

DECEMBER NEWSLETTER

2020



Letter from the Superintendent

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2)

These words from the prophet Isaiah, often included in carol services, are one of my favourite readings for the Christmas season, but they seem to have particular significance this year. I don't know about you, but I am longing to hear the news that, when this lockdown ends, we will be able to meet once more in our churches.

With this possibility in mind, plans are being made in churches around the Circuit to celebrate Christmas in different ways, to reflect the changing circumstances in which we are all living. I know that many of you have been thinking about how to share the good news of Jesus' birth with the wider community. For let's not forget, we have a message of hope to pass on. Jesus came that we might know life in all its fullness – a life of joy, hope and peace, as we turn aside from the destructive behaviours that can blight our lives and the lives of others, and turn to God, who promises to transform our lives with love.

We're told that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect in the north of England, in no small part due to the fact that many across the region are facing the multiple challenges of low income, poor employment prospects, and health or disability concerns. As Christmas approaches the impact of these factors can seem even more acute. We are called to continue to think creatively about how we can make a difference in the lives of those who need the most support. When the angels told the shepherds of the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, they announced that this was "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Luke 2:10) As we prepare for Christmas 2020 let us remember that we are now the bearers of this good news, and do what we can to spread the word, like those shepherds who first hurried off to see the baby.

May God grant you all a blessed Christmas filled with joy, hope and peace.
Ann



Churches are currently closed once again due to national Covid-19 restrictions.

For most recent information on what this means for church services during and following the end of the current lockdown on 2nd December please see our website www.swtyneside.org.uk or Facebook pages for the Circuit or individual churches.

[A further flyer will be issued about arrangements following the end of lockdown.](#)

Our online service premieres via our Youtube channel every Sunday morning at 10.30am



This year's Methodist Church campaign is a message of Hope, that God is with us. The campaign will mostly be shared through social media with the hashtag #GodsWithUs and through the website www.findingourhope.co.uk

Each day of Advent will see a social media post being shared showing a photo of a person with their own words explaining how they've experienced God with them this year. There will be a link to the website with their full reflection. These are all people who have benefitted from the help of the Methodist Church in some form during this year. A video sharing the campaign message will be shared on the 1st December narrated by the 24 people shared in the advent posts.

Promotional materials can be obtained from the website link above including posters of various sizes and postcards. These are free for the price of P&P. There is also a CD and Worship at Home material available.

Churches are being encouraged to adapt, build on and use the campaign message and materials in whichever ways suit them best within their own context e.g. create their own posts featuring people and messages from their own communities.

Sam Cree, Children and Youth Worker

To all who don't know me, I'm Sam Cree. I've worked in the circuit since 2016 and I've been based at Ryton (with some work at Spoor last year). This photo of me was taken while in Uganda with Girls' Brigade. I thought it describes who I am; my love of Girls' Brigade, travel, adventure and helping others. I am rather passionate about charities that provide clean water too!

Thankfully, I have recently returned from furlough and I am thrilled to returning to a new role working across the whole circuit. I hope that by building on existing work with new developments, new fruit will grow. It is a blessing to know that the circuit want to invest in children and young people.

Already I'm straight into running a weekly mid-week 'Junior Church on Zoom'. This is open to all primary school aged children from across the circuit. I'm reconnecting with schools and looking at what the church can offer during these different times. Next steps may include Youth Alpha on Zoom and doing some virtual Godly Play.

If you have children or young people interested in any of my activities or you want to get involved as a volunteer, please get in touch with me at samrytonmc@gmail.com.

Blessings, Sam



Lucy Zwolinska, Community Development Worker

Hello South West Tyneside Methodist Circuit! This year has been a difficult one for so many, but I have been so encouraged by the generous and creative ways that churches and communities have provided for those who are struggling. Our Churches have been involved with food provision across the West of Gateshead. From partnering with national charities like TLG for the Bags of Hope scheme in Ryton and Blaydon, to working with local organisations like the Pickle Palace and Mutual Aid Groups in Rowlands Gill, Highfield and Chopwell, this has been good news for those who have experienced poverty more sharply because of Covid-19.

Gateshead Foodbank has been running very differently since the start of lockdown. Instead of opening our distribution centres, referrals are made over the phone and foodbank parcels are delivered straight to those who need them. Some of our Blaydon volunteers have been able to help at the warehouse and with deliveries, but we can't wait to get back into the church where we can offer a cup of tea and a chat alongside food parcels.

Half of my time is spent alongside Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission, which is made up of people with lived experience of poverty. We had our launch event in March in Gateshead Council Chambers which were at capacity. Commission members told some of their own stories about poverty alongside our guest speaker Debbie Honeywood, star of Ken Loach's latest film, 'Sorry We Missed You'. Our Commissioners are now meeting regularly (over Zoom of course!) with people who hold positions of power across Gateshead who have committed to working with the Commission for change.

Looking ahead, Christmas suddenly feels very close! As usual, Trinity Methodist Church in Blaydon will be collecting donations for Christmas dinner hampers for vulnerable families. This year we're aiming to deliver more hampers than ever. A similar project is happening through the Highfield and Rowlands Gill Mutual Aid Group which Strathmore Road is involved in. If you'd like to find out more about either or make a donation then keep an eye on their Facebook pages: @TrinityMethodistBlaydonAnd @SRMChurchIf you're not on Facebook then do feel free to drop me an email lucy@swtyneside.org.uk

God bless, Lucy



Dunston Hill

The community is looking forward to Advent by doing a Reverse Advent Calendar (putting in rather than taking out) providing food and Christmas items for the foodbank. We are also thinking about Brigitta's idea of decorating the windows at the front of the church, to tell the Christmas story to people who pass by.



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Carols on the Doorstep - 5:30pm on the 20th December

Download your carol sheets to share with neighbours and friends soon from www.carolsonthedoortstep.co.uk or contact Deacon Tracey Hume for more information.

Lockdown Youth Work at SRMC

At Strathmore Road Methodist Church, as the lockdown started we knew that zoom was going to be a big part of everyone's life for however long this was going to last. We were also in the middle of a redevelopment project that would mean no building either. The younger group, Rock Solid have loved being able to meet (virtually) and still run around playing games in their own homes (sorry parents!). However the older group of 15-17 boys quickly became zoomed out and we started to lose them.

Around the same time we were allowed to host youth groups outside observing social distancing and making sure we were 'covid secure' so we started meeting IRL (in real life) in the back garden of one of our volunteers. We found that stripping everything away from the group including our building gave it a new lease of life. Thankfully we had a fire pit to keep us warm. Even as the days got shorter the lads would spend the whole session looking at the stars and talking about how incredible creation is.

Some of these lads don't really know Jesus yet but they were able to connect with creation like they never had before because we were forced to go do things differently by this pandemic. We look forward to getting back into our youth room when we can, mainly so we can throw balls at each other playing dodgeball but until then we have to work with what we've got and realise that being able to meet up and share each other's lives is more important than where it happens. Improvise, adapt and overcome as Bear Grylls would say. Wise words.



Rowlands Gill & Highfield Mutual Aid Group

Following implementation of the Covid Lockdown in March, representatives from local community groups, councillors and volunteers came together over Zoom meetings to discuss the local support required. We teamed up with the Pickle Palace and opened the Church hall as a delivery, packing and distribution centre for food parcels distributing surplus supermarket food to those in need.

Linking up with Age UK and using their Charity Log job progression system we were able to provide a shopping and prescription collection service for people who were shielding and had no family, friends or other support networks to help. In conjunction with the local Methodist Homes Live At Home scheme regular befriending calls were offered to those who were isolated and just needed to hear a friendly voice. Our helpline was also able to sign post people in need to other services available from local groups, charities and statutory bodies.

One of the real positives of the pandemic is how local groups have come together, pooled resources and worked hard with the common aim of supporting our local community. It made a real difference to a lot of people.

More than a Food Bank

'We are not a food bank' is the phrase used most often when describing the Pickle Palace. Food banks are based on a referral system and tend to be rather bureaucratic whereas the Pickle Palace, which is a Community Based Company, is open to everyone.

The Pickle Palace runs 3 'Pay as you feel' markets in the circuit, in Highfield, Chopwell and Greenside. In addition to the markets there is a weekly delivery service to those who are shielding, isolating or who have no transport to get to a market. The concept is simple and the benefits to individuals, communities and the environment are massive. Surplus food which is perfectly edible and in great condition is 'rescued' from local supermarkets and taken to the markets where anyone is welcome to come, browse and take what they want in return for a donation. One concern often expressed is a fear that by attending the markets visitors are taking food from people who are in greater need. This is not a problem. The amount of surplus food collected each week is huge and more than enough to go around.

The markets are well attended by a wide range of people: some who have no option due to financial difficulties, some who want to pick up a bargain, some who want to avoid waste and help the environment and others who want a socially distanced chat with the volunteers and customers. Several members of Strathmore Road Church have been involved as volunteers all year and the delivery operation was operated from SRMC before the building was closed for the building work. The Highfield market in particular sees several church members packing boxes, unloading vans, welcoming visitors and staffing the market. It is wonderful to see lots of church members visiting the markets which are all Covid secure and are an opportunity to catch up with people who we would normally see in church weekly but have not seen for many months.

The other question often asked is about the name Pickle Palace. Simple. The surplus food is also used to make fantastic jams, chutneys and you guessed it, pickles.

The Market times are:

Mondays Highfield Carers Trust 10.30 to 11.30

Wednesdays Chopwell Community Centre 11.00 to 12.00

Thursdays Greenside Cricket Club 11.00 to 12.00

More details are on <https://www.facebook.com/hannahspicklepalace>





Christmas at Ravensworth Road

Not being able to do what you normally do certainly makes you think outside the box for alternatives; and now, in the run-up to Christmas it's a bit like that situation when you retire and people ask you how you're going to fill your time and you can honestly answer that you don't know how you ever had time to go to work. We certainly seem to have much more in the pipeline than would be usual:

- 1) We have started work on what we are only slightly irreverently calling the Baby Jesus Project. Last year, for the first time, we had a manger scene outside church – it was a bit stark with just the wooden stable and a crib carrying the baby Jesus brick! This year we are populating it with characters painted in a very simple rustic style and plan to have it in place by Advent Sunday. We were very fortunate to have the materials provided, cut to size, free of charge by a local tradesman. It's probably taken more time coordinating who is allowed to go when to do the painting than has the actual painting.
- 2) We are doing our own version of 'Tyneside Rocks' with a group of us (in our own homes) painting pebbles with simple Christmas scenes. These will be scattered around the vicinity of the church for people to find and take. We will also be making sure that all our friends in Wallace House nursing home, next door, receive one with a little booklet of the Christmas story.
- 3) No matter what the outcome of the current lockdown we will still not be able to meet on Sundays for a while but on Sunday 20th December we are planning a socially distanced outdoor service around the crib. Everyone is being advised to wrap up warm and, I guess, the length of the service may be governed by the weather conditions.
- 4) Our usual Christmas dinner won't be possible this year so, following a very successful harvest afternoon tea, we will be providing all our members and friends with an afternoon tea treat box so that they can invite a friend who has maybe been very supportive or extra-friendly during these difficult times to share with them as a way of thanks (assuming we're allowed into each other's homes by then). We aim to all be eating at the same time as we share in our virtual tea.
- 5) It hardly seems possible, but last Sunday was our 30th phone-in service since the restrictions were introduced. While the services started off aimed at Brigitta's churches they are open to anyone. If the rules haven't relaxed and churches are still not being allowed to meet for worship, or your church is meeting again but you don't yet feel able to go, please feel free to join us at 11am each Sunday; you can get the contact details from your minister. The phone-in services will continue for as long as they are needed. When we first started, I think everyone was rather sceptical about how a telephone service could work but everyone 'attending' has found them extremely useful – it's surprising how worshipful you can be on the telephone.
- 6) We will be distributing Christmas cards around the locality and including a small poster 'rainbows to angels' which we are asking people to display in their windows during advent, similar to the rainbows that were a common sight in the early days of lockdown. They carry the simple message:

'We followed the rainbows to find hope...now let's follow the angels bringing comfort and joy'.

Just Finance

At the moment many more people are experiencing financial hardship, some for the first time in their lives, often leading to mental health concerns as well as practical difficulties.

The Just Finance Initiative are running online training to equip those attending with the information they need to support people struggling with low income, high costs, budgeting, debt etc. It will not make you an advisor but it will give the confidence to at least signpost people in the right direction. **For more information or to sign up contact Keith Stamp on keith.stamp@outlook.com or on 07931521465**

Two's Company - Telephone Befriending

'Two's Company' was launched in April and is a telephone befriending tool for churches based on a framework already established for the 'Linking Lives' home visiting projects. Two's Company is designed to be a tool which churches can use to reach those people in their communities hardest hit by lockdown measures. The model is quick, easy, and safe to set up and is free of charge (although donations are welcome). Training is carried out by Linking Lives UK for local coordinators by Zoom, who can then cascade that training to local volunteers. Calls are made to Link Friends on a weekly basis for around 30 minutes and this is often a real lifeline to those most marginalised and unable to engage with friends or family. Referrals are received from social workers, social prescribers (community connectors etc.) and from family members. Linking Lives UK are still inviting churches to partner with them to provide this vital service to their communities. Communities Together Durham and Newcastle and North East Churches Acting Together are partnering with them and are hosting an information webinar for churches who wish to find out more.

Two's Company information webinar Thursday 21st January 2021 at 1pm

Register via <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/twos-company-telephone-befriending-tickets-129008912129>

For more information and contact Joanne Thorns on regionalofficer@necat.co.uk;

To find out more www.linkinglives.uk