning.*

bit about the rich sacred theatre of Orthodoxy, in contrast to our very different Quaker worship. But I now see that it is a *difference* in sacred theatre. If Orthodoxy enjoys an ornamental, baroque explosion of incense, candlelight, shadow, icons, mosaics, robes, singing, prayers, readings, chanting, then Quakerism enjoys a minimalist theatre, where light, shade, the outer words of ministry, the inner words that we might read (or receive rising up from inside ourselves), whatever object might have been laid on the table, noises and events in the Meeting House garden, as well as incidental noises from the world outside of the Meeting House, all fall together into their own sacred mosaic.

As I sat amongst the other worshippers, witnessing and silently joining with the liturgy being enacted by the priests, cantor, and choir, I was struck by the thought that we Quakers are also silently witnessing and joining with the communion that is being created within, between, around, and amongst us by the Spirit.

Ecumenism and Interfaith are very important to me, and if one engages freely in different forms of worship, there are treasures to be held in the heart. Whenever I join another church's worship these days, I tend to return to Meeting for Worship feeling refreshed – and glad and grateful to be a Quaker.

We attended the Tuesday morning service at the monastery again, during which I was examining the mural high up above the sanctum sanctorum, depicting the Last Supper: six disciples sat on one side of Jesus, five on the other. As I wondered as to the whereabouts of Judas, I spotted him, surreptitiously slipping out of a door in the corner of the painting, perhaps re-emerging in a painting that we admired during a visit to Chelmsford Cathedral the day before...

Painted by Suffolk artist Mark Cazelet to decorate a stone wall which used to feature a window that was lost during an extension of the building, it is a gigantic depiction of a modern tree of life, painted on a series of oak

panels.

In the bottom left hand corner, a bulldozer shovels trash and pollution up against the base of a majestic oak tree, the lower left hand quadrant of which is dying; as the eye moves upwards and away from this toxic winter, a swirling zigzag of golden leaves recall bright, ripe autumn, drawing a shining line between the death of pollution and human toxicity and the glowing green of summer in the rest of the tree. On the bottom right hand side Adam and Eve, two teenagers in T-shirts, emerge from a cornfield. In the deathly reaches of the tree, there is Judas again, hanging from a bough, thirty silver pieces cascading from the purse clutched in his skeletal fingers. There are also natural treasures in this tree: a jay with an acorn, a butterfly, and in the upper right hand, a redeemed Judas resting amongst the leaves with thermos and sandwiches close to hand, enjoying the view. This does not strike me as an anodyne emollient where everything is magically made new and fresh, but rather as a sweet sigh of relief after a time of testing has been worked through. It is a beautiful and provocative painting, and I recommend it to anyone who finds themselves in the area: at once a paean to the beauty and fragility of Nature, and humanity's responsibility for both its destruction and protection, as well as for much of our own suffering and redemption.

As I drafted this piece, sitting on the sofa in our Airbnb, I could see through the window onto the gravel path and the field beside our rented cottage. There were a couple of resident grouse as well as a regal pheasant. In quiet moments, the grouse scuttled this way and that; when they came to the farmyard gate they seemed to always hop onto the same spot on the lowest bar before hopping down again on the other side and scuttling on, pecking here and there amongst the gravel. The pheasant, with his long, lordly tail and scarlet bandit's mask over his eyes, hurried for no one. There didn't appear to be any local fox threatening

these beautiful birds, which felt like a minor natural miracle on one hand. On the other, each morning, we would step out onto the gravel beside the cottage and see the same patch of stones scratched up away from the side of the building, exposing a short length of cement piping laid beneath the gravel. What was happening? Was some animal or other seeking a place to shelter, or else a convenient underground safe for dead prey? We never saw any definitive evidence to settle the matter one way or another, but the determination of whichever animal it was in the face of the gravel being smoothed back into place was either admirable or disturbing. Whatever the truth of the matter, the croaking calls of the birds provided a sacred backdrop to the days.

As we prepared to return to everyday life, I reflected on all of these insights and experiences that I was taking back with me and was put in mind of the icons in the chapel: semi-shrouded by shadows, but with glimmering light picking out flashes of gold and other details here and there. I want to hold them close.

*This is an amended version of an article that previously appeared in Nottingham Quaker Meeting Newsletter.*

# FAITH IN TROUBLED TIMES

Wendi Momen  
with Leicester Faith Awareness Women's Group

**T**here is no doubt that we live in troubled times. The 'we' in this statement means all of us as individuals, members of families, members of communities, people living in a particular part of the world and as people living on earth.

We do not need here to rehearse at length the destabilizing troubles facing us at every level, from individuals to the global level, from personal anxiety, stress and loneliness, to wars, the effects of climate change, geopolitical turmoil, the increase in displaced persons and resulting migration, the widening gap between the unbelievably wealthy and the equally unbelievably poor, the rise of autocrats not only in politics but even in our workplaces, the prevalence of 'entitlement', the increase in misogyny, racism, religious bigotry and prejudices of all kinds; a disregard – even denigration – of truth, justice, equality, care for others; the increase in materialism and the attitude of 'me first'. And the effect of all this on young people in particular. You can think of many other examples.

We are here as people of faith, or are thinking about faith and religion. Interfaith week celebrates the interconnectedness of faiths and challenges us to look more deeply at how we think about each other as people and how we behave towards one another.

On Remembrance Day we reflect on the past and our family and friends who were caught up in the great and terrible wars that have so afflicted humanity – and continue to do so. So many sacrificed in the hope that we might live in a world without war, without fear, without horror, without hate.

Today we reflect on the future. We still hope to live without war, without

fear, without horror, without hate. And we also hope to live without poverty, injustice, inequality, fear of the other, terrorism, criminality, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia and so many other social negatives that have arisen to divide us and have caused too many of us to forget who we are as human beings and why we were created.

But hope is not enough. Without action by individuals, families, communities, institutions, hope cannot be sustained.

I take my thoughts today from the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, of which I am a member. As it honours all other religions as being from God, I pray these reflections will resonate with those of all faiths and none.

Every individual has agency and the capacity to play a part in developing and creating a less troubled world, to establish peace, to overcome the self-centredness that divides us. We do not need to look far for how we can do this – most, maybe all, the people here tonight are already working towards these goals. We use the scriptures of our faiths to guide us, to uplift us, to give us a wider vision of our purpose here on earth. We pray earnestly, beseeching God, to assist us in our efforts. As individuals, we work on purifying the heart and cleansing it from prejudice on the one hand, and work with many to create the social conditions for peace and unity to emerge on the other.

A key to bringing about this peaceful, harmonious, just, equal, creative, caring, loving, sustainable, prosperous and live-in-able world is recognizing one glaringly obvious but greatly overlooked fact: **we are just one people, living on one planet together** – that's it.

We all know that peace is more than just the absence of war, the cessation of hostilities, the ceasefires.

Every religion throughout history has brought teachings of peace. For example:

**Judaism** considers peace to be a central value, defined not just as the absence of conflict, but as a state of wholeness, well-being and harmony. The Hebrew word for peace is shalom and it is a basic foundational concept.

Peace is a central concept in **Zoroastrianism**, achieved through following the ethical principles of "good thoughts, good words, good deeds" and living a life in harmony with truth and order. A peaceful existence is achieved by choosing good over evil, and the ultimate goal is a world of peace and tranquillity brought about by the triumph of Ahura Mazda (the Lord of Wisdom) over evil forces.

**Christianity** views peace as a gift from God, a state of total well-being and an active pursuit of reconciliation through faith in Jesus, who is the "Prince of Peace". Christians are called to be peacemakers, to forgive enemies, to be compassionate and to work for justice.

**Islam** is directly linked to peace, as the word "Islam" shares the same Arabic root as "salaam", which mean peace. It teaches that submission to God leads to a peaceful life and promotes justice, compassion and reconciliation, both within the individual and in society.

**Hinduism** teaches that peace is a central concept rooted in the principle of non-violence. Inner peace is achieved through detachment from desires and maintaining inner balance, while peace in the world is found in social harmony and reconciliation, compassion and justice.

**Buddhism** teaches that violence stems from within ourselves and hinders spiritual progress. Inner peace is a prerequisite for enlightenment and personal peace is the foundation

of a more harmonious world.

**Sikhism** teaches people to be in harmony with others, as all people are equal. Conflict is a separation from God. Inner peace is found through prayer and meditation. Social peace is achieved through equality and service.

The **Bahá'í** Faith teaches that peace is the responsibility of everyone. Inner peace is found through prayer and meditation, followed by positive service. This is our twofold moral purpose: individuals must develop their spiritual life and contribute positively to the betterment of the world. Global peace is considered not only possible but inevitable, as the next stage of our social development.

Despite these principles and objectives, we know that much injustice and suffering have been inflicted throughout history in the name of religion. This is still true today. At the same time, when examined fairly, in the historical context of their times, religion has been a central protagonist in bringing education, prosperity and order to the world. The teachings of the founders of the great religions do not support the contentions and prejudices convulsing much of humanity. Intolerance and fanaticism represent, at best, distortions of true religious values.

Writing of religion as a social force, **Bahá'u'lláh**, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, declared: "Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein." "The purpose of religion", He affirms, "is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife."

**The true and lasting peace toward which we all aspire depends on unity. When we are united – in a unity that embraces and honours diversity – all problems can be solved. The conscientious application of the Golden Rule – that we should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated – a principle at the heart of all**

### **religions – would bring about a radical change in the world.**

To play a constructive role in shaping humanity's peaceful future, religious leadership and people of faith need focus on the core of positive moral values held in common by all religious traditions, rather than on differences. We may each believe our religion is best but we must respect the spiritual choices of others. If there must be competition among religions, let each strive to excel in guiding people to peaceful coexistence, moral rectitude and mutual understanding.

Religion wields the power to mobilize the hearts and minds of the people and to urge us forward on the path toward peace and mutual understanding. It has a moral authority and an ethical sensitivity that complement the resources and expertise of governments and civil groups. Religion has been at the heart of many of history's great social movements. The special role of religious and spiritual leadership is to take a long view, not from an ivory tower, but with a perspective that is detached from immediate exigencies and the often partisan struggles of day-to-day political life.

And let me here add a few thoughts about the role of women and girls in this process. While women, widows, girls often take the brunt of the injustices and prevalent negative forces, they are also the front line workers, providing education, food, care, protection, healing, comfort, compassion, creativity and energy to both immediate and long standing troubled times.

Bahá'í texts say:

*The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age*

*will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in Esslemont. Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 149)*

*Woman by nature is opposed to war; she is an advocate of peace... woman is naturally the most devoted and staunch advocate of international peace*

*The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge. (Promise of World Peace)*

In addition to attitudes and concerns that have traditionally centred around child-rearing and the home, women have particular skills, perhaps first learned in that environment but now applicable on the community, national and international levels, that are vital for a successful, peaceful society. For example, the Bahá'í Faith suggests that women have 'special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá in London, pp. 1023) Perhaps these special gifts include such skills as 'juggling' (time management), negotiating (dividing the piece of cake), patience (crying babies) and calm and competence in the face of crises. Here we have a statement about the participation of women in

decision-making that no one else has made.

The participation of women at all levels of community and national, as well as international life, is now being seen as imperative. A mix of skills, attitudes, behaviours and vision is vital for virtually every social activity requiring a level of decision-making, certainly for the establishment of a lasting, permanent and vibrant peace. It is not only that women as a group bring a different perspective to a wide range of issues, important as that is; it is also that individual women have unique abilities and talents that are needed and can be utilized by the wider community, talents that were previously undeveloped and not available.

Further, we need that new kind of society that a more equal balance between women and men in all these roles will bring – that different perspective that will emerge as people who have not ever worked in partnership find ways to do so. The systems of the past have clearly failed us. It is not reasonable to dwell on all the reasons why, nor to carry a chip on our collective shoulders

as a result. Peace requires us to develop a new system of governance, of social interaction, of decision-making, of distribution of wealth in the community to accommodate the change in our perspective. That future society is based on justice and equality, not only of gender but of ethnicity, class, age, religion, level of ability and wealth. In fine, it is based on the premise that there is only one race, the human race. It is a future based on the recognition of our basic unity, in all our diversity of colour, culture and custom, the will to achieve it, and the actions that will make it possible.

Having used our abilities as human beings to sort out the issue of the partnership of women and men, we can use these same skills to solve other apparently intractable problems, such as racism, poverty, inequity, social exclusion and similar issues which are at the root of war, civil unrest and social and economic dissatisfaction and disintegration.

May we all be able to continue our work of building peace in our world of troubled times.

**The Faith Awareness webinar was hosted by the Faith Awareness women's Group. We are an interfaith group and we meet regularly, mostly on the Zoom platform but sometimes in person.**

**Our webinar was planned as a contribution to Interfaith Week, 2025. This special week was launched in 2009. It has been well supported since the beginning and has made a huge contribution to local interfaith relations and to the building of wider community life all over the country.**

**Dr. Wendi Momen is a member of the Baha'i Faith. She has a background in international relations and in economics. She is a writer and a book editor. She is a social activist and has worked for the advancement of women, for poverty eradication, housing and the environment. She is a member of many vital organisations, always working for the well-being of all in our society and world.**

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# AFRICA TODAY: THE HEARTBEAT OF PEOPLE AND THE PULSE OF DEVELOPMENT

**Ronald Nathan**

## **Introduction**

Thank you for the invitation to speak on Africa Day's significant occasion. As we gather under the banner of **Christians Aware**, an organisation committed to listening, learning, and acting for justice, peace, and development, it is both timely and essential that we shift our gaze. Let us move beyond headlines and statistics and instead tune in to the heartbeat of the continent – its people.

Africa is not a story of deficit or despair. Africa is creativity. Africa is resilient. Africa is a possibility.

As we explore the Africa of today, it's vital to clarify what we mean when we speak of "Africa." This is not a single story, but a continent of countless voices, cultures, and realities.

Let me offer three simple but essential facts to reframe our understanding of Africa today:

1. **Africa is not a country – it's 54 countries and over 2,000 languages.**

Too often, Africa is spoken about as if it were one place, one culture, one identity. In truth, Africa is as vast and varied as Europe and Asia combined – geographically, politically, and culturally.

*"Speaking about 'Africa' as a single unit would be like calling Europe 'a country' – erasing the differences between Norway and Greece,*

Portugal and Poland.”

## 2. Africa is the world's youngest continent – 70% of its people are under 30.

This is not a declining continent – it's alive with energy, ideas, and future leadership. Youth-led movements are already shaping Africa's future, from tech innovation to activism.

*“While much of the world is ageing, Africa is bursting with youth – and with them, new ideas, movements, and visions for change.”*

## 3. Six of the world's ten fastest-growing economies have been in Africa in recent years.

This challenges the narrative of dependency. Challenges remain, but extraordinary innovation is occurring in mobile technology, clean energy, and creative industries.

*“Africa is not waiting to be saved by the West. In many places, it is leading – especially in mobile banking, solar innovation, and cultural entrepreneurship.”*

When we discuss Africa today, we speak of a continent that defies simplification – a place of complexity, contradiction, and enormous potential. To understand Africa, we must unlearn stereotypes shaped by Western media. Africa is not a single story – it is thousands.

Let us now explore the people and movements shaping Africa today – from city streets to rural cooperatives, from faith communities to youth-led innovation.

### Africa today: people in focus

As I have mentioned previously, Africa is home to the youngest population on Earth, with over 70% under 30. This youthful energy is dynamic – young people drive change everywhere: launching tech startups in Nairobi, leading climate protests in Kampala, and creating music and art that speak truth to power in Lagos and Johannesburg.

Rapid urbanisation and internal migration are transforming cities. Rural youth bring fresh ideas, reshaping traditional norms. This creates a vibrant fusion of heritage and innovation – from Accra's fashion markets to Kigali's digital classrooms.

Education access is expanding, especially for girls, enabling new opportunities. Despite ongoing challenges, women and youth are increasingly active in politics, business, and community leadership.

From Ebola to COVID-19, African nations have demonstrated resilience, often through local healthcare solutions like community care in Sierra Leone and digital health tools in Rwanda.

Faith and culture remain foundational. Churches, mosques, and traditional leaders are spiritual and social anchors – supporting health campaigns, peacebuilding, and education.

This is the Africa we must see: not merely surviving but shaping its future. It is a continent of agency, dignity, and creativity – told through the lives of its people, not just its problems.

### Development: whose agenda?

When we discuss development in Africa, we must first ask: *Whose agenda are we following?* Too often, dominant development models are shaped by external priorities rooted in colonial legacies.

The shadow of colonialism lingers in extractive trade systems, artificial borders, and economic structures built for export, not equity, and still defines much of Africa's global engagement. The continent exports raw materials, imports finished goods, and suffers disproportionately from climate change, which it did not cause.

Many African thinkers and movements critique top-down development models that treat Africa as a problem to fix, rather than a partner with wisdom, creativity, and solutions. Too often, development

means big infrastructure projects and aid packages with strings attached, overlooking local knowledge, spiritual values, and communal strength.

But a new narrative is emerging – written by Africans themselves. Movements like **Afrika Vuka** challenge fossil fuels in favour of renewable, people-centred solutions. **#EndSARS** began as a protest against police violence but evolved into a youth-led demand for systemic change. In Kenya, **Msingi Trust** supports grassroots justice advocacy. Across Africa, women's cooperatives, peace networks, and faith-based enterprises restore dignity and rebuild communities – not through charity, but through shared power and local agency.

We must champion this development – one that listens before acting, builds on community strengths, values spiritual capital as real capital, and respects diverse paths towards flourishing.

Development is not a project to be delivered. It is a process to be shared – with humility, partnership, and justice at the centre.

Africa doesn't need saving. It needs listening. It requires partnership. It needs respect.

If we are to walk in step with Africa's people, our role is not to lead, but to learn – and support what is already growing strong from the ground up.

### Challenges faced by the Continent

Africa faces a range of complex challenges, with poverty, inequality, and unemployment affecting large portions of the population. Many people, especially young individuals, struggle to find stable employment, while basic services such as education, healthcare, and clean water remain limited in many regions. Political instability, corruption, and poor governance further hinder development, contributing to social and economic inequality across the continent.

Conflict and insecurity continue

to impact several African countries, leading to displacement, humanitarian crises, and disruptions in daily life. Health challenges such as disease outbreaks and weak healthcare systems strain resources, while climate change adds further pressure through droughts, floods, and environmental degradation. These issues often lead to food insecurity and reduced agricultural productivity, particularly in rural areas that rely heavily on farming.

Infrastructure deficits, including poor roads, unreliable electricity, and limited internet access, slow economic progress, and increase the urban-rural divide. Rapid urbanization without proper planning has resulted in overcrowded cities with inadequate services. Additionally, Africa's growing youth population presents both a challenge and an opportunity—without investment in education, job creation, and governance, this demographic shift could increase social tensions and hinder long-term development. The effects of these are demonstrated in some five coup d'états in the last six years in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Niger, Madagascar and Mali, all of which demonstrate the youth's impatience with the slow pace of democracy.

### **Justice, peace, and partnership**

Justice, peace, and partnership lie at the heart of Christians Aware's mission. Justice is not charity but about restoring relationships among people, nations, and the earth. Peace is more than the absence of violence – it is the presence of sustainable, dignified living. Development is not aid – it is liberation and flourishing.

Across Africa, these values come alive. Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria build peace through dialogue, education, and shared projects. In Liberia, women across faiths led peace efforts that ended the civil war. True partnership listens, learns, and walks alongside.

This is the peace we are called to embody and support.

### **What can we do? Listening, learning, acting**

As Christians – and as people of conscience – our response to Africa must begin not with charity, but with **solidarity**.

This means learning **from** Africa, not just about it. Africa is not only a place of need, but of profound theological, cultural, and social wisdom that can enrich our own lives. Are we ready to listen?

We can act through everyday choices: ethical consumption, advocating for fair trade and climate justice, and investing in African-owned businesses and initiatives that build local resilience and dignity.

We also amplify African and diaspora voices – theologians, educators, artists, and activists – who shape the world in bold and prophetic ways.

Working in true partnership with Africa is not only right – it is necessary. A more just, peaceful, and healthy world for African communities is better for **all** of us. Justice is not a gift we give – it is the foundation for our shared flourishing.

This is how we live out our faith: walking humbly, learning deeply, and acting boldly – together.

### **Decolonizing aid**

Let me take a couple of moments to speak to the current topic of decolonisation of aid. Decolonising aid means shifting power from donor countries and international agencies in the Global North to local communities, organisations, and governments in the Global South. It calls for local leadership in designing and delivering aid, with funding going directly to local actors rather than being filtered through large international NGOs. The goal is to build equitable partnerships where local voices shape decisions, and aid is seen not as charity but as a form of solidarity and justice that acknowledges historical exploitation and inequality.

This approach also involves reforming the structures and mindsets behind

aid. It requires ending paternalistic attitudes, ensuring accountability to the communities served (rather than just donors), and focusing on long-term capacity-building over short-term fixes. Decolonising aid means valuing local knowledge, using respectful language, and measuring success based on what matters to local people. Ultimately, it's about redistributing power, not just resources. This must include decolonising theology and theological methods such as missions.

### **Conclusion: a hopeful vision**

As we reflect on Africa today – its people, challenges, and resilience – we are reminded that our shared humanity is sacred and profound. Every person bears the divine image, deserving dignity, justice, and peace.

Our response must go beyond charity or pity. It calls for committed, informed action – standing in solidarity, listening deeply, and working alongside African communities as partners in a shared journey toward justice and flourishing.

In the words of **Wangari Maathai**, visionary leader and environmentalist:

*"The world is not only hungry for food; it is hungry for peace. It is hungry for justice. It is hungry for love."*

May this hunger inspire us to give, transform, hope, and act together.

**Ronald Nathan is an international public theologian and Pan African Advocate. His main focuses are justice, development and black theology. He has worked in 38 African countries. He won the Paul Robeson award in 2025**

# SOME DIARY DATES

2026

- February 11 Webinar at 7.00pm. Speaker: Inderjit Bhogal – 'Churches of Sanctuary. Protective Hospitality.'
- March 18 Churches of Sanctuary. Speaker: Inderjit Bhogal. 7.00pm. Wakefield – venue to be confirmed.
- March 24 Webinar at 7.00pm. Speaker: Margaret Barker – 'Mary Magdalene's Easter.'
- April 19 Ayub Khan will run a half marathon in Vienna. Details are – Start time: from 9:00 am in multiple waves. Start: Wagramer Straße/Reichsbrücke. Finish time: 1:00pm. Finish: Ringstraße/Burgtheater. Ayub will run for Christians Aware. We have created a 'Total Giving' site. Please sponsor Ayub.
- April A Christians Aware visit to Holyrood House near Thirsk, enabled by Martin Slater. This is the place to turn to for well-being, creativity, spirituality and healing. Spiritual direction and counselling.
- May 16 – 23 Journeying pilgrimage on Lley Peninsula. CA members are invited to join.
- May 29 – 31 Methodists for World Mission annual conference in Cliff College, Derbyshire.
- June 13 CA event in Crickhowell.
- July 20 Visit to Leicester by Revd. Christopher Garland from Australia. Lunchtime meeting and talk.
- July 24 – 26 National Justice & Peace Network conference at Swanwick – 'Just Talk'.
- July 23 – August 7 CA visit to Zambia.
- July 26 – 31 CA Summer School at Parcevall Hall.
- September 1 – 5 CA Dorset Pilgrimage led by Stephen and Jane Skinner.
- September 17 – 23 CA visit to Romania
- October 7 Interfaith pilgrimage to the Punjab led by Inderjit Bhogal.
- October 17 CA Focus on the Middle East and Autumn Fayre in Leicester.

# INTERCONNECTED

Concern for the environment needs to be  
joined to love for our fellow human beings



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