



Christian Today Digest

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Christian Today Website Articles

Sometimes Christian Today also includes an article of interest, which is not necessarily a good-news item but rather one that has been included for readers to pray about.

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

Why we must open them every day: our 5-point plan to save Britain's churches

By Luke March

The UK has around 42,000 Christian places of worship. They are a unique combination of architecture, history and faith and a vital and much-loved part of our heritage.

In England, 45 per cent of all Grade I Listed Buildings are churches and cathedrals. Last year, 57 per cent of British adults said they had visited a church, chapel or meeting house to attend a religious service, a community event or as a tourist or visitor.

The facts speak for themselves – it is clear that churches are important places in the lives of many British people,

providing a physical space for spirituality, reflection, celebration, exploration.

So, earlier this year, I was dismayed when the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) announced that it was to stop its Grants for Places of Worship programme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The decision means that, for the first time since 1977, no ring-fenced public funding will be available to protect our church and chapel buildings.

HLF general grants will still be available for places of worship to bid for, but they will be competing with other, often better resourced, organisations. A real concern is that poorer churches will find it so much harder to access essential funding. And religious denominations which regard a church as solely a sacred space may find it almost impossible to meet the HLF criteria for community use.

It is not too late for the HLF to reverse this decision. Such a decision would have the support of the main Christian denominations, and the support of the public.

A new opinion poll carried out in June 2017 for the NCT by ComRes showed that out of 11 categories, cathedrals and churches were ranked by the British public as the second most important type of historic building that should be protected for future generations. Ranking only after castles, cathedrals and churches were regarded as more important than even royal palaces or country houses.

While I would very much welcome a decision to return to ring-fenced funding, the impact of the HLF decision has brought home to me all too clearly the dangers of relying too much on funding from the state and state-run bodies.

So, in our new Annual Review, I have set out a five-point plan to help secure the future of the UK's church buildings.

The main features are:

1. Prioritise the maintenance of church buildings.

It is generally much more cost-effective to look after historic churches through regular maintenance rather than having to undertake often expensive structural repairs because the condition of a building has been allowed to deteriorate. Resources and the funding paradigm should therefore move away from repair and replacement to maintenance and conservation.

New ways should also be found to help the volunteers who look after church buildings to keep them in good repair. For example, our new ‘MaintenanceBooker’ website, launched in February 2017, shows that new technology can make it easier to get professional help to maintain church buildings.

2. Help more churches become centres for the community.

Many churches want to do more to open their buildings to their local community and be used as venues for the arts, leisure, social action and other community activities and even host public services such as post offices, libraries and GP surgeries.

For example, two years ago the first ever main-branch post office set within a church in the UK opened up at St James's Church in West Hampstead, London

That's why our grants programme funds the installation of modern facilities, such as toilets and kitchens, allowing churches to become community hubs. This helps to strengthen local economies and also builds social cohesion.

3. Put churches firmly on the visitor and tourist map.

Churches, chapels and meeting houses are treasure houses of heritage and history and much more should be done to help them attract visitors.

The National Churches Trust's 'ExploreChurches' website provides the UK with a high-quality website for church visitors and tourism.

Closer co-operation between partners in the tourism, heritage and church sectors would help bring many more people into churches. This is a form of soft evangelisation. But attracting visitors also brings with it additional income through donations and gift purchases.

4. Create a one-stop shop for churches applying for funding for repairs and maintenance.

The UK's churches will always require funding from a variety of sources to pay for repairs, maintenance and new

facilities. But churches seeking funding have to navigate a ridiculously complex web of grant-giving trusts, foundations and heritage organisations to access the money they need.

The church heritage sector should start work now on streamlining the grant application process, possibly through creating a funding portal. This would allow churches to submit one application to reach as many potential funders as possible.

5. Open church buildings every day.

Church buildings need to be open every day so the public can enjoy their beauty, history and sense of prayerfulness.

There is still a widespread view that churches need to be kept locked to

prevent theft or vandalism. But an open church can often be safer as the local community then becomes more engaged with the building.

Vital role in the life of our nation

As the National Churches Trust moves into its second decade, taking forward the work of the Historic Churches Preservation Trust, we will further develop our five-point plan in partnership with those involved in looking after church buildings at the national, denominational and local level.

Too many of the UK's churches, chapels and meeting houses are still fighting a battle against the ravages of time. We need to make sure they get the support,

maintenance, funding and repairs that are essential in ensuring they can continue to play a vital role in the life and well-being of people and our nation for many, many years to come.

Godfulness: What the Church can learn from a new (but old) kind of meditation

By Joseph Hartropp

‘Mindfulness’ is a popular practice in contemporary culture. It’s a type of meditation which focuses on self-awareness and still reflection on the world around you, reported by many to be a boon to mental health.

A new Christian book puts a theological spin on the notion: GODFULNESS: A

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO BIBLE MEDITATION, bills itself as a ‘guide to Bible mindfulness’. Christian Today spoke with author Derek Leaf, the leader of the Christian discipleship ministry The Navigators UK about the new perspective of **GODFULNESS**, and its challenge to the contemporary Church.

Leaf describes the origins of his book: ‘it started with a bit of frustration over whenever I heard Christians talk about the meaning of life, they all went to the Westminster confession of faith – “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever”.

‘It’s a good answer . . . but I thought, doesn’t the Bible have something to say about this? Over the years I was praying through St Paul’s prayers, which are for different people in different situations... I began to realise that Paul was praying from a distance, he didn’t know people’s situations that well. . .

he was praying strategically, about what was of eternal significance in their lives, and thus what has true meaning to life.

‘If we’re living the way he’s praying for them – that is what God is looking for.’

There began a six-year project to try and communicate the heart of St Paul’s prayers. When he decided the book couldn’t just be ‘Derek’s reflections’, he added real-life testimonies to ‘ground’ the theology.

‘It started as trying find the purpose of life . . . and ended as a book about meditating on Scripture.’

Leaf doesn’t have much to say about the secular practice of mindfulness, though he’s aware it’s a ‘controversial word at the moment’. But his book appears to take its themes of awareness and simply centre them around God’s word.

Among various creative suggestions for Bible reading, Leaf invokes the practice of Lectio Divina (Latin for ‘divine reading’), a medieval type of meditation that invites slow prayer and reflection around Scripture, drawing one into deeper communion with God. As Leaf describes it, Lectio Divina involves ‘reading through a passage several times, honing down on what you think God is speaking to you . . . what was it that particularly captured you? Pray into that thought . . . follow how it develops.’

It’s one approach, but Leaf is wary of implying that any one path of devotion is the only way Christians can relate to God. To those struggling to find an awareness of God, he says that ‘usually, there’s a kind a kind of vogue’ about how Christians should engage with God, but won’t actually connect with everyone.

Subsequently people feel ‘excluded . . . they hear stories of great encounter, and have no connection, I would encourage people to explore different ways of engaging with God. This is one approach.’

Some Christians Leaf knows have never had a tangible ‘experience of God . . . they faithfully walk with him, they read the Bible and seek to put it in to practice and they’re some of the most godly people I know.

‘So, I would not get too caught up in the experience. God works with people in different ways. We need a big enough sense of what he’s doing to embrace and welcome all such people.’

Leaf sums up GODFULNESS: ‘Bible meditation is more than just a hobby. It can be a life-changing exercise. Meditating on God’s Word becomes a divine partnership! He shows you his

heart and then, as you pray about what he has shown, your heart is changed.'

What could the Church learn from GODFULNESS?

'I see two directions', Leaf says. 'One is encouraging people to meditate and put into practice God's word. I'm hopeful that people see how their lives can be transformed.'

As the popular evangelist J John writes in his commendation of the book, the pace of modern life means that 'Bible reading in particular has become something that is done poorly, if at all. We slot our time with God's Word into spare moments and, reading the text with speed, fail to feed on it properly. It's hardly surprising that spiritual malnourishment has reached epidemic proportions.' GODFULNESS is a response to that 'epidemic'.

Leaf adds: ‘The other direction would be looking at what is really important to God. In the evangelical world, we tend to have a thought that what we value most are forms of worship, evangelism, outward forms of the Christian life. What surprised me looking at Paul’s prayers is that those things were almost absent . . . what he was lifting up was the values of God’s work in us.

‘How do we express faith, take hold of the promises of God, the hope he sets before us, and how do we live all that out in love?’

Leaf hopes this book will point to ‘bigger sense of what God is at work doing . . . Christian fruitfulness is much bigger than “how many people have you spoken to, what have you done?”’

He concludes: ‘It’s a different perspective on life’.

Pioneer ministry: How a new generation of ministers is changing the face of mission

By Andrea Campanale

The Church Mission Society has just seen the most students ever graduate from its PIONEER MISSION LEADERSHIP Training programme. A total of 24 students left with a range of university awards in theology, ministry and mission at a ceremony at CMS headquarters just outside Oxford.

But what are ‘pioneer’ leaders, and why is the movement growing?

‘Pioneer’ was first used to officially describe the ministry that was going on at the edges of traditional church in the Church of England’s 2004 Mission Shaped Church report. The report

highlighted the ways Christians were engaging with people outside the usual reach of church and suggested this represented a significant hope for the future.

It also recognised that different gifts and skills were needed to start something new, as opposed to growing and maintaining an existing established congregation. The report recommended creating a new designation, the **Ordained Pioneer Minister (OPM)**, as well as a new training pathway that would nurture and resource this pioneer gift.

Anglican theological colleges were soon offering a new pioneer track. But it was essentially the same training offered to all ordinands, with an additional session or two on pioneering. A few years in, it was acknowledged that this was not meeting the expectations of either

those training as pioneers or the needs of the Church of England.

Consequently, CMS was approached to devise specialist training in cross-cultural mission and launched its Pioneer Mission Leadership training in 2010. As one of the oldest missionary sending agencies, this seemed a natural fit – particularly as about 30 years previously CMS had come to realise that the greatest missionary challenge was now on its own doorstep. In response, it was applying learning from more than 200 years of taking the gospel to other cultures around the world, to the sub-cultures of the UK and Western Europe.

According to CMS director of mission education Jonny Baker: ‘The course gives pioneers a supportive learning community – a place to belong, as well as equipping and empowering them to initiate and follow through with mission

projects that have a wider impact on the church and society.'

It's not just Anglican pioneers that train with CMS. Students also include Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals. Among those graduating this year is Janice Hamilton who is being ordained into the Church of England as a deacon in Gloucester Diocese. She is involved in a community regeneration project in Sedbury, Gloucestershire, to refurbish a disused youth club. Organisers hope this initiative will draw the local community together. Overall, the project will cost £55,000 and the team has launched a crowdfunding initiative as well as seeking funding from local sources.

Lay pioneer Libby Hawkness-Smith lives in Oxfordshire and heads up Journey On, a community for people with learning difficulties such as autism. Libby says: 'Like so much of society the Church can

be unintentionally patronising for people with autism, but a lot of people want to be challenged, they just need someone to help them build up to a challenge.'

Claire Elwood, another graduate, is involved in Tea and Toast, an outreach initiative to students in Nottingham's city centre. Every Friday night after the clubs have shut, the team offers revellers hot drinks, friendship and support to those in distress, and if the situation allows it, they take the opportunity to share their faith.

From September CMS will be offering two new courses, one in Pioneering Youth Work and another for pioneers working in children's and family ministry. These will draw on the expertise of the Oxford Centre for Youth Ministry and Streetspace, part of Frontier Youth Trust. As well as the courses being run from its base in

Oxford, CMS is now setting up hubs in other locations around the country. The first hub, St Cedd's Centre in Romford, is a partnership between CMS and Chelmsford Diocese and has just successfully completed its first year, training 14 pioneers.

CMS's pioneer training has also been a catalyst for supporting those engaged in mission in other church streams and networks. On 18th July CMS hosted a day conference, in collaboration with Methodist Pioneering Pathways, on Pioneering on Estates and New Housing Developments. More than a hundred practitioners gathered to hear stories of mission, share learning and consider some of the political and theological issues that are raised by their ministry.

Government figures show that in England around 150,000 new homes are built every year. While this is still not sufficient to meet the demand, it

represents a huge opportunity for the church to engage with people outside the boundaries of established church, as brand-new communities are being formed.

Ben Norton, whose ministry is on a new housing estate in Hull, says of his experience there: ‘I believe we have to create the space for trust to be established. People have to trust us before they can begin to trust in the promises of God. We have to start with people rather than programmes or services.’

As Jonny Baker says: ‘Mission Pioneers are giving the Church a glimpse of the future, where mission will not be delivered solely by large para-church organisations, but increasingly through agile, innovative and creative pioneers, witnessing love in action.’

Muslim teenager goes to Christian camp to get close to his girl crush but ends up falling in love with Jesus instead

By Stephanie Velez

One Muslim teenage boy had other things on his mind when he followed his crush to her Christian summer camp but rather than being kicked out, the camp teachers led him to Christ.

The captivating story of the young Muslim man's conversion is told by OPEN DOORSUSA, who were running a summer camp recently in a former Soviet country in Central Asia where there are restrictions on sharing the Gospel with children and teenagers.

Despite these restrictions, the organization was able to hold a Christian camp and it's lucky for teenager Damir – real name changed for security reasons – that they did as it changed the course of his life forever.

Actually, he didn't go there to meet Jesus. Damir, the 16-year-old son of a high ranking Muslim official, went there chasing after a girl he was infatuated with, Kamila, whose name has also been changed for protection.

Remarkably, Kamila's parents are Muslim but they still permitted her to attend the Open Doors Christian summer camp.

Damir was less interested in the camp and more interested in getting intimate with Kamila. He even went to the trouble of booking a hotel room close to the camp so they could meet.

But God was about to make a startling intervention. When Kamila disappeared from the camp, her meeting with Damir came to light and the camp director Sharifa, whose name has also been changed, went to Damir's hotel room where they were found together.

Kamila was taken back to the camp by a teacher, but the camp director 'felt a prompting from God' to speak with Damir one-on-one.

Sharifa didn't immediately throw out an invitation to Damir to accept Jesus. Instead, Damir was asked what he thought would happen if Kamila were to become pregnant, particularly as he admitted to having no desire to marry her or raise a child with her.

Sharifa's words struck a chord with Damir and he made a promise not to be alone with Kamila. But more startling was when he asked Sharifa if he could

take part in the camp. Of course, the answer was yes and from that time on, he attended the camp every day, joining the teaching sessions and Bible lessons.

One particularly meaningful session for him was a teaching lesson on what the Bible has to say about relationships between boys and girls.

Convinced by all he had heard in this and other teaching sessions, Damir accepted Christ and he and Kamila have since made the decision to be friends while they seek God's will for their lives.

'I came to this camp with only one goal,' Damir shared. 'That was to have intimacy with Kamila, something new for me and new for her. I wanted this not because of my love, but because I wanted status and popularity. I didn't care about the consequences. Now, I realize that I need close relationship and intimacy with Christ. My

relationships with girls must be pure. I am responsible for controlling myself and not giving room for sin.'

Now he and Kamila are both praying that their parents will also come to know and accept Jesus as their personal Saviour. At least for the time being, Damir has some hesitations about sharing his newfound faith with his parents.

'I want my parents and sisters to meet Christ, to learn about his love. But I am afraid of their opposition. Pray that God will give me courage to share with them,' he said.

