



## MAGAZINE OF UNITING CHURCH SKETTY DECEMBER 2023 & JANUARY 2024



Bethlehem, then and now (*from Wiki Commons*)

**The shepherds said to one another, “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.**

## Uniting together - Caring for all - Seeking God

**Minister:** The Revd Louise Gough

**Senior Elder:** Pat D

**Senior Steward:** Jan C

**Church Related Community Worker:** Adella Pritchard (Swansea Region of URC Churches)

**FEBRUARY 2024 MAGAZINE:** All items for inclusion in the February 2024 edition of the Magazine to be sent to Noel D by 16 January at the latest, but sooner if possible. Issue date: Sunday, 28 January.

*NB We have stopped producing audio recordings of this church magazine due to a lack of demand. This is under continuous appraisal and if you think such recordings could benefit you, please let Les W know. If you would like to receive the weekly notices and/or monthly magazine via email (.pdf file) please contact Lynne W.*

**Contacting us:** Uniting Church Sketty, Dillwyn Road, Sketty, Swansea SA2 9AH. Website: [www.unitingchurchsketty.org.uk](http://www.unitingchurchsketty.org.uk)

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The building development was funded by the following



The refurbished hall was funded from the sale of the Bethel building

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**LETTER FROM THE MANSE**

## Dear friends

Maybe it's just me, but the thought of Advent (let alone Christmas!) is already a bit over-whelming! It's not just my extensive to-do list which is worrying me. I'm writing this in the middle of November, and I know that the shops have been full of festive matter for weeks already. I visited Llandudno in October (*see photo*) and some of the hotels were shrouded in baubles and Christmas trees and in the full swing of Turkey and Tinsel celebrations! I had to avert my eyes and pretend I couldn't hear "The Man with the Bag" being belted out by the entertainer as I strolled along the prom after dark! I suppose at least the people with their trimmings up and their cards written and their presents wrapped have saved themselves a bit of last-minute stress further down the line. The nearer Christmas gets, the more the pressure seems to build. That's true whether we throw ourselves joyfully into the various facets of the season with wild enthusiasm and maximum tinsel, or whether we silently embark on our inner battles so that we can attempt to navigate ourselves safely through the heightened pain that often goes hand in hand with this time of year.



I don't know how Advent and Christmas got so complicated (not that many people even seem to notice Advent anymore!). This year, I want a proper Advent, and a simple Christmas. I want to forego the noise (all around me, and in my head), the hassle, the stress, the striving for perfection, the need to do things better (and earlier) than last year – and strip the whole thing back to basics.

I want an Advent that is full of waiting and expectation, where every day brings us closer to the God who is hatching an extraordinary plan. I want to remember God's careful preparation to take the world by surprise, so gently, so simply, with the birth of a child. I want to remember, like Mary, to be willing to receive the gift, to carry the weight of it and bear the cost of it and experience the newness of it. I want to remember the shock and the ordinariness of it, with the certainty that something inexplicably wonderful has happened. I want Christmas to change my heart, my life – and bring me close

to God – so that by the time 25<sup>th</sup> December comes, I am ready for Christmas to begin (and not sick and tired of what passes for it!).

So what if we could do it all differently? The good news is that we can! To keep Advent special, to have a simple Christmas, we just have to refocus our vision. We have to step beyond the noise and the hurry and the stress, the bright lights, the adverts, the busy-ness, and go through the plain door into the wide-open enormous peaceful space that is silence. That's where we'll meet God. God invites us to inhabit that inner place where we can be totally ourselves, and where we can experience the uncomplicated state of being in God's presence – where nothing is expected, and no words need to be spoken. If we can find those few minutes a day, just to be with God, alone, in silence, knowing that God is there, God will show us what is true.



Then we'll begin to find that Christmas is all around us. If we want to see it, all we need to do is to look down. We'll find, beneath our feet, the ground. Ordinary, undecorated, probably quite dirty ground. And it will remind us that in Jesus, God becomes grounded. God comes to live beside us, to walk beside us, and to share in all our joy, all our pain, all our struggles.

At Christmas, God becomes grounded. It's as simple as that. Beyond the dazzle, the dreams, the desperate efforts, shines the tiny, vulnerable, earthed light of Jesus – and no darkness (even when it masquerades in seasonal shimmers), can ever put it out.

May you know the joy and peace of a proper Advent, and a simple Christmas, in the presence of the Grounded God.

Blessings

Louise

*[NB All the photos that accompany Revd Louise's letters in the Magazine are and always will be taken by her! ed.]*

## WORSHIP SERVICES IN UCS FOR DECEMBER AND JANUARY

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(all at 10.30am unless otherwise indicated)

- December 3: Advent 1 Revd Louise Gough (Communion)  
10: Advent 2 Revd Noel Davies (Human Rights Day)  
17: Advent 3 Revd Louise Gough (10.30 Nativity & 6.30 Carols)  
21: Thursday Communion, Revd Louise Gough  
24: Advent 4 (Christmas Eve) Revd Louise Gough  
25: Christmas Day at 10.00am, Revd Louise Gough  
31: Sue Raad
- January 7: Revd Louise Gough (Covenant Sunday - Communion)  
14: Revd Linda Woollacott  
21: Revd Louise Gough (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity)  
25: Thursday Communion, Revd Louise Gough  
28: Revd John Atkinson

***NB: Revd Louise will lead prayers and reflections every Sunday evening between 7.00 and 7.30pm – any occasions (e.g. over Advent and Christmas) when these meetings are not held will be announced in the Newsletter. Please join us, if you are able, using the normal UCS Zoom link. Please contact Louise if you have any specific prayer requests – but check for permission first.***

**OUR DECEMBER COMMUNION COLLECTION** will be for Crisis. Crisis tries to find a stable home and provides education and training to help homeless



people rebuild their lives. They have a special campaign at Christmas which is always a cold and difficult time for those on the streets. Swansea is one of the areas where Crisis has a base (on St Helen's Rd.) so our donations could

help those we see around us.

In **JANUARY** we will be collecting for Stepping Stones in Swansea, a project linked to Action for Children, which offers pre-school care for children with an emerging or diagnosed disability. Members of our UCS congregation were originally involved in setting this up. There is no similar facility in the area, and it is much appreciated.



**Susan G**

# CHRISTMAS SERVICES IN UNITING CHURCH SKETTY

‘Christmas is all around us. If we want to see it, all we need to do is to look down. We’ll find, beneath our feet, the ground. Ordinary, undecorated, probably quite dirty ground. And it will remind us that in Jesus, God becomes grounded. God comes to live beside us, to walk beside us, and to share in all our joy, all our pain, all our struggles. At Christmas, God becomes grounded. It’s as simple as that!’ (Revd Louise Gough)



*Karl Bloch, The Birth of Jesus (L) and the Bethlehem Wall 2014 (R) [from Wiki Commons]*

“The picture we paint in our minds of Bethlehem at Christmas is far removed from the Bethlehem of the twenty-first century.”

## **Dec 17: Advent 3 - Revd Louise Gough**

10.30am Children and Youth Nativity

6.30pm Carol Service

**21: Thursday Communion - Revd Louise**

**24: Advent 4 (Christmas Eve) - Revd Louise**

**25: Christmas Day, 10.00am - Revd Louise**

**ALL ARE WELCOME**

## BENEVOLENCE FUND PAYMENTS MADE SINCE NOVEMBER MAGAZINE

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Tŷ Hafan Communion Collection October 2023	£339.85
Sketty Foodbank Harvest Collection	£408.75

### Extracts from Thank You Letters Received

**Action for Children** (Communion Collection for September of £321.18)

Thanks to the generosity of the members of Uniting Church Sketty, and all our supporters up and down the UK, Action for Children works directly with more than 671,000 children, young people and their families. Our frontline were on the ground helping children and young people through 447 services in local communities across the UK, in schools and online, aiming to support the most disadvantaged young people who experience severe difficulties in life.

**Shelterbox** who received 50% of a total Collection of £852.85 for the Turkey Earthquake Appeal:

Thank you so much to Uniting Church Sketty for your donation, which means that we can continue to help vulnerable people feel more in control of their future.

Many villages have largely been reduced to rubble, leaving people with little option but to sleep out in the open or in communal tents, and getting aid to the people we are supporting will be challenging – there are large distances between mountain villages and some roads in the mountains are still partly blocked.

**Note** - Shelterbox are operating in Turkey, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia

**Jon D**

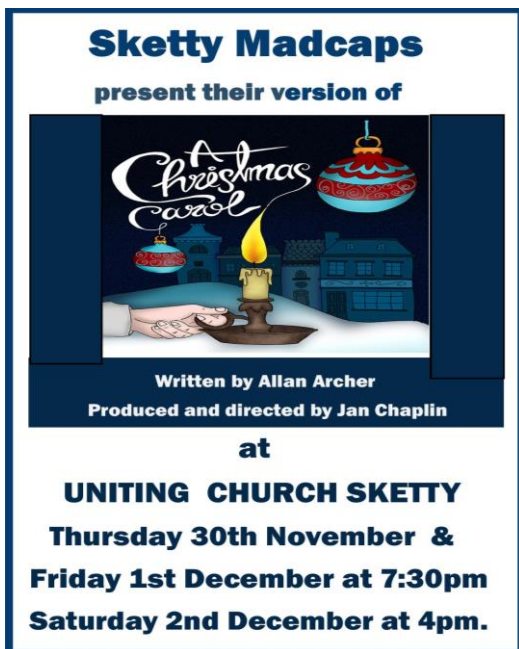
### SINGLE USE PLASTICS

I am sure you are all aware of the Welsh Government's new ruling regarding the above. The circuit has sent us Cytun's guidance to assist churches in this matter. The latter is not given as legal advice but merely to help us adopt an appropriate response for our church. Clearly this is helpful to us all, not merely in following the new government rules but in ensuring we continue to move forward on our ECO journey. All the prohibited items have now been removed from our kitchen and, for the future, please can we not use, or bring into church for other people to use, the following:



- Single use plastic plates – this includes paper plates with a laminate surface.
- Plastic cutlery and drinks stirrers
- Polystyrene cups and / or food containers
- Single use plastic stemmed cotton buds and balloon sticks
- Plastic drinking straws.

Many thanks **Jan C**



## COVER TO COVER

**Our December meeting** at 10am on 7th December will be the chance to share a favourite Christmas story or poem and to sample some Christmas eats.



**At our January 4<sup>th</sup> meeting** we will discuss "**Barchester Towers**" by **Anthony Trollope**. We have already discussed "Conclave" about the election of a Pope and "Oranges are not the only fruit" about a very strict Pentecostal church. Now for

the Church of England!

We are always glad to have new members, so you are very welcome to join us.

**Pat D**



## HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

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Sunday, 10th December, will be Human Rights Day. This year it's the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1948. It was the culmination of long international



negotiations and provides, 75 years later, a foundation for creating a humane, compassionate and just society. Our service on that Sunday will mark this anniversary and remind us that, for

Christians, and for all peoples of good will and humanity, respect, dignity, equality and freedom for **ALL** are completely fundamental.

The Declaration has thirty clauses, all of which are important, but at the heart of it are the first and second articles:

### Article 1: Free and equal

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*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of sisterly and brotherly respect.*

### Article 2: Freedom from discrimination

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*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.*

We believe that in God 'All human beings are born free' and 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration'. We live in a world where, tragically, a vast number of our sisters and brothers do not share these basic human rights. It is our calling from God to live out, in the small ways that are possible for us, the words of Jesus: 'He has sent [us] to proclaim freedom for the captives... and to set the oppressed free.'

Noel

# OUR HARVEST WINDOWS



Now, thank the Lord,  
O! Thank the Lord  
For all God's love!

*Thanks to everyone who created these wonderful window displays for our harvest service, reflecting various aspects of our church life and witness, and to Janet N and Lynne W for the photos on this page.*





*We're very glad to include this poem from Jim H, a good friend of Revd Linda who has been a local preacher in the Wokingham area for many decades! He joins us regularly for worship and used to join the Christ Well Bible Stuides on Zoom during the last year. This is his response to the UCS Harvest Thanksgiving Service:*

### **Water in the Desert or Freedom from Want.**

Out of Egypt God's people all fled  
Into the desert where most things were dead.  
The people complained, "This life's not so good.  
Slavery was better. At least we got food".



God sent them manna and this met their need.  
Each day they all had a really good feed.  
Then water ran out. The desert was dry,  
"We're thirsty, we're thirsty" was their pitiful cry.

God spoke to Moses, "Do what I say.  
You'll all have your water by close of day.  
Just strike that big rock you see over there".  
And water spilled out and spread everywhere.



So, let's value our freedom, God's great gift to us.  
Enjoy every day and don't make a fuss.  
We've plenty to eat, fresh water galore.  
We have a good life. We'll not ask for more.

**Jim H**

*Thanks to Linda J for the photos above. Image right from Wiki Commons.*



## ECO (EARTH CRISIS ONGOING) NEWS

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A Rocha (the charity which fronts Eco Church) offers 12 tips for a greener Christmas: [arocha.org.uk/our-twelve-tips-for-a-greener-Christmas](http://arocha.org.uk/our-twelve-tips-for-a-greener-Christmas).

Examples include – rent a tree, make a natural wreath, make a tree from recycled materials and create homemade gifts.

If you are not able to make gifts or go shopping, why not consider giving a gift



and supporting a charity at the same time. Recently, I have twinned my garden with a garden in Kenya. The charity is Ripple Effect ([www.rippleeffect.org](http://www.rippleeffect.org)). Gifts range from £5 to £100+ and include paying for people to grow bananas and pineapples, buying chickens, donkeys, garden tools and watering cans. With your gift you will

receive information and a gift card to send to the person for whom you are buying the gift.

Other charities that offer similar gifts include All We can ([www.allwecan.org.uk](http://www.allwecan.org.uk)); Leprosy Mission (<http://leprosymission.org.uk>), Save the Children (<https://shopsavethechildren.org.uk>), Action For Children (<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk>) and many more.

Recycle after Christmas (and beyond). It's a great time of year to review and improve your own recycling set up at home. You can find out what you can recycle at home by entering your postcode here: [recyclenow.com/recycling-locator](http://recyclenow.com/recycling-locator)

**Janet N**

## COFFEE AND CHAT

Our October meeting had attendees who don't usually come to our meetings, which was great. We had a wide-ranging discussion on the way forward towards our Gold Eco Award. More details will be made known in the coming months.

Our November meeting was at a different venue, the National Waterfront Museum. We applied for a stall at the Green Fair, which was to be held on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November and were successful.



We included a rolling PowerPoint display about UCS for people to watch, free packets of seeds, wine corks, peanuts to feed birds and plastic



flowerpots for people to take with them. Adella and I received help from Delyth (A Rocha officer for Wales) and Tamsin from the St Madoc Centre as well as Chris L.

Janet N

*(All photos taken by JN)*

## WALKING GROUP

Our next walk will be on Friday, 8th December. Meet at the West Cross Inn at 2pm to walk to Verdi's. Anyone who doesn't usually walk with us is welcome to meet us there about 2.30-2.45 for a chat and a cuppa. The walkers will then return to West Cross.

Janet N

*(So there's the chance of lunch **and** ice cream! Ed.)*

**WE PRAY...** as Christmas approaches, we think of those who dread it as they don't have the wherewithal to buy the presents they would like to buy for the children, family and friends – and those who will feel lonely at this time. We pray for those who will not receive many or any presents. We pray for individuals and groups of people who are preparing to make Christmas bags for women, men and families and toy sacks for children who are asylum seekers and refugees. We give thanks for all those in UCS who are committed to doing this and we thank God for the generosity of those who give money and gifts to fill these bags. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Janet N



## OUR 2023 CHRISTMAS BAG PROJECT

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Meeting the deadline for publicising the final numbers of the above project is difficult now in the middle of November but I can assure everyone that we will meet the targets we have set ourselves.



Thanks to everyone who has already filled, or has promised to fill, a bag. We will hopefully have 90 bags for adults and 70 bags or stockings for children, ready for a blessing in church on December 10<sup>th</sup>. Many of these bags will be filled with items purchased with your money donations, for which I am very grateful. The photo shows a small sample of the confectionery items ready for filling bags and stockings in the very near future.

Many thanks to everyone for your contributions, sewing, buying items, donating money and filling bags. This project would not be possible without

your generosity.

**Linda J**

*[Linda and her team of helpers have been working very hard on this project again this year. And it's not finished yet. Many thanks, everyone! Ed]*

### COFFEE MORNINGS

- **Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> December**, 10am-12noon Coffee Morning - Alzheimer's and the Old Mill Cancer Support charity (*see below*)
- **Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> December**, Eco coffee and chat

## GREEN FAIR 2023



A steady trickle of people visited the Green Fair on Saturday morning.



Many people passed our stall and glanced at it, but then walked on. One lady who stopped was surprised that we were giving away wildflower seeds, peanuts, flowerpots and corks – at no charge!

Suddenly there was a mad onslaught, with people rifling our seeds, peanuts and corks.

I met people who know people whom I know – you know what it's

like in Swansea!

Then my laptop decided to update itself in the middle of the rolling PowerPoint! GGGRK! The problem was eventually resolved, thank goodness.

About two minutes later, who should appear but Les W, but he was too late! Where are these tech experts when you need them?! Some interesting conversations were had, especially with those who were on the Eco Church trail.

Moving into the afternoon and people were still taking seeds and peanuts and entering into





conversations about green issues. Some people also played our Green Bingo to find out how green they were.



The more we heard from other churches, it seemed that a sensible way forward would be for people from the churches in Swansea who are part of the Eco Church initiative to meet up to share the highs and lows of their journey with Eco Church. Watch this space!

Our stall has been supported by Sonia B, Jackie C, Chris L, Janet N & Adella P

*[Thanks to Adella and Janet and to everyone who worked hard to set up and look after the stall. It sounds as if it was a great success. Ed.]*



**The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it;  
for God founded it on the seas  
and established it on the waters.**

**[Psalm 24]**

## THE OLD MILL FOUNDATION: PUTTING THE 'CAN' INTO CANCER



Old Mill Foundation  
HOLISTIC CANCER SUPPORT CENTRE

The aim of the Old Mill in Penclawdd is to provide physical and emotional support for people living with

cancer. Caring for a loved one can be a difficult and stressful time and it is comforting to the person with the diagnosis to know that their partner / carer can also receive the same support.

Sarah set up the foundation 20 years ago following the loss of her husband to cancer. Realising there was a need for support in the community, she decided to open her home and salon, providing treatments and support free of charge. Initially Sarah was helped by 2 volunteers and after expanding to 4 centres across South and West Wales there are now over 50 volunteers.

The volunteer therapists have a multitude of skills and a high level of training in Cancer Care linked to the Bristol Cancer Centre founded in 1979 by Penny Brohn who was living with Cancer.

Penny realised she needed more than medical treatment to support her health and well-being. Using a Holistic approach to living with Cancer, each individual attending the centre, with their own personal needs, is offered a variety of complimentary therapies, diet and nutrition advice.

Mike and I have been very fortunate to attend and receive excellent support from the volunteers at the centre during the year. Everyone has been most welcoming to us. More importantly, the friendly, relaxed and happy environment has taken us away from the stressful acute hospital settings which we have regularly frequented over the past 4 years and continue so to do. We have received excellent care from the Medical and Nursing staff at both hospitals but each impending visit has caused us a degree of anxiety.

We have most certainly benefitted greatly from friendship, support and the relaxing sessions of Reflexology, Indian head Massage, Head / neck / shoulder massage, and have 'tweaked' our nutrition and diet accordingly. The Old Mill is a perfect complement to the excellent support we receive from Maggie's at Singleton. Although we're unsure what the future has in store, we now have a more positive outlook on life. We Can Live with Cancer! In order to provide this excellent service, The Old Mill Foundation relies on the generosity of donations, whether large or small, from attendees at the centre and fund-raising events.

**Anne and Mike W**

G.F. Handel's

# MESSIAH

**Conductor/Arweinydd**  
**Jeffrey Howard**



**Soloists/Unawdwydd**

**Ros Evans**

**Joanne Thomas**

**Gareth Dafydd**

**Morris**

**Owen Webb**



**The Chamber  
Orchestra  
of Wales Chorale**



**Chamber Orchestra  
of Wales**



**Brangwyn Hall, Swansea**

**Sun/Sul, Dec/Rhag 10, 2023 at 5pm**

**Price £20 - accompanied children FREE**

**[www.brangwyn.co.uk](http://www.brangwyn.co.uk) - 01792 475715**

## CHRISTIAN AID CHRISTMAS APPEAL 2023

***Every woman deserves the chance to break out of poverty...***

And in Bangladesh, young women have become a guiding light in their community – leading the way out.



Kurigram, in Northern Bangladesh, is one of the country's poorest and most disaster-prone regions. Life, here, is challenging. And for women, opportunities are

even more limited.

Looking back, 21-year-old Kakoli Khatun (centre, above), who lives in Kurigram, remembers, 'I didn't have any dreams a few years ago... To do something, I had to ask for money from my brothers and father.'

But now, Kakoli splits her time between running a successful business, and studying for a college degree.

Kakoli has found community in an extraordinary group of gifted women – artisans and entrepreneurs – who've set up a business to sell their beautiful craftwork online. These women have become a powerful force for change in their communities.



Your gift could enable someone like Kakoli to shape their future....

**This Christmas, will you help young women shine?**

**ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS IN JERUSALEM: A statement from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem (at a time of war between Israel and Hamas):** *'Each year during the sacred seasons of Advent and Christmastide,*



*our Christian communities throughout the Holy Land take great delight in their preparations for the commemoration of the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ... But these are not normal times. Since the start of the War, there has been an atmosphere of sadness and pain. Thousands of innocent civilians, including women and children, have died or suffered serious injuries. Many more grieve over the loss of their homes, their loved ones, or the uncertain fate of those dear to them. Throughout the region, even more have lost their work and are suffering from serious economic challenges. Yet despite our repeated calls for a humanitarian ceasefire and a de-escalation of violence, the war continues. Therefore, we call upon our congregations to stand strong with those facing such afflictions, by this year foregoing any unnecessarily festive activities. We likewise encourage our priests and the faithful to focus more on... holding in our thoughts our brothers and sisters affected by this war and its consequences, and with fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land.*

*In these ways, we believe, we will be standing in support of those continuing to suffer so that all of God's children might receive the hope of a New Jerusalem in the presence of the Almighty, where "death shall be no more, neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21.4).'*

How far removed from present Bethlehem do the lyrics of the famous carol 'O little town of Bethlehem' now seem, as a wall imprisons the Palestinian people, watchtowers with armed Israeli soldiers intimidate and belittle passers-by, gunship helicopters loom overhead, the movement of their blades echoing through the valley, and frequent clashes bring bloodshed, tears and cries of pain to the streets. The picture we paint in our minds of Bethlehem at Christmas is far removed from the Bethlehem of the twenty-first century. The holy sites of Bethlehem and the surrounding areas encourage deep spiritual encounter, but this is pointless without engagement in the current crisis in the region. (from *URC Daily Devotions*, written by Jacob Holme, an Anglican Youth Minister in London, and member of the WCC Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Palestine-Israel. Used with permission.)

**PRAYERS FOR ISRAEL-PALESTINE (from the Methodist Church website)**  
**(A prayer based on Isaiah 65:17-25)**

How can we call a land “Holy” when a festival site becomes a killing ground and a hospital becomes a grave? Christ, have mercy upon the land of your birth and all who know it as home. May the prophecy of Isaiah find fruition in this time and place:

No more shall infants live but a few days  
or the lives of older people be cut short.  
No more shall weeping and distress echo across the plains.  
No more shall children be borne for calamity.  
Let houses be built and lived in.  
Let vineyards be planted and enjoyed.  
Let enemies come and eat together  
and the days of hurt and destruction be over.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**(A prayer from the Methodist Peace Fellowship)**

Oh Jerusalem, how we long for all peoples to be gathered up under the wings of peace, and yet your heart is shattered and your sides pierced by swords of grief.

Beloved city, may mercy and justice walk in your streets and markets.  
Show us how to look into each other's eyes with love and equity so that all humanity might die to violence and live to trust our neighbours once again. Amen.

**(A prayer from the President and Vice-President of Conference)**

God of peace and compassion, we pray for all impacted by the escalation in conflict in Israel-Palestine:

For all who are mourning,  
For all who are fearful for today, and for what may lie ahead,  
For all traumatised and re-traumatised by what they have experienced.  
Enable us to stand in solidarity with people of peace.  
May your Spirit bring peace and healing to your troubled world.  
Amen.

**(Compiled by the Revd Andrew Pearce)**

**PREPARING FOR THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS: As we approach Advent, the following readings and prayers may help us to reflect on what Advent may mean for us and for our world today:**

## **ADVENT 1**

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‘Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would tremble before you!  
As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil,  
come down to make your name known to your enemies  
and cause the nations to quake before you!’ (*Isaiah 64: 1-2 NIV*)

**A Prayer:** Advent God, at times, we look at the world and we think, ‘Human beings can’t make this right! We need some kind of superhuman intervention.’ So we are tempted to pray with the ancient prophets, ‘Oh, that you would come down, that the mountains tremble before you... and the nations quake!’ But then we realize that this isn’t really your way, Lord. For you have come down already! In Jesus, you are already among us. But not with trembling and quaking but in quiet ways. If only we knew, and took notice of, ‘the things that belong to peace’, in and through Jesus. Wake us up, Advent God, to what we already have within our reach, in Jesus. And set our hearts ablaze with your love and peace. Amen.

## **ADVENT 2**

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‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God... Behold, the Sovereign Lord tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young’ (*Isaiah 40: 1 & 11 NIV*)

**A Prayer:** Comforting God, on this Human Rights Day, we recognize that millions of our sisters and brothers around the world do not know any comfort. They live day after day with the horror and violence and terror of war and oppression, not far away but on their doorstep, around them and above them. Millions of our brothers and sisters do not know respect, fairness and equality. How can they live like this? Advent God, who created us all equal in your image and likeness, awaken us to be advocates for the human rights of all and challenge and warn us not to



turn our backs on those declarations and conventions that seek to protect our sisters and brothers, in the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who gathers and tends with embracing love and gentle leading. Amen.

### ADVENT 3

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‘Mary was greatly troubled at the angel’s words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.’ (*Luke 1: 29-33 & 38 NIV*)

**A Prayer:** Sometimes, Lord, we too, like Mary, are troubled and fearful. We think of ourselves and wonder: what have we ever achieved, how can we have been chosen for the work of your kingdom, the kingdom that will never end? Release us, Advent God, from the paralysis of our guilt and inadequacy and fill us with humble confidence in your Spirit, unbelievably at work still, in and through us: ‘May your Word to me be fulfilled.’ Amen.

### ADVENT 4

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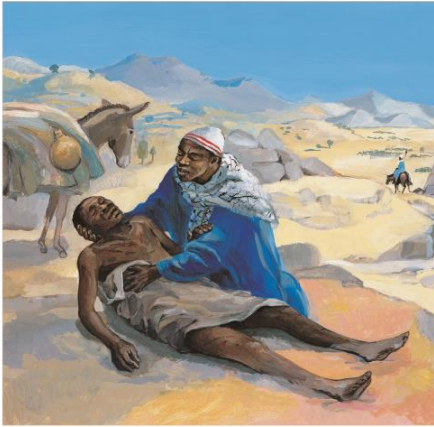
‘The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.’ (*Isaiah 9: 2 NIV*)

**A Prayer:** God of light in our darkness, we confess that we can’t always see the light. At times, in this despairing and hopeless and tragic world, the darkness seems to us to overwhelm the light. And yet, Advent God, we believe that you still speak into our dark world – as you did in the beginning – ‘Let there be light!’ So we need our eyes opened again to see your light shining in the darkness and to believe that, despite all appearances, the darkness cannot put it out or overcome it. Let your light in Jesus, the Light of the world, shine forth – in us and through us – to penetrate a dark world and transform it with its radiance. Amen.

**Noel D**

## WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY, 18<sup>th</sup> TO 25<sup>th</sup> JANUARY

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The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the best-known passages of Scripture, yet one that never seems to lose its power to challenge indifference to suffering and to inspire solidarity. It is a story about crossing boundaries that calls our attention to the bonds that unite the whole human family. In choosing this passage of Scripture for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the churches of Burkina Faso (in West Africa) have invited us to join with

them in a process of self-reflection as they consider what it means to love our neighbour in the midst of a security crisis. Communities in the British-Irish context may be less vulnerable to acts of mass violence than in Burkina Faso, but there are still many living with the memory and/or the threat of serious violence, centred on issues of identity and belonging. There are also groups within communities, including people from ethnic minority backgrounds and people seeking asylum, who feel particularly vulnerable to violence or being displaced by the threat of violence. Our neighbours in Burkina Faso call us to reconnect to God's dream for us – a dream of a unity formed of ties of love and compassion. This challenges us not only to reflect on the learning from our ecumenical journey so far, but to widen our vision. What can we learn from people of other faiths, from those whose backgrounds are most different from our own, and what do we need from each other?

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Church is being challenged to stop and tend to the wounded and, in so doing, to recognise our own wounds as churches and as communities. Facing the reality of our own brokenness helps to connect us to the suffering of others from a place of humility and deep empathy, creating a sacred space of encounter inspired by Christ's healing love.

**Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary, Churches Together in Britain & Ireland**