

### Opening Reflection by the Revd Camilla Veitch

Synod Clerk



It's funny how to many people Christmas seems to end after Boxing Day. All the carols and Christmas songs that have been played incessantly on the radio until Christmas Day seem to come to an abrupt end on 27 December. Yet in the church the season of Christmas has only started at that point! The celebration of Jesus' birth which we have anticipated so long carries on in the church's liturgical year at least until Epiphany, if not more.

I always find that life feels very empty when the external signs of Christmas are gone. When the lights are taken down, the decorations are packed away and the carols have ceased playing life seems bare and bleak. Added to that we have several months of cold and dark ahead us. This particular January the coming months feel more challenging than usual at the beginning of a new year.

The good news, though, is that the light and hope of Christmas remains with us. I like to keep the Christmas lights up in our garden for as long as possible, but even when those have been taken down the light of Christmas still shines. John, the evangelist, writes eloquently about this in the opening chapter of his gospel: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

The truth and heart of Christmas is this: God has come to be with us – not just for Christmas, but for eternity. God takes flesh and dwells among us and with us every day of the year and each day of our lives. It

may not be as easy for us to see this in the bleak mid-winter of January as it is on Christmas Day, but this is the heart of the good news: God is with us. Always.

As we take our first tentative steps into this new year, with our hopes and fears for what it may bring, let us cling on to this truth: God is with us. We are not alone. In Jesus God comes close, giving us hope and strength, shining his light into our fear and darkness, and giving us light to pass on to others. Thanks be to God.

## Closing church buildings for public worship: new guidance

*In the light of the rapid spread of the new variant of the Covid-19 virus, and the renewed lockdown, the URC's Synod Moderators have this week issued updated advice to churches, as follows:*



Since our last guidance was issued (October 2020) it is clear that the new variant of the virus has caused a rapid and alarming increase in Coronavirus infections. In light of this, **the Synod Moderators strongly recommend that churches should cease to meet for in-person worship** and move exclusively to on-line or paper-based worship material. You are reminded that the URC, through the Daily Devotions team, continue to produce Sunday services which can be listened to online and followed on paper, in addition to any local worship provision. Whilst it is vital (literally, life-giving) to maintain our habits of worship, this cannot depend on meeting in a church building.

The Synod Moderators remind the United Reformed Church of our previous advice: **because something is allowed does not necessarily make it wise; it is better to do the right thing**. In 'The Message,' Micah 6:8 is rendered in this way:

“But he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do,  
what God is looking for in men and women.  
It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour,  
be compassionate and loyal in your love”.

No church wishes its building to be the site of a spreading event, which puts lives at risk.

Consequently, **our advice is now that even when permitted in law during a time of National Lockdown and at the appropriate level 4 of restrictions, our churches should close for public worship.**

Weddings/Civil Partnerships and Funerals may continue, subject to legislative restrictions.

This recommendation also permits the minimum number reasonably possible to meet in the church building to allow recording/broadcasting by internet or telephone an act of worship, provided that they continue to follow the regulations to maintain a Covid-secure building and as long as it doesn't conflict with any legal restrictions against this when the law takes precedence over our advice.

If, despite this advice, an Elders' Meeting (or equivalent) decides that they should continue to offer in-person worship within the relevant legislation, they must review their Risk Assessment and rigorously apply it in order to maximise the protection afforded to those who will attend. A failure to do this may result in a breach of Health & Safety law. The Elders will need to record their decision and the reasons that lead them to that decision. They may well find that Ministers, Lay Preachers and others are not willing to lead worship in-person while the risk of infection is high, and the Elders must be ready to make alternative arrangements. The refusal to lead in-person worship because of the risk to a Minister and others would not be considered a disciplinary issue by any Synod Moderator.

We also want to remind you that **the work of the church will not cease even if we are not meeting for in-person worship.** We encourage all churches to think about how to care for their community, and support people who may be dealing with mental health issues or facing domestic abuse, whilst minimising the risk of spreading Coronavirus. This period is also a missional opportunity.

We rejoice at the speed of development and deployment of the Covid vaccines. We pray that our current situation will be temporary although we cannot know for how much longer we will have to be very cautious. We believe that we will end 2021 in a much stronger place than we enter into this new year. Until that point, we urge churches to continue to show love to one another and treat others gently.

***The Synod Moderators***

## Synod Safeguarding Officer



We are delighted to announce the appointment of **Donna Gordon** as our new **Synod Safeguarding Officer.**

Donna brings to this part-time role her experience as serving SSO in the West Midlands Synod. Her starting date in the East Midlands Synod is next **Monday, 11 January**, and she can be reached from that date by emailing [safeguarding@urc5.org.uk](mailto:safeguarding@urc5.org.uk).

# Stepwise – could you become a group Facilitator?

## Facilitator Taster Afternoon

Thursday 14 January

1.30 – 4.00pm on Zoom

Would you like to form a **Stepwise** group in your locality? Might you, or someone you know, become the Facilitator, in order for that group to be formed? If so, please take note of this opportunity next Thursday.

[Stepwise](#) is the URC's innovative **discipleship development** programme, offering opportunities for people of all ages, shapes and sizes to explore and develop their Christian faith together. [Click here](#) to view some of those who have already taken part, including in the East Midlands Synod, reflect on their journey so far:



Even in lockdown, it is possible to embark on your Stepwise journey – indeed, it may be an excellent way to make constructive use of additional time at home. Two groups in our Synod have already completed **Faith-Filled Life**, the introductory Stepwise stream, using Zoom.

Now, to meet the appetite for further groups around the Synod, we need more people who are ready to **facilitate** a Stepwise group. Facilitators are not tutors in the traditional sense, but people who are willing to share their experience and skills in enabling and encouraging the group. They effectively ‘host’ the group meetings, creating an environment where participants can explore the themes of each session together.

If you'd like to know more about being a Facilitator, without having to make any firm commitment in advance, please join the **Facilitator Taster Afternoon** to be hosted by East Midlands Synod next Thursday, **14 January** from 1.30 – 4.00pm on Zoom – the first time the national Stepwise team has created such an opportunity on a virtual basis.

Designed to inform, equip and enthuse potential Facilitators, the afternoon will include:

- Opening worship
- An introduction to Stepwise
- Some group work, exploring and experiencing facilitation
- A Stepwise facilitated group taster session
- An opportunity to ask questions and offer feedback to the Stepwise team.

Please consider whether this is a role you might fulfil for a Stepwise group in your area – or even over a wider area through the use of technology. To register for a place, please email **Derek Graham**, Training & Development Officer in the first instance on: [training@urc5.org.uk](mailto:training@urc5.org.uk).

## Lay Preachers' & Worship Leaders' meeting

**Wednesday 13 January 2021, 7.30-9.00pm**

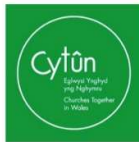
**All worship leaders and lay preachers** in the East Midlands Synod are invited to an inaugural Zoom meeting next Wednesday evening, led by our Lay Preaching Commissioner **Mark Hodgson**.

We hope it will enable us to get to know one another better and explore ways of supporting one another. Projected topics include: coping with Covid, national initiatives, lay presidency, recognition/accreditation, specific training needs; and whether it would be fruitful to hold further networking meetings.

To register, please email **Derek Graham**, Training & Development Officer, on [training@urc5.org.uk](mailto:training@urc5.org.uk).

## Webinar for Elders and trustees from the Charity Commission

**The Charity Commission**, in partnership with Churches Together in England and Cytûn, offers a free one-hour seminar which promises a helpful briefing for Elders, trustees and managers:



Churches Together in England  
Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales  
Cytûn: Eglwysi Ynghyd yng Nghymru  
in partnership with  
Charity Commission for England and Wales



### WEBINAR GOOD GOVERNANCE IN CHURCHES: EXPECTATIONS OF THE CHARITY COMMISSION

This webinar, delivered by the Charity Commission's Faith Outreach team, provides an **overview** of the Commission's expectations as regulator, including:

- Trustee duties & risk management
- Financial management and reporting in a faith charity context
- Sending money internationally
- Safeguarding in places of worship

The webinar is suitable for trustees and managers of church charities, particularly those with limited experience of their role and charity law.

The same webinar will be run twice at the following times:

- Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2021  
09.30 – 10.30am
- Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021  
11am – 12pm

To book your place:

**You must register to attend by clicking on the link below:**

<https://bookwhen.com/cte-cytun>

Or by using this QR code:

Please click on the event on the date you wish to attend. You will receive confirmation of your booking via e-mail.



## Enquirers' Event: Saturday 27 February

Please share news of this online event with anyone in your church who may be interested in exploring worship leading, lay preaching, working with young people, or any other form of ministry:



# What is God asking of YOU?



Ministry Enquirers' Event to help you think about God's call to Worship Leading, Lay Preaching, Ministry with children and young people, the Ministry of Word and Sacraments or Church Related Community Work.

**Enquirers' Event** Saturday 27th February 2021  
10am - 3pm online  
Register with [ministries@urc.org.uk](mailto:ministries@urc.org.uk)  
to receive Zoom details

## Situations Vacant

*The Chaplaincy team for Leicester's hospitals asks us to publicise the following opportunity:*

We are looking for enthusiastic and friendly Chaplains to join our diverse team. We work across the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust (one of the largest trusts in the country), as well as the Leicestershire Partnership Trust (with Mental Health and Community Hospital services).

You will join a multi-faith and belief team (currently normally comprising 15 paid staff and 80 volunteers) which provides pastoral, spiritual and religious care to patients, visitors and staff. We are looking for someone who is eager to work in a multi-faith and belief context.

You will have accreditation/licensing with authority to practice as a world religion or belief (including non-religious beliefs) leader/representative and/or pastoral worker. Please be advised that if you are shortlisted we will check your status with your accrediting/licensing body prior to interview, so you must indicate in your application if you do not wish this to happen.

You will have substantial pastoral experience. Previous experience working in chaplaincy and/or healthcare is essential.

For further details / informal visits contact Mark Burleigh, Head of Chaplaincy & Bereavement Services on [mark.burleigh@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:mark.burleigh@uhl-tr.nhs.uk) or call 0116 258 4243. Informal chats by phone or Zoom are welcome and an exploratory visit may be made by arrangement subject to Covid-19 precautions.

Full details and an application form can also be found at: <https://www.jobs.nhs.uk/xi/vacancy/916330723>  
Applications close on 31 January.

## Annual Church Returns

All Church Secretaries should by now have received our Christmas mailing. This includes the **Annual Church Return** which is due to be returned to the Synod Office by 31 January 2021 at the latest.

If you have any queries about completing this, please contact **Chris Willis**, Synod Administrator, at [admin@urc5.org.uk](mailto:admin@urc5.org.uk) or by telephone on 0115 960 9241.

## Find us online



The [East Midlands Synod website](https://www.urb5.org.uk/) remains the one-stop shop for all essential information: <https://www.urb5.org.uk/>



Our [East Midlands Synod Facebook Page](https://www.facebook.com/URC-East-Midlands-Synod-102279281444717/) continues to host the Evening Prayers led by our Moderator the **Revd Geoffrey Clarke** and others during the continuing pandemic. 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/>

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



On our dedicated [YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzXFUjKn8XOGeZU5SgN95g), the Synod shares special events, training videos, worship resources and more. Evening Prayers are also uploaded here. Please subscribe: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzXFUjKn8XOGeZU5SgN95g>

## Contacting East Midlands Synod

Owing to the renewed lockdown mandated by the UK government, the building of the **East Midlands Synod Office** remains closed. All members of staff continue to work from home: please email them in the usual way. Please continue to use the Office address for any postal business, including Annual Returns. Mail is collected weekly. The office number **0115 960 9241** is answered from Monday to Thursday, 9.00am-3.00pm and calls will be forwarded as necessary.

Any update to these arrangements will be posted on our website: [www.urb5.org.uk](http://www.urb5.org.uk)

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This E-letter is produced on behalf of:

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Free-to-use photography sourced on Unsplash:  
Christmas lights on Regent Street by Jamie Davies; "Stop the Spread" poster by Michael Marais

***Next edition: Thursday 21 January 2021***

Please send all material for this E-Letter to both: [modpa@urb5.org.uk](mailto:modpa@urb5.org.uk) and [training@urb5.org.uk](mailto:training@urb5.org.uk)

Copy date for next edition: 12 noon on Tuesday 19 January 2021