



Opening Reflection by the Revd Geoffrey Clarke



Moderator of the East Midlands Synod

Merry Christmas?

In common with other much-used phrases it is possible that when we wish others a “Merry Christmas” we can overlook how those words can sound to those for whom “being merry” feels an experience out of reach for them. Ralph Blane and Hugh Martin’s classic seasonal song makes it all sound much simpler than it can feel in reality:

Have yourself a merry little Christmas

Let your heart be light

From now on

Your troubles will be out of sight

Light hearts, troubles out of sight or miles away... faithful friends near to us... Such – and more – are the features of the fantasy land that the “magic” of Christmas enables us to be transported to. Whilst I concede that Christmas gives us licence for a reprieve from the knocks and blows of real life, the chance to convey to others our appreciation of them and to be given permission for a much-needed break from routine, we cannot be blind to the fact that our merriment can accentuate the anguish and suffering of those who feel they cannot muster a sense of joy or celebration. **Thom M Shuman**, in the liturgy he has written for our [livestreamed evening prayers](#) for Tuesdays in Advent, touches on this:

***... those for whom this season is not one of joy;
those whose lives are empty of family and friends.***



For such as these the prospect of having a “Merry Christmas” is but a distant dream beyond the current nightmares they endure.

Mary Christmas ...?

I’m drawn, instead, to rediscover something of a “Mary Christmas”. “Mary Christmas” and “Merry Christmas” may sound very similar phonetically but the former is found not so much in the tinsel and glitter of light-hearts and troubles far away but is made real in the stress and strain, the grit and grime. A “Mary Christmas” is a daily diet of faith rather than an annual binge on fantasy. It is a faith and lifestyle which embrace a willingness to say “yes” to God even when doing so is accompanied by discomfort and scorn, together with the risk of losing face and favour with others.

A “Mary Christmas” may feature its heartwarming moments of pondering treasured words and the glow of new life (cp. Luke 2:19) but is also open to the reality of soul-piercing grief (cp. Luke 2:35). A “Mary Christmas” invites us, with her, to be God-bearers – the company of those whose words and ways enable others to catch a glimpse of God in our midst. A “Mary Christmas” invites us, with her, to labour for the coming of God’s kingdom in a world where there is no place in the inn (cp. Luke 2:7).

In his book, *The Humble Church*, **Martyn Percy**, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford writes:

Social distance between God and humanity is abolished in the incarnation. God is with us. ... Our calling as Christ’s followers is not to be fretful and fearful, but rather to become an extension of God’s courageous, endlessly expended love for the world. ... Our calling is to express the continual love and risk revealed in the incarnation; to become like Jesus, who is the body language of God.

(pp. 39-40, *The Humble Church: the Body of Christ*, Martyn Percy.
© Martyn Percy 2021. Canterbury Press. ISBN 978-1-78622-315-9)

So, I dare to wish you a “**Mary Christmas**” – confident that a peace and joy beyond price are found in the One she bore at Bethlehem.

I commend Thom M Shuman’s prayer:

*See, You come, Clarifier of our hearts,
playing salvation’s love song
on a baritone sax;
preparing the way for grace
to transform our souls;
holding us in Your heart
when we lose our way.*

*See, You come, Tender Mercy,
filling in poverty’s potholes
with grace’s riches;
tearing down cruelty-capped
oppression;
straightening out the winding paths
we make the needy walk;
soothing the lonely nights
of rough sleepers.*

*See, You come, Eyes of grace,
so in seeing the suffering around us,
we might share mercy;
in observing the struggles of others,
we might give offerings of justice;
in noticing the silence of leaders,
we would cry out for hope.*

*See, You come, God in Community, Holy in One,
so we might be Your people of grace and justice. Amen.*

(© Thom M Shuman)

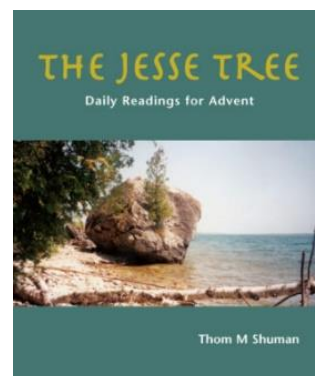
With my prayers for the churches and communities of East Midlands Synod,



Advent Prayers – Live at 9.30pm Every Night



Our Moderator **Geoffrey** and the Evening Prayers team continue to explore the lineage of Christ every evening during Advent, in a special series of readings and reflections taken from [The Jesse Tree](#) by the **Revd Thom M Shuman**.



Evening Prayers are held at 9.30pm every evening on the East Midlands Synod **Facebook Page** at <https://www.facebook.com/URC-East-Midlands-Synod-102279281444717> and uploaded shortly afterward to our **YouTube** channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzXFUjKn8XOGeZU5SgN95g/videos>

Omicron: Updated Advice from Synod Moderators



Responding to concern about the new Omicron variant of Covid-19 and the government's renewed advice to wear face coverings in enclosed spaces like buses, trains and shops, the United Reformed Church's Synod Moderators published updated advice to churches on Wednesday 1 December, including the following recommendation:

Most of us spend much less time in a single shop than we do in Sunday worship, and the risks of transmission, even with other mitigations properly in effect and the high level of vaccination, are greater in churches than in many other enclosed settings where our members would typically find themselves.

The Synod Moderators agree that as a continuing act of respect and love for neighbour, people using URC buildings in England should also wear face coverings, unless they are medically exempt. ... Please redouble your efforts to see that masks fit well and cover the mouth and nose properly at all times, unless you are taking part in leading worship and are properly physically distanced from others.

The Moderators' statement is available in full at: <https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3984-omicron-synod-moderators-provide-updated-advice-to-churches>

The situation continues to develop rapidly, with the UK Government strengthening its Covid guidelines further yesterday (Thursday 8 December). The Synod Moderators are preparing further guidance which will be circulated as soon as it is available. All updates will continue to be shared on the national URC website www.urc.org.uk and East Midlands Synod website www.urc5.org.uk.

Deepen Your Discipleship in 2022

Explore your faith with Stepwise

Stepwise
Discipleship development
for everyone

An exciting programme of learning and discovery – find out where God might be leading you and how you can make a difference in your church and world

Get ready to join in, share, grow your discipleship – and enjoy!
Deepening faith | Walking the Way | Following Jesus

To find out more, visit urc.org.uk/stepwise
email: stepwise@urc.org.uk

Stepwise
The United Reformed Church

Stepwise is the United Reformed Church's very own discipleship development programme. It is designed for everyone who is keen to reflect on their Christian faith, who is ready to be stimulated and challenged, and wants to make a difference in their own life and the lives of others.

The programme is shaped around individual strengths and needs and emphasises the importance of living out your faith in your daily life. It is designed for people of all ages and backgrounds and aims to strengthen and deepen discipleship and help you grow in faith.

The programme consists of five broad learning streams which include topics and themes for individuals and groups to explore. Every **Stepwise** journey begins with the **Faith-filled Life** stream, after which participants can if they wish, go on to any of the other four streams: **Faith-filled Confidence, Faith-filled Community, Faith-filled Worship** and **Faith-fuelled Leadership**.

[Click here](#) to enjoy a short video about the development of **Stepwise** and the way it has inspired people in their discipleship – and helped to drive communities forward during the pandemic.

This video is also available on the **Stepwise** website page at <https://urc.org.uk/stepwise/> alongside recorded webinars about each of the five **Stepwise** streams and other resources to help you find out more.



The East Midlands Synod will be offering a Synod-wide **Faith-Filled Life** stream, beginning in spring 2022 and meeting online: details will follow. We also encourage and support the setting up of local **Stepwise** groups who prefer to meet in person, where it is safe to do so.

To receive further details or register your interest please contact **Derek Graham**, Training and Development Officer on training@urc5.org.uk. Two groups in the Synod have already completed Faith-Filled Life: could yours be next?

Faith and Science in the Local Church

Friday 7 - Saturday 8 January 2022



The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion will be holding a **workshop** for church leaders on **Faith and Science in the Local Church** from **Friday 7 - Saturday 8 January 2022**.

What is science, and how should churches be engaging with it? How do scientists who are Christians reconcile their faith and their research? How do we think theologically about matters of mental health? How do evolution and the Bible fit together? What does it mean to be human in an era of intelligent machines? How do we make good bioethical choices? What does it mean to steward creation under God?

Join to discover more. This interactive workshop is designed for Christian leaders – whether ordained, lay, or active and experienced members of a local church. Participants will be equipped to engage with scientific issues in the day-to-day life of their ministry context.

Bookings are still available. Visit: [Faith and Science in the Local Church 2022 | Faraday \(cam.ac.uk\)](#)

Bursaries for UK national or regional leaders within Christian denominations, or equivalent networks of churches are available, including 50% off the cost of travel and accommodation. For details or to apply, contact, Church Engagement Director, **Ruth Bancewicz** at ruthb@faraday.cam.ac.uk.

In addition, in the new year, fortnightly **research seminars** will continue:

- **Tuesday 25 January** **Dr Sharon Dirx** [Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics]
‘Neuroscience & Free Will: Are we just driven by our brains?’
- **Tuesday 8 February** **Prof. Steve Furber** [Manchester University]
‘Brains, Minds and AI - Implications for Faith and Ethics’
- **Tuesday 22 February** **Prof. Neil Messer** [University of Winchester]
‘Cognitive Science and Religious Faith’
- **Tuesday 8 March** **Revd Dr Joanna Collicutt** [Oxford University]
‘Psychosis and Religious Experience’

Seminars are held at 1.00pm, online and in person. The seminars are free, and all are welcome. For more information, visit: [Seminars | Faraday \(cam.ac.uk\)](#) .

Free Churches Choir Festival

Postponed from October 2021 owing to the Covid pandemic, the **Free Church Choirs** biennial festival of church music will now take place in Lichfield Cathedral on **Saturday 21 May 2022**.

The programme features anthems from Mozart, Parry, Townend and numerous others, and singers are warmly invited to take part either as individuals or as part of a choir. For further information visit:

www.freechurchchoirs.org.uk



**Recruiting choirs and
individual singers**

**Will you be one of
the singers at the
Free Church Choirs
Festival of Church Music?**

**Lichfield Cathedral
Saturday 21st May 2022**

**Festival Conductor - Peter J Williams
Organist - Rufus Frowde**

**Anthem Books available
from December 2021
from Adrian Prisk, 15 Parklands,
Great Linford, MK14 5DZ**

Tel: 01908 605815; Email aprisk@doctors.org.uk

**Further details on the website
www.freechurchchoirs.org.uk**

Free to Believe National Conference

Keeping Hope Alive

Thursday 14 – Saturday 16 July 2022



Free to Believe, an ecumenical network of Christians striving for an open, inclusive and thinking Church, holds its next National Conference at **High Leigh Conference Centre**, Hoddesdon, from **Thursday 14 to Saturday 16 July 2022**.

Speakers include:

- **Fiona Bennett:** “Respair” - the return of Hope after despair.
- **Karen Campbell:** URC Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministry.
- **Alex Clare-Young:** Beyond Binaries: Hoping for peace in a world of conflict.
- **Helen Garton:** Are we where it's at? Why being Radical is not being Radical at all.
- **Iain McDonald:** Hope frustrated and fulfilled - a personal journey.

FTB Chair the **Revd Dr Martin Camroux** describes the conference as offering hopeful voices at a time we need to hear them. Booking is now open and there are still plenty of places, priced £185 per person.

Booking forms are available on the FTB website: [Conferences \(freetobelieve.org.uk\)](https://conferences.freetobelieve.org.uk)

Personal News

It is with great sadness that we bring news of the death of the following retired ministers. We give thanks to God for all that was achieved through their lives and ministries.

Here in the East Midlands Synod we are saddened to announce the death of the **Revd Vernon Broomfield-Payne**, who died on Thursday 18 November after a period of illness. His ministries were in: the Kettering Group (1995-2000); Christ Church, Haydock (2001-10); and Haresfinch (2002-10). A celebration of life service for Vernon was held on Friday 3 December at Nene Valley Crematorium, Wellingborough. Please hold Vernon's wife Kate and all his family in your prayers.

The South Western Synod informs us of the death of the **Revd John McMinn**, who died on Monday 6 December, 25 years after retiring to Yetminster. John served: with the Congregational Union of Scotland (1953-61); at Brockworth & Warden Hill (1961-63); Prestbury & Rodborough (1972-83); in the East Somerset Group (1983-96) and at Winsham (2009-14). Please hold his wife in your prayers.

Book now for Youth Assembly 2022



Bookings are now open for **URC Youth Assembly 2022**, taking place at Whitemoor Lakes, Alrewas, Staffordshire, from **Friday 28 – Sunday 30 January 2022**.

Next year marks the Jubilee celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the URC, so the Assembly will explore the theme of jubilee through three perspectives: commemorating the past; celebrating the now; creating the future. The programme includes discussions, worship, keynote talks, workshops and a silent disco.

Tickets cost £145 and bookings close on 1 January 2022.

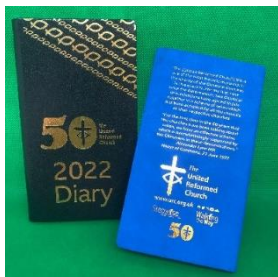
Note: a Synod grant of £100 is available to help young people attend – so it could cost you as little as £45! (For details, please email cydo@urcwestmidlands.org.uk .) **To book your place, visit:** bit.ly/URCYA2022bkgs

The Assembly is open to all young people with a connection to the URC from Year 10 or S3 up to 26-year-olds. (The age limit has been extended for 2022 due to the cancellation of the 2021 Assembly.) A creche will be available for children aged 0-5 years old.

The URC Youth Leaders' Gathering

The URC **Youth Leaders' Gathering**, for all who work with young people aged 11-25 that are in any way connected to the URC, will also be taking place over the Youth Assembly weekend as a separate event. Places cost £115 and can be booked at: bit.ly/URCyouthlg21

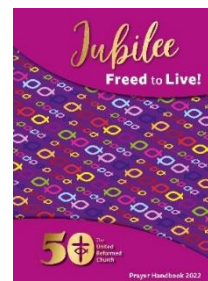
Get ready for 2022 - from the URC Shop



2022 URC 50th Anniversary Pocket Diary (£6.99)



URC Buildings Calendar 2022 (£2.99)



The 2022 URC Prayer Handbook – Jubilee: Freed to Live! (£5.49/£10.99)

All these, together with a wide range of books, stationery, branded merchandise and gifts are available to order at: <https://urcshop.co.uk/>

Urgent Appeal from the Winter Night Shelter MK

Our friends at [Winter Night Shelter MK](#) write:

“There is an urgent need for more volunteers to come forward in order for us to be able to open the night shelter next month (click [here](#)). For the first time ever we are in a situation where we have a waiting list that exceeds every available bed space, due to rising levels of need, and not enough volunteers in place to be able to open our doors yet.

If you are in a position to give a few hours on a regular basis this winter to join one of our friendly and committed teams, this is the time to sign up. We have daily volunteer opportunities available in our evening reception café (at Unity Park Station in central Milton Keynes), in the overnight venues (in Wolverton, Bletchley, Coffee Hall and Newport Pagnell) and in the morning welcome service (at Unity Park Station). Roles include setting up and making beds, meet and greeting, drinks preparation, cooking and kitchen help, food service, night duty, cleaning, packing down, laundry and more.

You can sign up via the forms available on the volunteer page of our website: <https://www.winternightsheltermk.org/volunteer/>

We understand that many people are rightly cautious about Covid. Through 2020 and 2021 we have been able to continue face-to-face work with guests by ensuring we closely manage our Covid 19 transmission risks. Over the last year we have worked closely with the local public health team and we have put in place a number of measures that are much more rigorous than the general guidance in place across the UK (see the information on our website for more details). We believe these measures will be important to ensure we can continue to be there for all of our guests this season, who need emergency accommodation during the coldest months of the year.

If you are not in a position to volunteer with us we would ask that you consider making a donation to support our work to provide a safe haven for the homeless during the coldest months of the year. We are a charity relying on kind donations and fundraising from individuals and organisations in our community. Thank you.”



Find Us Online



The [East Midlands Synod website](#) is the one-stop shop for all essential information: <https://www.urc5.org.uk/>



Our [East Midlands Synod Facebook Page](#) continues to host the **Evening Prayers** led by our Moderator the **Revd Geoffrey Clarke** and others – **including our Advent series**. If you are a Facebook user, please consider **Liking** and **Sharing** this Page and its posts: <https://www.facebook.com/URC-East-Midlands-Synod-102279281444717/>

Similarly the [Synod Youth and Children's Facebook Page](#) shares news and ideas related to our work with young people: <https://www.facebook.com/URCEastmidlandsYouth/>



On our dedicated [YouTube channel](#), the Synod shares special events, training videos, worship resources and more. **Evening Prayers** are also uploaded here. Please subscribe: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzXFUurjKn8XOGeZU5SgN95g>

Contacting East Midlands Synod and Office Closure

Following the latest government guidance to resume working from home where possible, the **Synod Office** will again be closed from **Monday 13 December** until further notice. However, staff members continue to be available as usual: in the first instance please contact them by email, as this will receive a direct response from the staff member with whom you wish to correspond. Mail will be checked periodically and the Synod telephone line (**0115 960 9241**) will continue to be answered Monday-Thursday, 9.00am-3.00pm.

Any further update to these arrangements will be posted on our website: www.urch5.org.uk

Please note that the scheduled closure of the Synod Office for the Christmas and New Year period runs from **Tuesday 21 December to Monday 3 January** inclusive and staff will be on leave during that time.



On behalf of the whole East Midlands Synod team, we wish you a Christmas and New Year filled with peace and joy.



This E-letter is produced on behalf of:
The URC East Midlands Synod, 1 Edwards Lane, Sherwood, Nottingham, NG5 3AA.
Telephone: 0115 960 9241

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Next edition: Thursday 6 January 2022

Please send all material for this E-Letter to both: trainingpa@urch5.org.uk and training@urch5.org.uk
Copy deadline for next edition: 12 noon on **Monday 3 January 2022**