

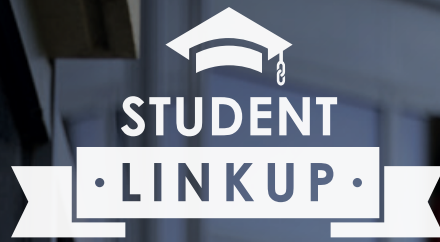


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THE MAGAZINE OF THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE
JULY / AUGUST 2021

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Welcome

The cross

There's a consistent plea in this edition. Now, that should come as no surprise – *idea*, after all, has an overarching theme. But it's not, as one might expect, that we should just muster up the courage to speak out.

In the opening article, Peter Lynas, our UK director, writes that “we need an apologetics shaped by the cross” as he explores how we might be a voice for God in a culture where truth is subjective and the gospel is seen as bad news (p. 2).

Meanwhile, Jo Frost, our director of communications and engagement, points to the cross, “the ultimate disillusioning act”, as she urges us to fearlessly confront the cruel reality of injustice with God's love, truth, justice and hope (p. 8).

And in my interview with Glen Scrivener, the director and evangelist at Speak Life says that, following revelations about the late Ravi



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Zacharias, “here is an opportunity to, once again, learn the way of the cross” (p. 12).

Might our response to the call to speak out, therefore, start with the theology of the cross? Gillian Lee, one of our advocacy researchers, prays: “Lord, give us boldness when we speak out, and let it guide people to your Son, who lived a perfect life and offered us life to the full and hope for all nations. In all we say and do, may all glory be to Christ” (p. 23).

Naomi Osinnowo
Editor



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THE GOSPEL: TRUE AND GOOD BUT REJECTED

How do we speak out in a society where truth is subjective and the good news is bad? asks Peter Lynas, UK director, Evangelical Alliance.

What is the gospel? This is a question that I often ask during teaching sessions. It's fascinating how such a simple question causes listeners to stop and think.

There are generally two elements in people's responses: first, the gospel centres around an event in history and it is good news; second, the gospel is both true and good.

For a long time, apologetics focused on the question of whether the gospel is true: did Jesus live, die and rise again from the dead? Was He the Son of God? As theologian C. S. Lewis put it, was He lunatic, liar or lord?

The question today is less about whether the gospel is true, but rather whether it is good news. Truth is apparently subjective: you have your truth and I have mine. A plural society allows people to believe in different truths. This is not to concede the importance of truth but to note that a different issue seems to have arisen. What if the gospel is not seen as good news?

There is a growing group of voices challenging the goodness of the Christian faith. This shift is significant; it puts evangelicals in the dock. It argues that orthodox theology itself, and not misrepresentations of it, is offensive and harmful.

There are two implications of this shift. The first relates to mission and discipleship; put simply, people are less likely to become Christians, or remain Christians, if the gospel is not seen as good news in our society. The second major implication is around freedom of religion; some are now asking the state to intervene on questions of theology because religious freedom does not extend to harmful practices. What would once have been matters for doctrinal discussion and dispute, are now to be reviewed by various quangos and a range of government departments. All of this has an impact on our calling to speak out.

What is truth?

So, let's first turn back to the question of truth. There is this incredibly dark and yet almost humorous moment when Jesus stands on trial before Pilate. The Roman ruler wants to know if Jesus is the King of the Jews. Jesus wants to know if this is Pilate's own question or if someone put him up to it. You can imagine the disdain in Pilate's voice as he replied, "Am I a Jew?" before asking again what it is that Jesus has done.

Jesus begins to explain about His kingdom and Pilate thinks Jesus has slipped up: "So you are a king then," he challenges. Jesus responds that His kingdom is about truth; everyone on the side of truth listens to His voice. Confused, Pilate asks, "What is truth?"

A world in which people do not know what is truth is not new. Theologian N. T. Wright describes Pilate as the first postmodernist. In a sense this is deeply reassuring: Jesus has faced the very same challenges we do and has shown us the way. The challenge, as missionary Lesslie Newbigin put it, is to "contextualise without compromise".

In his book *Dominion*, historian and agnostic Tom Holland argues that the entire fabric of the cosmos was ruptured when God became human and walked the earth. The crucifixion of Jesus – and the resurrection – was not merely an event in history but "the very pivot around which the cosmos turns". We must continue to proclaim that at a certain point in human history, God, the creator of the world, in whom meaning and truth is found, appeared as a man. Jesus came to love and to serve, to live, die and rise again, to break the powers that oppress, and to reconcile all things to the Father.

This news event is not a private matter. Newbigin notes that Christianity has lost its place

in the public square and has largely been relegated to the private sector. The gospel has become about changing individuals and not about changing systems and structures. This was already to sell the gospel short, but now the very idea of change is being challenged. Now even a privatised faith is unacceptable because those private beliefs could be harmful and so they must be patrolled and where necessary controlled.

Good news?

That takes us to the second key question of whether the gospel is good news – the shift from an intellectual problem to a moral one. The secular world has rejected the transcendent and any external source of authority, leading to a turn inwards. As the world out there grows increasingly fractured, hostile and uncertain, the inner self is where people look for protection and meaning.

In expressive individualism, we discover, create or choose our identity inside of us and then express it out into the world. The key here is that meaning exists inside of us. As author David Foster Wallace comments, “Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe, the realest, most vivid person in existence.” All we have to do is live authentically – personal freedom and self-expression have become the culturally accepted paths to our own salvation.

So, each person lives their own story in a world of micro-narratives. Overarching stories are rejected because they are associated with power. Religion is seen as using story to control the lives of its followers – telling them how to behave. The modern justice movement is focused on de-centring those with privilege and power. Christianity has had both privilege and power and so is seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Any claim to religious freedom is seen as an attempt to hold onto power and therefore as an affront to justice.

In the process, sacrifice is framed as oppressive and inauthentic, the beauty of forgiveness and reconciliation is seen to compound guilt and shame, and the offer of transformation is portrayed as judgmental and condemning.

This should make for an unsettling read. If the gospel is no longer seen as good news, then few will want to speak out, and even fewer will want to listen. Again, this is not a new challenge. The core human temptation, going right back to the Garden of Eden, is to redefine good and evil on your own terms, rather than trust God’s vision and definition of human flourishing.

Heart’s cry

The good news is that there is something in the human heart, even amid the cultural shifts and a disordered fallen condition, that longs for a better story. There are moments, often around death or sickness, when people are open and even seeking the transcendent. As author Julian Barnes puts it, “I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him.”

We have been invited into a story that is more than just true; it is the best story ever told. It is the story that make sense of all other stories humans tell about the world. It tells the story of an event in history and the good news about a person. It tells the story of good conquering evil. It tells the story of a hero who dies for His enemies. It tells the story of a king who gave His only Son so we could become sons and daughters. It tells the story of Jesus who charted the path of true human flourishing, combining authority with compassion, justice with mercy, and freedom with obedience. It tells the story that leads to the home for which every human heart was made.

We need an apologetics shaped by the cross, an apologetics that listens to, and cares for, the other. This is not about trying to win an argument but instead about demonstrating Christ’s love for others and inviting them to ‘come and see’. We must embody the truth and beauty and goodness of the gospel – in loving marriages and faithful singleness, in parenting our children, caring for our elderly parents, and in our conversations about race, sexuality and creation care. Our churches must be a sign and a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth – a living, communal apologetic.


As I heard one young person put it recently, “We are craving truth, but we are also craving true community.” We are that true community. Amazingly, we are each called to be the storyteller and story bearer of this beautiful, true and good story.

Learn more

Catch up on seasons one and two of the Being Human podcast, where Evangelical Alliance directors Peter Lynas and Jo Frost inspire and equip Christians to understand, articulate and participate in the biblical vision of humanity:

eauk.it/being-human-idea





It's vital that we speak up, even if it makes us unpopular, says **Danny Webster**, head of advocacy, Evangelical Alliance.

COUNTING THE COST OF BEING *counter-cultural*

We are to be faithful to what scripture teaches us. That's always the call, in every context, in every community, for everyone who calls themselves a disciple of Jesus. We are called to follow Jesus and we are commissioned to make Him known.

Christian leader John Stott, whose legacy was recently commemorated on the centenary of his birth, spoke frequently of double listening, of holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Our commitment to follow what the Bible teaches does not negate the need to listen and to understand the culture and society around us. But our understanding of the world we live in never undermines what we learn from the Bible about how we respond and what we say.

This means, as we speak up and engage on key

public policy issues, we will at times be applauded and on other occasions rejected. Some of our views will be popular, and others will be viewed as controversial. But we speak with faithfulness and a commitment to truth.

Our society increasingly sees outrage as the major note of any public debate; if you're not outraged at what someone else has said, then you are probably lacking in conviction. The space for nuance, reason, considered arguments, context, and policy that cuts both ways is squashed out of sight.

Public policy is frequently complex and rarely simply defined into something that is good or bad. The best policy proposals can have room for improvement, or good ideas can be constructed in such a way that makes them into bad laws. Even poor policy plans can have redeeming features.

For instance, the Government's New Plan for Immigration is broadly a bad policy proposal, but it has positive steps towards community resettlement of refugees. The proposals for gambling regulation reform, which have many points of merit, fail to address the availability of gambling opportunities for children and do not require the gambling industry to fund essential research, education and treatment.

The UK Government has frequently spoken of its intention to bring forward plans to end conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is an undefined concept, primarily used by its detractors, but often captures activity which is described as seeking to change or suppress someone's sexuality or gender identity. Horrific accounts have been reported of people being subjected to abuse because of their sexuality, with the intent to force them to change. Some of these accounts are of treatment carried out by the state historically, such as electroshock therapy, while others are of formal approaches (a defined programme run by a psychotherapist, for instance) and others more informal (such as when no specialist is involved).

At the point of writing this article, details of the proposals are unknown, so it is difficult to establish how we will respond. But, considering international comparisons, and the definitions proposed by campaigners, we have considerable concern. It is apparent that plans could exceed the stated intent, impacting the freedom of churches and Christian ministries to teach a biblical view on sexuality and minister to members of their congregation.

In its 2018 action plan, the Government said it would not restrict people from accessing spiritual support around their sexuality, and therefore we will hold them to this commitment. When we see the final proposals, we will consider them carefully. We share the desire to see abusive practices stopped, but we will not accept measures that run roughshod over religious liberty.

Speaking out on issues around sexuality attracts attention – more so than engaging on gambling, immigration, sustainability, domestic violence or the countless other issues to which we regularly respond (see page 7 for an overview of our recent public policy work). We do not speak to court controversy, and we will not be silent to be judged favourably by the court of public opinion. We speak carefully and with utmost consideration because key issues are at stake, and it is vital we help evangelical Christians have a voice that is heard.

Intolerant of tolerance

Controversy is king in attracting attention, and outrage is the go-to posture in public debate; this means nuance is frequently absent. But alongside this unwillingness to engage with complexity in public conversation is a considerable reduction in the tolerated space for belief in anything absolute.

Tolerance is lauded as a high value of contemporary society – the acceptance of different

views, beliefs, lifestyles and people. But proponents of such tolerance often ringfence their tolerance far too narrowly. Some views are placed outside the circle of tolerance; considered intolerant, these are not worthy of respect or space in public debate. Only those views that accept certain other preconditions are welcome.

This is frequently used to shut down debate and stifle views that are not considered mainstream or acceptable. The problem is that whatever noble causes may motivate such an approach, in the process our freedom of expression is diminished. As Lord Justice Sedley remarked: "Free speech includes not only the inoffensive but the irritating, the contentious, the eccentric, the heretical, the unwelcome and the provocative, provided it does not tend to provoke violence. Freedom to only speak unoffensively is not worth having."

In a society where people increasingly reject biblical beliefs around sexuality and they're not reflected in laws or policies, the space to speak freely is contended, and the importance to do so never greater.

The cycle of outrage and controversy feeds a culture war, where those who are shut out from public debate are aggrieved by their treatment, and nuance gets lost because fire fights fire. This is where cancel culture comes in, whether it's social media platforms, book contracts or speaking engagements. While individual situations may be justifiable or permissible, the cumulative effect is that voices with more conservative views on moral and social issues are left out of public debate and are, as a result, further portrayed as marginal and therefore marginalised.

It is vital that Christians do not take the bait and feed a culture-war narrative but respond with grace, compassion and clarity. Our world needs compassionate, confident and courageous disciples. We should use our freedom to speak, because if we retreat from public life, it will be harder to retake our place. On the issues that may seem controversial, it is important that we do not stay silent.

We should have confidence in what the Bible teaches and how scripture shapes our views on policy issues. Our engagement in politics is not defined by access or favour, or even by whether we are viewed to have influence in the manner the world may judge. We are called to faithfulness to Christ and His word to our world.

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In recent months, the Evangelical Alliance has been using its voice to influence public policy across the UK.

Hate Crime and Public Order Bill, Scotland

Why we spoke out

- People must be free to debate, accept or reject the gospel.
- We had various concerns about the proposed bill in its original form in 2020, including its inadequate or complete omission of freedom of expression provisions.

How we spoke out

- We pushed for guarantees on freedom of expression. We met regularly with government representatives, expressing concerns and proposing solutions, representing the views and evidence provided by our members. This included three separate meetings with the Scottish Government's Justice Secretary and two separate appearances before the Scottish Parliament Justice Committee.

"Considering the state of the bill at its introduction, we can see how much it's changed (it was enacted March 2021). Intent must now be proved, a reasonable person test was added, the freedom of expression provisions became significantly stronger, and the possession of inflammatory material section was removed," says Kieran Turner, public policy officer for the Evangelical Alliance, Scotland.

Abortion policy, Northern Ireland

Why we spoke out

- In February, the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill was brought forward to the Northern Ireland Assembly. It aims to amend abortion laws by removing the ground for an abortion in cases of non-fatal disabilities for all gestations. Alongside Both Lives Matter, we support this aim.

How we spoke out

- When the bill was introduced, we encouraged our members and supporters to write to their MLAs, urging them to vote in support of the bill.
- We hosted a Zoom event to look at the bill's detail and explore how the church can respond, such as advocate for those directly affected by abortion for disability. Additionally, the event helped to connect the dots between prenatal and post-birth discrimination and encouraged the church to join the conversation to build a better story for those living with disability.

We'll continue to engage with the bill as it proceeds through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Gambling legislation, England

Why we spoke out

- Gambling-related harm can escalate to family breakdown and loss of home and life. Many families are reluctant to watch sports due to the pervasiveness of gambling.
- Gambling comes under the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but considering the scale of gambling-related harm, we believe it should come under the Department of Health.

How we spoke out

- We released a joint statement with other organisations urging the Government to treat gambling as a public health issue.
- We collaborated with other groups to launch stopbettingads.com, to challenge the exemption around gambling advertising in sports.
- The Government launched a consultation on gambling legislation in March. We encouraged Christians to engage around gambling advertising, online protections for players, a mandatory levy and banning any form of gambling for children.

We hope for a response to the consultation next year. Please pray for a good response from the Government.

Relationship and Sex Education (RSE), Wales

Why we are speaking out

- The RSE 'code' in Wales is far more 'progressive' than other UK nations which are looking at this document to inform discussions around their own RSE curricula.
- In this 'rights-based' curriculum, the right of children of faith to express biblical opinions without judgement is essential.
- Parents have lost the right to withdraw pupils, therefore a point of redress for parents to challenge one-sided, age-inappropriate content is vital.

How we are speaking out

- We speak into the advisory group for RSE and Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE).
- Both consultations were launched on 21 May, and we are encouraging evangelicals to speak up on behalf of this and future generations.

"Children of faith need to see themselves in the curriculum. It's up to us to speak up on their behalf. Pray for us to engage wisely but firmly," says Siân Rees, director, Evangelical Alliance Wales.

The gift of DISILLUSIONMENT

We have to forgo our illusionary worlds to bring love, truth, justice and hope to all, says **Jo Frost**, director of communications and engagement, Evangelical Alliance.

What has caught your attention over past year? It has been a hard and trying year. The year that never was and yet never ends. COVID has taken over everything, and yet this time last year one story cut above the noise of everything else – the murder of George Floyd.

It caused protests and riots, soul searching and questions, because something that had previously been ignored or dismissed was now impossible to disregard. There was nothing to steal our attention, nothing to drown out the injustice. We were no longer distracted. We couldn't pretend that everything was okay.

Then in March, Sarah Everard was murdered, and once again it felt like the injustice that could have been dismissed and ignored was writ large for everyone to see. In the weeks that followed her death, new website Everyone's Invited received thousands of testimonies recounting horrendous stories of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape in British schools.

Sarah Everard, George Floyd, Everyone's Invited – these stories remind us that injustice is not unusual, it's not hidden, and it's not new.

COVID has been a season where we have been forced to pay attention. These moments have exposed the uncomfortable truth for us all to see. The illusion that we don't have a justice problem has been broken; reality is visible, and we are now invited to do something about it. This is the gift of disillusionment; it is often an unwelcome one, but it is vital, and it is healing.

To be disillusioned is to be confronted with the fiction of our imaginations or our expectations. To be disillusioned is to be gifted with sight of reality and opportunity to recognise the lordship of Jesus over all the mess and the dysfunction.

Jesus' ministry was full of disillusioning acts: He upended the Pharisees' expectations, the crowds' expectations and even the dreams of His own disciples. He shattered what people thought the messiah was going to look

like, what they thought a prophet should do or say. Jesus' time as messiah on Earth was not to wage war but to bring peace, not to subjugate but to serve, not to kill but to die.

For people, then and now, to even begin to recognise who Jesus is and what He accomplished on the cross, we all have to be disillusioned. The cross is the ultimate disillusioning act: on the cross, the Emmanuel of Christmas, the with-us God, becomes the for-us sacrifice. Reality laid bare, we are seen for who we are, and Jesus is lifted high for us who He is.

As we emerge from this pandemic, I pray that we see people for who they truly are – image bearers of the Lord most high – broken, culpable, loved, forgiven. I pray that we refuse to deny the reality of injustice, that we no longer sweep things under the carpet so we can carry on with our illusionary worlds. And I pray that we embrace the gift of disillusionment and do all we can to live as citizens of the kingdom of God, walking in step with His Spirit, bringing love, truth, justice and hope to all.



*To be disillusioned is to be
confronted with the fiction of our
imaginations or our expectations.*

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: IS YOUR CHURCH DOING ENOUGH?



Domestic violence is a problem in our congregations, as much as it is in wider society, so it's time local churches spoke up and did something, says **Bekah Legg**, director of Restored.

“We must speak up and do something.” These are the words of the people of God as they gathered together in horror after an act of unspeakable

violence (Judges 19:30). A woman, neglected and rejected by a husband who valued his own life above hers, had been gang raped and killed. God’s people came together, grief-stricken and outraged.

When I imagine that scene, the people of God coming together in holy horror and grief, I can see similarities between the scenes we witnessed after the murder of George Floyd and during the vigil on Clapham Common, London, following the murder of Sarah Everard: a collective outpouring of grief and anger as one person’s story comes to represent so many more.

What happened to Floyd was wicked in and of itself, but it resonated with the everyday experience of black men and women, all around the world. What happened to Everard did the same for women.

What happened in the time of the Judges, to a woman whose name we never get to hear, galvanised a society which had, during this period, drifted further and further from God. That drift can be documented, terribly, in the lives of the women in Israel. The whole book of Judges recounts the treatment of women spiralling into a godless abyss, with this woman’s abuse and death at the very bottom.

As God’s people, today it’s easy to distance ourselves from that story in Judges 19. It happened 3,000 years ago in a time we see as more barbaric, with people who weren’t like us. We like to think we would never do something like that, that it couldn’t happen in today’s world, to women and girls we know.

But it does. According to United Nation statistics, 15 million adolescent girls worldwide have experienced forced sex. Nine million of those in the last year. Nine million girls whose names, like the woman in Judges 19, we’ll never know.

Every day, 137 women around the world are killed by men who were meant to love them – fathers, husbands, brothers: 137, every single day. In the UK, that translates to two women a week being killed by an intimate partner. One in four women will be subjected to domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime.

In our churches too

Women are still being neglected and rejected, their lives are still valued as less than the men around them, and they are still being subjected to sexual and physical violence. It happens on our streets, it happens in our homes, and it happens in our churches.

That’s not a sentence I enjoy writing. But Restored, together with the University of Coventry

It happens on our streets, it happens in our homes, and it happens in our churches.

and the University of Leicester, conducted research in 2018 that showed that one in four churchgoers have experienced abuse in a current relationship (see restored-uk.org/research). One in four – it’s the same figure outside the church. I don’t like writing that sentence either.

Most of us don’t like thinking about it at all; we don’t want it to be true, so we look the other way. But it’s time to turn our eyes and recognise the problem. Only then can we create a church that genuinely looks the way we believe it should, and create a culture that stands against abuse and creates a place of safety and refuge. We can build a church that models marriages and relationships that reflect the love of Christ to the world around us.

We need to speak up and do something, and we can start right where we are. Our research suggested that domestic abuse is a great taboo in many of our churches. Nearly 60 per cent of respondents had never heard domestic abuse mentioned in a sermon; most churches don’t have information about where to go or who to speak to if you’re being subjected to abuse. Only two in seven Christians surveyed felt their church was adequately equipped to deal with a disclosure.

Those are things we can do something about (see restored-uk.org/training). We can tackle the difficult topics in our sermons, reach out to support our local refuge and get trained to respond to disclosures. We can make it clear that we care, that there is a safe place for people to talk and find support.

Let’s speak up. Let’s raise our voices to affirm the value of every member of our community and to stand against abuse in all its forms. Let’s do something to restore dignity and security to those who’ve had it taken away and help them to find a new identity in Jesus.

Continue

Join Bekah Legg in a conversation addressing violence against women and what the church can do to speak into and change culture: eauk.org/bekahlegg



We must not look away at this time. We must look into these very dark places, shine the light and repent.



OUR CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN A SCANDALOUS TIME

Sexual abuse scandals are sending shockwaves through the church. Naomi Osinnowo spoke with **Glen Scrivener** for his take on recent revelations and how we repair the damage done to the witness of the church.

Glen Scrivener was “hit very hard” earlier this year when an investigation led by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries concluded that there was credible evidence that its founder had engaged in sexual misconduct.

For the director and evangelist at Speak Life, this scandal serves as a sobering wake-up call, especially for evangelists, and an opportunity to, once again, learn the way of the cross.

I spoke with Glen to find out more.

For readers who are unfamiliar with Speak Life, tell us a little about the charity.

We are an evangelistic ministry and we’re convinced that what you love you share. A central verse for us is Matthew 12:34: “From the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” We want to fill the hearts of Christians with a love for Jesus in the confidence that, from the fullness of hearts, we overflow in witness to the world. Through proclamation, media and training, we try to proclaim Christ to the church in a contagious way so that the church witnesses Christ to the world. You can find out more at speaklife.org.uk

You have been involved in conversations about spiritual and sexual abuse within the community of faith following revelations about the late Ravi Zacharias. What had struck you about this case?

It hit me very hard because I am an evangelist seeking to make Jesus known in the world. I

recognised that with this scandal you had something destructive to the cause of Christ in the world. It doesn’t matter how polished you are as a speaker, if your life and lips don’t go together, that is catastrophic for the witness of the church. This is a real wake-up call, especially for evangelists.

Seeking lost sheep is one part of the ministry that Christ has given to His church; there’s also the shepherding of those sheep, and the protecting of the flock from wolves. It seems that we have divorced the seeking of the lost sheep from the protection and provision for the flock, which is devastating for those who want to see the lost won and brought home to the sheepfold. If we cannot keep our flock safe, then why are we trying to add more to the sheepfold?

There are issues about hypocrisy in leadership and a lack of transparency, authenticity and honesty. There are serious questions to ask about whether we have invested in glitz, glamour, platform and ego when Jesus wants shepherds who walk in His path – the way of the cross, self-denial, humility and transparency. We must not try to do the Lord’s work in the way of the flesh.

It’s got so many resonances for me. There are huge lessons for us in the global church as we seek to make Christ known, and I wanted to draw attention to those lessons because in the UK there are scandals that are in the process of coming to light. We must not look away at this time. We must look into these very dark places, shine the light

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and repent. We must humble ourselves and learn whatever the Lord is teaching us.

Scandals of this nature unsettle the Christian community. How do we remain rooted in Jesus, our sure foundation? And how do we, from that position, confront this type of thing?

We have everything we need in Christ and in the scriptures to handle these scandals. Part of the horror of it is just how anti-Christ these scandals are. Here are people who should have known better; and we the body of Christ must do better because we've been taught far better than this.

Jesus has taught us – in fact, He has taught the whole world – that power must be used in service, that hypocrisy is a diabolical sin, that the way forward is repentance and letting in the light, that the body is a temple and that sex is sacred. It's Jesus who makes sense of the horrors of abuse. May these scandals draw us closer to Him.

What can we learn from Saint Paul, who exhorted the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ and told the Colossians to put to death and deprive of power the evil longings of their earthly body?

Paul can make these calls to the church because he teaches so powerfully about the cross. In Philippians we have got the wonderful hymn of the cross in chapter two: Christ, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Jesus made Himself nothing and took on the nature of a slave. Similarly, in the first chapter of Colossians, Christ is the image of the invisible God, who reconciled all things by the blood of His cross.

Paul can make these calls to the church because he teaches so powerfully about the cross.

Paul bases all His teaching on the way of Jesus; and the way of Jesus is to use whatever platform, authority or power you have in the service of those without it. Lying behind sexual scandals, financial scandals and spiritual abuse is an abuse of power.

We need to recentre ourselves on Jesus, who came to serve, to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Here is an opportunity to, once again, learn the way of the cross.

Abuse within the church and within faith communities can also erode or even destroy non-believers trust in the church as an institution and their trust in individual Christians and fellowships. How do we witness to a wary people who may say, "But you lot...?"

At some stage, a conversation needs to be had where we say to churches and to the world, if you really want to oppose abuse, come home to Jesus. It's Jesus who gives you the right to call such sins

The world is sick and tired of cover-ups, hypocrisy, self-justification.

anti-Christ, because that's what they are. These scandals do not teach us that we need less of Jesus; they teach us that we need so much more of Him.

In the meantime, our posture is a posture of repentance, humility and learning; and I think, even in that, there is a witness that we bear in taking that posture (witness in the Greek is the word martyr). There is a kind of death that witnesses to Jesus; and there's a kind of response to this that says, we must decrease so that Christ can increase.

We take it on the chin, and we say to the world – which has its own 'me too crises' – "You're absolutely right, it's indefensible, and there's no excuse for representatives of Christ to act in anti-Christ ways." At that point we trust the Lord to witness even through our repentance. I think that can be a refreshing response to sin.

The world is sick and tired of cover-ups, hypocrisy, self-justification. We mustn't say, "For the sake of witnessing to the world, we will plaster on a veneer and pretend everything is okay. We must go the way of the cross: take the lid off and let the light in, as uncomfortable as that is. We're to trust that the Lord can actually reveal to the world that here is a different response to sin, not the response of the cover-ups, but a response of repentance and humility.

Can you recommend anything for us to read or watch to grow in our faith and witness amid the stuff that goes down in the world and in the church?

Three quite recent books are really helpful for us to reorient ourselves. *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund, which doesn't mention abuse but gets to the heart of this theology of the cross and going the way of humility. Ortlund takes us back to Matthew 11, when Jesus says, "My heart is gentle and lowly"; it's a wonderful meditation on the heart of Christ. While we revel in Christ's heart for us, the book is also a challenge for us to go the way of gentle lowliness, rather than the way of platform, ego and power-trips.

The two others are far more specific about abuse scandals. Taking Christ as our model, Dr Diane Langberg in her book *Redeeming Power* says we need to acknowledge that everyone has power. If you think you don't, you're liable to abuse the power that you have because you're not thinking about how to steward it. She then explains how, in the way of Christ, we can steward our authority.

Third, *A Church Called Tov* by Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer. The book uses some test cases of churches that have responded very poorly to abuse allegations and churches that have responded better to allegations. It really brings us back to how the gospel shapes church culture and how it ought to shape church culture.

The plight of a family of human trafficking survivors was our answered prayer for opportunities to minister to the poor, marginalised and vulnerable, says **Matt MacDiarmid**, lead elder at Hope Community Church, Wigston.



A PRAYER, A FAMILY, AN OPPORTUNITY

There are a lot of words we could use to sum up 2020: disappointment, frustration, loneliness. These are no doubt true, but another word springs to mind, too: opportunity.

Near the beginning of the first lockdown, our children and families worker was asked if she could provide any support to a local family, victims of human trafficking. This wasn't an everyday occurrence for us. We are a small church in a small town to the south of Leicester. We love Jesus and one another but have been increasingly learning of the Father's heart for the poor, marginalised and vulnerable, and for the past year had been praying for more opportunities to minister to them.

Struck by Isaiah 61's promise that the year of the Lord's favour would lead to the poor,

marginalised and vulnerable being transformed into "oaks of righteousness" who will "rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated" (v. 3-4), we longed to see the last, the least and the lost meet Jesus and help others like them do the same.

So Lesley, when confronted with the plight of this family, put out a request to the church to see if we could, at the very least, meet their material needs. We sourced enough items to fill one of the seminar rooms in our building, and the donations kept on coming. The question was no longer, how can we provide for this one family? but, how can we seize this incredible opportunity to help many more?

We quickly formed a partnership with the local Trussell Trust Foodbank. It provides the food;



It started with a prayer: “God, break my heart for what breaks yours.”

we are certain this is what God has called us to, and He will provide all we need.

Over this past year, we have had the privilege of supporting and getting to know people living far below the poverty line, people in abusive relationships, people with addictions and dependencies, the homeless, people who have spent time in prison, the elderly, and refugees. We have also had the privilege of working with professional and voluntary agencies that are able to see our contribution to the town in an unequivocally positive light.

We are constantly amazed by the increasing opportunities God is giving us to not just give food and clothing but to share Jesus with people. Lesley often quotes Ezekiel 22, where God is looking for people to “stand in the gap” between the church and those who would never normally come to a church like ours. And all this because God used the pandemic to provide us with an opportunity.

The Bible is clear that God’s heart is for the last, the least and the lost, and that He calls us to have the same heart. We know this in theory, but for so many of us our upbringing, experiences, fears and biases prevent us from seeking to engage with those whose lives often seem messier than our own. But this is what God calls us into. This is not an optional extra for the Christian faith; this is front and centre of God’s calling on our lives, to share Jesus with those the world has forgotten.

With us at Hope Community Church, it started with a prayer: “God, break my heart for what breaks yours.” It’s a simple prayer but a dangerous one. We started praying this as a church family well over a year before we ever met that first family. But that prayer is changing the culture of our church from the inside out, and our prayer is that it might start to change yours too.

we provide the other items. Shortly after, an opportunity arose to run a weekly session in a local council estate. We now have a team running a session there every Tuesday, where we give out food and household items as well as chat and provide support for benefits and the like.

Increasingly, we are getting opportunities to pray with and for these amazing people who have struggled so much, even before coronavirus. We are now exploring how to develop this ministry further, and how the reduction in restrictions might enable us to provide more of a café environment in our own church building. This has been accelerated by employing a new member of staff, full time, to oversee the ministry and set up a CAP debt centre. Indeed, this is a huge step of faith for us financially, but

Please pray

For your local church, that members would become increasingly hungry for the Spirit of God to work through you all to minister in word and deed to the last, the least and the lost.





For me, it was a disaster: all that prep for just one guy? But God had something else in mind, says **Ben Jeffery**, lead pastor at soulcity church, Stockport.

AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

I was recently invited to speak at Barnabus, a homeless project in the heart of Manchester. This was my first experience ministering to the homeless, and I was nervous. Expecting it to be busy, as it usually is, and keen to share the gospel well, I spent hours preparing for my message.

A room filled with people who'd all turn to Jesus - that's what I dreamt of. The reality was quite different. When my session began, there was just one man. He sat there looking lost and nervous. I felt frustrated; I had spent so much time preparing for this moment, and it all seemed like a waste.

"Hi, how are you doing?" That's what I said when I sat beside him. He said that he had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer and had only a few months to live. He was in extreme pain and didn't want support: "Save it for those who will live to appreciate it," he said, "I will be dead on these streets by Christmas." He was tired and wanted to rest.

The manager and I offered to pray for him, and the peace that filled the room was undeniable. His eyes grew wet with tears, we talked about Jesus, and he confessed that while he doesn't believe in God, he believes that there must be a reason he turned up today. I couldn't help but agree.

The truth is that, normally, he would not have allowed us to pray for him; he's far too self-conscious. Had people been in that session, he would not have come in. But that day was unusually quiet. It was almost as if everything was set in place so that he could receive the prayer that he so desperately needed.

Whenever we think about speaking out, we tend to think big - big personalities on big

stages - and hope for big moments. When the reality doesn't match our expectations, we can often feel frustrated. But we're to remember: Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour, not our neighbourhood. It's easy to get distracted by big ideas and miss the individual God has placed directly in our path.

In Luke 18 we read that Jesus was surrounded by a crowd when He hears someone calling His name. Amid the sea of people, Jesus hears the single voice of a blind man and responds, "What do you want me to do for you?" This seems like a pointless question, right? The guy is blind; he obviously wants sight. But Jesus doesn't assume; He listens.

There is something powerful about stopping, giving your full attention to the person sitting in front of you, and listening. This gives us permission to speak directly into the place in their life where they most feel the need for Jesus.

A few weeks later, when I returned to Barnabus for another session, the manager was waiting for me at the door, giddy and excited. The day after we had prayed for the homeless man, he had an uncomfortable night's sleep and passed a lot of blood. When he went to the doctor, he was told that the cancer had gone, completely. He had been healed. He now encourages his homeless friends to go to Barnabus to hear the sermons and receive prayer. The impact of that morning has continued to multiply ever since.

It's so important for us, as Christians, to use our voice for good, for God. Speaking out doesn't always go as we expect, but God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us".

God's word challenges us to remember our persecuted brothers and sisters as if we're suffering too. **Kenneth Harrod**, development manager at Release International, shares three ways you can step in and get involved.

Remember THE PERSECUTED

Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, a victim of persecution for his faith, once wrote: "When I was beaten on the bottom of my feet, my tongue cried. Why did my tongue cry? It was not beaten. It cried because the tongue and feet are both part of the same body."

Wurmbbrand's graphic illustration draws from Apostle Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ. "If one member suffers, all suffer together," wrote Paul (1 Corinthians 12:26a).

Once labelled the 'Voice of the Underground Church', Wurmbbrand was imprisoned by the then communist regime in Romania from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. His best-selling account, *Tortured for Christ*, was first published in the UK in 1967. Today the internet age in which we live gives us far greater opportunity to know about the persecution Christians suffer around the world. Which begs the question: what are we doing in response?

The persecution of Christians has many faces. In some places state repression leads to imprisonments and forces the church into an

underground existence. In other places religious opposition to the gospel spawns ongoing violence.

In April 2020, when we here in the UK were adjusting to life in lockdown, a young pastor, Matthew Tagwi, was gunned down by Islamist militants in a Nigerian village. He had begun his ministry just three months earlier. Matthew was one more victim in a relentless tide of attacks, kidnappings, destruction and killing of Christians in Nigeria – a country whose constitution grants freedom of religion.

In a year when we here in the UK have got used to online services and prayer meetings, Christians in China have found themselves monitored – and even arrested – for engaging in Christian activity over the internet.

Release International is a UK Christian ministry that was established in response to, and inspired by, the experiences and testimony of Wurmbbrand. Around the world we seek – prayerfully, pastorally and practically – to help the families of Christian martyrs, prisoners of faith and their families,



Christians suffering oppression and violence, and Christians forced to flee.

In the UK we raise the voice of persecuted Christians. We call Christians and congregations to express fellowship with those who suffer; to learn lessons of Christian discipleship with them; and, honouring them in Christian stewardship, to give them the ‘tools’ they need to live for Jesus Christ.

God’s word challenges us all to step in and get involved. The writer to the Hebrews said, pointedly, “Let brotherly love continue.” He then puts flesh on that thought, saying: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Hebrews 13:1,3).

So, in what ways can we speak out for persecuted Christians? We can speak out within our congregations. As Wurmbrand put it: “How much of your own Christian concern and giving is directed towards the relief of the martyr church? Ask your pastors and church leaders what is being done in your name to help your brothers and sisters

Around the world we seek to help the families of Christian martyrs, prisoners of faith and their families, Christians suffering oppression and violence, and Christians forced to flee.

in restricted nations around the world.”

We can speak out more widely, whether that means writing to politicians, signing petitions or sharing information on social media. We can follow ministries like Release International on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and share news with Christian friends.

Above all, we can speak out to God our Father. Release provides plenty of resources to enable you to pray, for real people in real places who are really suffering for Christ. This includes our free quarterly magazine, *Voice*, and regularly emailed prayer alerts. To sign up for either of these, have a look at our website (releaseinternational.org).

**I WILL NOT
ABANDON
THEM!**



WILL YOU SPEAK OUT ON BEHALF OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?

Release International is a Christian ministry that helps you engage with your persecuted brothers and sisters by praying with them, by responding to their practical needs and by sharing the journey of true Christian discipleship with them. Request Release International's quarterly magazine and receive a free copy of *Imprisoned with ISIS* or *When Faith Is Forbidden* plus our free brochures on how to write to or advocate for prisoners around the world.

Imprisoned with ISIS is Petr Jasek's inspiring story of how he survived fourteen months' imprisonment in Sudan. *When Faith Is Forbidden* tells the stories of 40 Christians in various countries who survived persecution for their faith.

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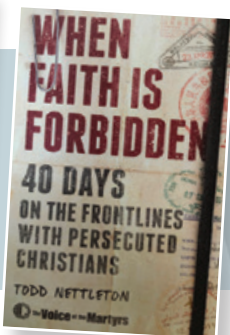
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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

let's PRAY

Lord, thank you for your wisdom
and compassion.

Let us be guided by your truth when
we speak on your behalf.

Please help us think of those who cannot speak
for themselves and be compelled to reach
into the margins of the world.

You have endowed us with dignity as
bearers of your image, so may we treat
all people with the respect they deserve,
regardless of wealth, ability or race.

Help us to love others because you first
loved us; and may this love be made complete
in your body, the church.

May we hold fast to your word, a foundation
that cannot be shaken.

Help us to be more concerned with being on
the right side of you rather than the right
side of history.

Thank you for the power of your Spirit to
change hearts and minds; and may we strive
to be your good and faithful servants.

Give us boldness when we speak out, and let
it guide people to your Son, who lived a
perfect life and offered us life to the full
and hope for all nations.

In all we say and do, may all glory be to Christ.

In Jesus' wonderful name, amen.

By **Gillian Lee**, advocacy researcher,
Evangelical Alliance

A culture of prayer

At the Evangelical Alliance we pray regularly
and champion prayer, because we believe
that as we seek God's face
together, the Lord hears us
and amazing things begin
to take place. Join with us,
using our prayer centre for
inspiration: eauk.it/prayer





Let New Light into Your Heart gives personal and biblical insights into social issues for Arab youth.

CHANNELS OF LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As SAT-7 celebrates its 25th birthday, will you join us in praying that our TV ministry will light the fire of faith that burns deep within a heart for years to come? asks **Lindsay Shaw**, press and communications officer, SAT-7 UK.

When SAT-7 founder Terence Ascott first mooted the idea of a Christian television channel to senior church leaders in the Middle East, few believed that local Christians would dare go on screen or that it would ever happen.

Today, 25 years after its first broadcast in May 1996, SAT-7 has over 25 million viewers. It runs four 24/7 TV channels for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the region's three main languages – Arabic, Persian, Turkish – and earlier this year, it added the region's first on-demand Christian

video platform, SAT-7 PLUS.

The 'impossible' vision became reality, and today SAT-7 is a trusted media companion to those who watch it in at least 25 nations – 19 of them in Open Doors' 2021 World Watch List of countries where it is hardest to be a Christian.

From its inception, SAT-7 was designed to be a media platform run by and for the people of the Middle East. Its stated goal is to see the region's church "confident in Christian faith and witness, serving the community and contributing to the good of society

and culture". Via satellite television and digital media, it gives MENA Christians platforms to speak to millions they could never reach in person.

Lifeline

SAT-7 broadcasts in a region where just 3.5 per cent of around 500 million people are Christians, and most are concentrated in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon. Its programmes are a lifeline to small and even persecuted Christian communities. They offer inspiring worship and teaching from some of the region's leading churches

and unite viewers with the wider body of Christ.

For growing numbers of Middle Easterners who are questioning their own beliefs or want to know more about Christianity, SAT-7 acts as a 'shop window' to discover what Christians think, believe and how they live. SAT-7 started its Arabic language channel, SAT-7 ARABIC, in 1996, but added a Persian channel, SAT-7 PARS, in 2006, and a Turkish channel, SAT-7 TÜRK, in 2010.

Almost 50 per cent of this region is under 25, so 2007 saw the launch of SAT-7 KIDS, a dedicated children's channel for Arabic speakers to help Christian youngsters grow strong in faith and allow non-Christian kids to discover a God who loves them. SAT-7's Persian and Turkish channels also

have their own children's schedules. A range of education programmes, begun when millions lost schooling because of the Syrian civil war, is watched by 1.8 million children a week.

Diverse

SAT-7's schedules are intentionally diverse and holistic. As well as broadcasting worship and core Bible teaching, magazines and talk shows help viewers to apply Christian values in everyday living. Dedicated programmes help women realise their true worth and address the challenges they face in male-dominated cultures. Young adult shows tackle the questions of the rising generation. Music and drama programmes offer entertainment mixed with biblical truth.

In 25 years of broadcasting, SAT-7

has served a region that has endured wars, uprisings, conflict and economic crises. With studios in Cairo, Istanbul and Lebanon, Persian studios in Cyprus and London, and small teams in Algeria and Tunisia, SAT-7 broadcasters are deeply affected by these challenges themselves. On live chat shows, they hear directly from viewers, and through its viewer support teams, SAT-7 answers thousands of messages every month.

For 25 years, SAT-7 (sat7uk.org) has dedicated itself to positively impacting the Middle East for Jesus. We've seen first-hand how a moment of deep joy can be the start of a life transformed. Please pray that the spark ignited by our programmes – and follow-up support – will light the fire of faith that burns deep within a heart for years to come.



Top left: On location, filming a series for SAT-7 PARS on the Book of Revelation. Top right: There is a Solution addresses emotional and psychological problems for Persian viewers. Bottom: Conference at the National Evangelical Church, Kuwait, and aired live on SAT-7.

My top tips FOR FAITH CONVERSATIONS

These are some of the ways you can share the hope of salvation as restrictions are lifted further – **Rev Dr Hannah Steele**, director, St Mellitus College, London.

Early on in the church's life a persecution broke out which caused the disciples to be scattered to different and unfamiliar places. Whilst this was undoubtedly a distressing and unexpected experience, those scattered responded in love and creativity and "preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4).

If someone had told me in January 2020 that schools would close and we would enter a national lockdown, I would have laughed in disbelief. Whilst the death toll sadly rose and people faced grief, financial uncertainty and loneliness, like those first disciples, the church too responded to unfamiliar territory with love and creativity. Churches were present in local communities, providing for those in need and adapting to unexpected events by live-streaming services and enquirers courses.

As restrictions are lifted further, and we emerge into a new phase, how do we continue to speak out about the hope of the good news of Jesus? Many of us will be connecting with friends and family we haven't seen for a long time. Some of us will be cautious about

social engagement and may struggle to know how to rebuild relationships. How can we share the gospel at this significant time?

Speaking out of EXPERIENCE

The pandemic has been a collective experience and yet it has impacted us all in different ways. Some have experienced the pain of it far more acutely than others. As followers of Jesus, we all have our own experience of how God has been present with us through this time. The first disciples were not afraid to speak of their personal experience of Jesus; in fact, Peter and John say, "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). In the same way, every disciple of Jesus today has their own story to tell. This is what being a witness is all about. You might not have a particularly dramatic testimony like those we tend to hear at Christian conferences, yet we can each point to the presence and faithfulness of God in our lives. It might be as simple as

an answered prayer or a God-given sense of peace during the challenges of the last year. In a culture that is often sceptical about metanarratives claiming absolute meaning for all, these stories can be more powerful, building on our experience and drawing people into a conversation about the difference Jesus makes. How can you speak out about your experience of God?

Speaking out by LISTENING

We tend to assume that evangelism is primarily about talking, but how about starting with listening? In the gospels, Jesus is asked more than 180 questions. While He directly answers less than 10 of them, He does ask more than 300 questions in return. Asking questions ensures that we listen as well as talk and can often lead to more meaningful engagement as we seek to speak out about our faith. As we start to socialise with friends and family once again, we can ask questions about how they have found this last year. Many people have lost loved ones and have been unable to



attend funerals and process their grief. How might we provide a listening ear and comfort? We have all been compelled to reflect on our own mortality in a stark way this past year. Listening to one another's experiences and having the bravery to probe a little deeper into questions of meaning and purpose is a good place to start a faith conversation.

Speaking out of **GOD'S LOVE**

Pope Francis describes Jesus as “the first and greatest evangeliser”. Love lies at the heart of so many of Jesus interactions with people, from the

bleeding woman in the crowd who He calls “daughter” (Mark 5:34), to the rich young man who He loves even though He walks away (Mark 10:21). Love lies at the heart of all Christian witness.

During the pandemic, we have seen the church responding in generous and compassionate ways to meet those who are in need. It is good we have been there in the crisis, but as the dust begins to settle and some form of normality resumes, will we continue to be present in our communities demonstrating the love of Christ?

Emphasising love can help address some of our fears about sharing our faith which are based on the idea of coercion or making people feel uncomfortable.

Friendship is not a tool we use to win the right to share our faith with people. Love is offered freely and genuinely, expecting nothing in return. In our post-Christian culture, the journey to faith is longer and more complicated for many who have little comprehension of a Christian worldview. As witnesses, we are called to journey patiently alongside people as we both speak out and live out the love of God.

To explore these ideas further, you can read my book *Living His Story: revealing the extraordinary love of God in ordinary ways*.

Seven ways TO SHARE THE GOSPEL IN THIS NEW SEASON

Now that we're able to gather with more people in person, **Helen Locke**, communications assistant at the Evangelical Alliance, wanted to find out what new challenges and opportunities we should look out for as we seek to share the good news of salvation. Seven contributors share their thoughts.



1. Invite the less obvious people

As coronavirus restrictions lift, I see a great opportunity and challenge in extending extravagant hospitality to those around us. The opening of our homes to share food, family, fun and faith with neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances is a precious expression of love and witness, but challenge comes in the temptation to drain our hospitality batteries exclusively on the close friends we've missed so much face-time with this past year.

Let's not miss the opportunity to intentionally connect

on a deeper level with those who have been journeying spiritually during the days of coronavirus and yet who might not be the first names in our social rolodex: those who joined our online Alpha courses, the neighbour we've chatted with but who hasn't set foot in our home, and the colleague who has struggled with loneliness and isolation.

Invitation is at the heart of evangelism, so why not start with a simple invitation to your home, with the simple intention of developing relationships with those around you? This will create the opportunity for others to know relationship with the God who invites them graciously into the glory of His eternal home.

Ben Jack, head of Advance, The Message Trust



2. Offer a place of belonging

As we reassess how we worship together in our local churches, now is a great time to consider how we can make church more inclusive for those with disabilities, to be radical as we work alongside and as we seek to listen.

As we gather in person, we must not forget those for whom church online makes worship accessible. Online church has also given disabled people the opportunity to use their gifts to minister. I believe we should find ways to allow this ministry to continue and not lose these vital

gifts as we meet in person.

The opportunity to reach out to, mentor and train those with disabilities is immense when putting into practice the technology we have learnt, and even picking up a phone or knocking on a door.

We should see how we can support those for whom church online has not been accessible, as well as those who are nervous about returning to the building because of the many changes.

The changes needed for disability inclusion will be vital and helpful in our churches being welcoming and places of belonging for everyone. What an opportunity.

Kay Morgan-Gurr, co-founder of Additional Needs Alliance



3. Go the extra mile

Throughout the pandemic my heart was warmed by seeing more people than ever volunteering and supporting charities right across

the country. People found significance in making a tangible difference to the lives of the lowest and the least, bringing a sense of achievement.

As we enter this new season, let us not forget why we did this. We did it because there was a need. This need has not gone away; if anything, things will probably get worse before they get better. So now is

the time to go the extra mile. Let's not look back at the things that were but forward to a 'new norm', where serving others is a part of our everyday lives. The gospel tells us that we do not belong to ourselves; we have been purchased at a great cost. We are now on a mission to bring the light of Christ to a lost world.

There is an opportunity to engage with our communities, take the love and compassion of Jesus to the lost and the least, by serving those who need our help. Whether it's working in a foodbank centre or packing food for children abroad, now is the time.

Hugh McNeill, manager, Coventry Foodbank



4. Create a 'hope space'

The summer is here, and we've made it through a difficult year.

We're back in the building, meeting as church. Let's not forget those outside our family - we've come back but there's room for more.

So, I invite you to leave your building again; don't worry, I don't mean permanently.

People have been more curious about spiritual things because we have been through such a difficult time. They have been seeking answers and looking

for hope. Here's one idea you could try: Hope Spaces - creating a prayer space in a community place for non-Christians to experience God for themselves. This might be big, taking over an unused shop in your high street, or as small as popping up a gazebo on your village green.

In the space create areas for people to come and pray. Invite people along, offer coffee, chat, listen, let them pray, tell them what's happening at your church, give them a magazine or a booklet so they can find out more. Create a space for hope - a hope space. To find out more, visit hopetogether.org.uk/hopespaces

Rachel Jordan-Wolf, executive director, HOPE Together



5. Have deeper conversations

One of the main challenges I think we'll have to overcome is the

perceived need to make up for lost time. There seems to be a pent-up desire to shop, travel, socialise and, pretty much, fill up time with practically anything to reverse the relative quietness (and even extreme boredom) of the lockdown. This is something to bear in mind, as the gospel message might have to cut through even more noise to be heard effectively.

In saying this, I do feel like we are already seeing

a shift in the nature of social interactions; people are more readily entering into deeper conversations, even with people they don't know very well. People's barriers seem to have come down during the pandemic, and it's now easier to have more personal and open discussions with friends and even strangers.

I reckon barriers will continue to come down as lockdown eases, which can only help to bring conversations on life's big questions to the fore more naturally and frequently, giving us more opportunities as Christians to share our faith.

Dayalan Mahesan, South Asian Forum coordinator, Evangelical Alliance



6. Help people celebrate

We are all entering a phase of ‘rehabilitation’ back into society. For some, this sparks joy – the anticipation of re-entering a world very much missed. For others, this exacerbates hesitancy and uncertainty about edging into the old familiarities too soon.

As Christians, we can be reminded of God’s faithfulness, goodness and gentleness in carrying us through the pandemic. He will not leave us to go it alone now. We have a lot to be grateful for.

As a church, and individually, we can help people to

recognise and celebrate the goodness in all that we have, as we ourselves demonstrate an attitude of gratitude. Let’s seek out opportunities for fun and celebration so that people see the joy, hope and confidence we have in Jesus and find a place to put their trust in these uncertain but hopeful times.

Prayerfully discern who needs your friendship at this time. Let the Spirit show you how to help them celebrate, and when. While some will be excited about the arrival of their long-awaited ‘freedom’, others will be hesitant, and still others will need to process the difficult events of the year gone by. So, meet people where they are, and show empathy.

Rachael Heffer, head of mission, Evangelical Alliance



7. Get better with training

As we emerge from lockdown it seems that one of our biggest challenges is how to encourage and enable Christians to share the good news of Jesus. As I write, I have just received a request from yet another church leader seeking help to equip his church members to share their faith.

Over the past year, many of us have been reaching out to those around us with much-needed practical help. However, research still indicates that most Christians struggle to put helpful words to their helpful actions.

The result is that people may think I am a nice person, but I leave them unclear about the best news on Earth. By definition, news is communicated using words.

During lockdown, an “absolutely thrilled” Rico Tice, of All Souls Langham Place and Christianity Explored, ran Agapé UK’s new Living & Telling course, which is free of charge. He is already receiving positive feedback from church members who are “inspired and encouraged” as they now share the gospel helpfully and naturally with friends and family.

All Souls will continue to run Living & Telling (livingandtelling.org.uk). Perhaps it would be a helpful resource for your toolbox too?

Tim Moyler, associate staff member, Agapé UK

Where next?

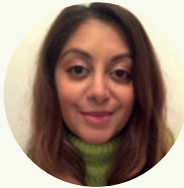
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10 minutes with...

BHAV JOSHI

South Asian Forum champion



Tell us about yourself.

I'm a marketing manager by day who's studying Beginning Theology at St Mellitus College part time. I'm also a podcast host and creator,

seeking to use this digital channel to unify and grow God's church in the UK. A few years ago, I felt a strong sense that God wants the UK church to represent His multicultural kingdom. Being British Asian (of Indian descent) and Christian, I see the work that needs to be done within the UK church to deepen our unity despite our ethnic and cultural differences, and within the South Asian community to break through barriers that prevent many from believing in Jesus.

Why did you join the Race Equality Advisory Group (REAG) for the Diocese of Coventry and the Evangelical Alliance's South Asian Forum (SAF)?

The REAG provides a forum for open dialogue with senior clergy and people from other cultures, from black British to British Asian. We have a safe space to acknowledge the problems around ethnic diversity and inclusion that exist within the church, many of which are entrenched, and explore how we can make the church representative of the diverse community of believers.

SAF really was an answer to prayer! I was blown away by its work to share the gospel, particularly with the South Asian community, so I had to drop its national coordinator a line to find out how I could get involved in this ministry, which you can read about at eauk.org/saf.

Why should the church take diversity, integration and unity seriously?

We should be setting an example for the world, proactively not reactively. Racism and discrimination are real, and they divide our world; as ambassadors for Christ, we are called to a life of reconciliation, repentance and forgiveness. We are called to speak life and truth where people need healing, regardless of their ethnicity or culture.

If we can't provide answers, then the world looks elsewhere. But it's really important that we work on ourselves too, uprooting the racism within our culture and within the church.

Why do you believe the church should share multicultural testimonies?

The Christian faith is multicultural and multi-generational, yet there can be a lack of understanding of other people's experiences and culture, among both believers and non-believers. It's important to share what makes us unique so that others within the faith can understand our experiences and so that those who do not yet know Christ can feel welcome into the body of Christ regardless of experiences, race, gender or culture.

How are you using your voice in a non-Christian South Asian context?

I launched a YouTube channel to share multicultural testimonies representing God's kingdom. It's progressed into a podcast called 'Couch Conversations with Rani', which I'm commonly known as (see anchor.fm/conversationswithrani). Through my podcast I aim to normalise being British Asian and Christian in today's world, whilst showing faith from a multicultural lens. It's important that we open up our diverse and rich faith, allowing non-Christians to see that we're normal people living our lives with the same struggles but with a God who walks with us.

How would you like fellow believers to use their voice?

I would love to see more boldness and courage to speak truth and love, unafraid of cancel culture. Jesus sometimes offended people, but He didn't stop telling the truth; we're to follow His example. We're not to be shaken by the world; we're to be part of the conversation to shape the world we live in. I also believe we're to make use of the resources at our disposal to share God's love with those who don't yet know Him. Let's not be afraid to get it wrong; we can try again.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH, IN LOVE

By **Gavin Calver**, CEO of
the Evangelical Alliance

For the last 20 years, I've travelled across the UK preaching in churches and at Christian events. It's an immense privilege and something I love to do.

For me, one of the strangest shifts during this season of lockdown has been the move from preaching in person to preaching into a device. I can clearly remember my first time. I thought, what on earth am I doing? How will this have an impact? Yes, I've been on camera before, but this was different: I'd be alone, with no one to bounce off and unable to see people's reactions and what the Lord might be doing.

That first talk involved an alter call, and it felt bizarre asking my phone if anyone wanted to follow Jesus. But I knew that the Lord was calling me to be brave and prompting me to speak up as if I were in the same room as those listening.

I remembered advice I'd been given years before: preach each sermon with the passion you would if your teenager was sat at the back prepared to give Christianity one last chance depending on the next 20 minutes. So there I was, proclaiming the power of God with all my heart into a small device and inviting listeners to surrender their life to Him.

A lady got in touch with me the day after the recording was broadcast. She had been sat on her sofa listening to me. Her husband, who wasn't a Christian and had no interest in the faith, was sat next to her reading a newspaper. At the end of my message, he was still in the room, and when I began to pray for people to come to Christ, he prayed along with me and surrendered his life to Jesus. At the

sight and sound of her beloved husband choosing to follow Jesus, this lady was overwhelmed with tears of joy.

Sometimes it can be extremely challenging to speak up and use our voice in different contexts and moments, but the call on our lives as Christians is to do it anyway, and to pray and trust God with the outcome. You see, God is always at work when we courageously step up and speak out. In the second chapter of Acts, Peter, having been filled with the Holy Spirit, stands up and shares the truth of the gospel with the crowd. Following his bold declarations, about 3,000 people were added to the number of early believers, in just one day (Acts 2:14-41).

From the tragic murder of George Floyd to our right to hold orthodox biblical beliefs, one of the challenges of my role at the Evangelical Alliance is having to speak up on different, and often divisive, issues. It's vital that every time we use our voice, we are brave and kind. We are called to speak up, but our words must be undergirded with the love of God and an understanding of humanity. Each time I open my mouth, I have to seek Jesus and ask the Holy Spirit to speak through me and remove my nerves so I can honour the Lord and declare the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Please pray

For the staff team at the Evangelical Alliance, and the wider membership, that, led by the Spirit, we would boldly speak God's truth in love.





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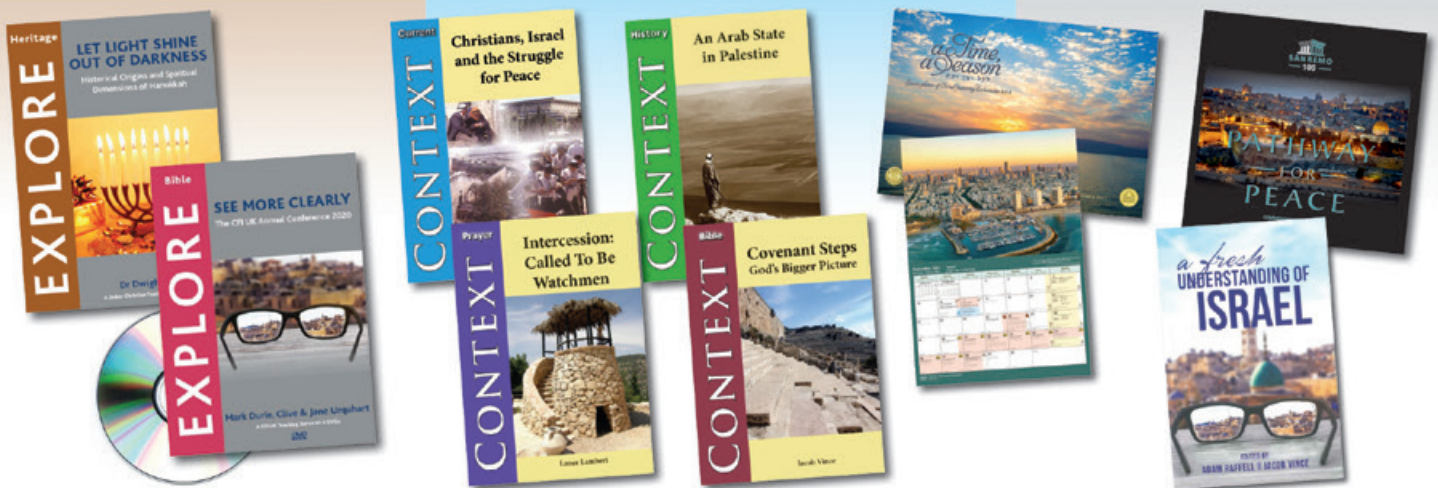


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