

Village Hope's aim is to proclaim and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in the villages of Britain, in order to establish effective Christian witness. We seek to encourage and enable village churches in Bible teaching, prayer, worship and evangelism.

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A better country

by Peter Carruthers, Executive Director

Last month marked 100 years since the end of WW1, when we remembered the millions who died in that war and subsequent wars. Every town and village in Britain lost some of their menfolk.

As I write, a different conflict is raging, also centred on Europe. Our nation's future is in the balance, and many, including farmers, are anxious and fearful. In many places, there 'wars and rumours of wars' as the 'nations rage and the kingdoms totter', and many suffer increased persecution for the name of Christ.

Now, however, we heading towards

Christmas, when we celebrate the coming into the world of the One who will 'speak peace to the nations' and 'whose dominion is to the ends of the earth'.

As the 'nations rage against the Lord and His Anointed', let us pray that the Lord will 'bless His people with peace', and that 'His way may be known on earth and His saving power among all nations'.

Centenary

Next year, 2019, will mark 100 years since the founding of our predecessor organisation, the Friends Evangelistic Band. As we revisit the story, we are

inspired by our founders' simple commitment to prayer and to 'preaching the Gospel to every creature'.

Conference

We shall mark this Centenary at our Annual Conference in April, which we hope you will make a special effort to attend (see box for details), and with a special Centenary edition of Village Link, and, possibly, a mini-conference later in the year.

Farming and the land

This year has been especially turbulent for farmers, as our Chairman John Plumb recounts below, and this edition Village Link takes 'farming and

Here at Village Hope we have been emphasising the different characteristics of the seasons through our prayer material, and so demonstrating the many facets of the Creator. The writer of Ecclesiastes famously points out that life also has many different seasons, and that we should expect to encounter both summers and winters in our experience.



We are sensing that there is a growing momentum for prayer for rural Britain in our nation at present, and we are excited to be a part of that 'season'. It is for God to bring forth fruit from the season, but it is our responsibility to

'do what we see the Father doing', and to obey His calling as Lord in our lives. We hope that this edition of Village Link communicates some of that sense to you this winter.

May we take this opportunity to wish all our readers a happy Christmas and a peaceful new year.

Tim Prince

the land' as its special theme. We are pleased to welcome two guest writers to help address this - John Martin and Adrian Cullis.

Village Link themes

In future editions of Village Link, we plan to focus on specific themes, while retaining Village Hope 'family' news and updates. We hope that this will widen Village Link's appeal, and that you will feel able to share it with others not yet on our mailing list. Request further copies if needed.

Prayer

We continue to issue monthly 'Seeds

of Prayer', as part of the Hope for the Countryside project. On 3 November, we held a Hope for the Countryside prayer day in Shrewsbury, in partnership with Shropshire Hope. More than 60 attended - twice the number at last year's conference, and indicative of a widening response to the call to pray for rural Britain.

Community

Strengthening our community remains a priority and a challenge, especially as we are all so dispersed. Nevertheless, the Village Hope Fellowship has grown and more have shared prayer needs via Village Prayer.

As well as the Shrewsbury event, we held three mini-conferences, in Kent, Cambridgeshire and Herefordshire to share in fellowship encourage those working in these locations.

As we reflect on the turmoil in our world, we know that 'this world is passing away' and we are those who 'desire a better, that is, a heavenly country'. But, we know also that we shall be called to account for what we have done with those things entrusted to us. We very much value your prayers and partnership as we seek to do this.

Top Barn Farm

Serving God in rural Worcestershire

by Tim Prince

One of our partners in the 'Hope for the Countryside' project is Top Barn Trust, which is responsible for the site at Top Barn Farm near Worcester. I attended an Open Day recently to get to know them a little better and to see some of the projects they are hosting on the farm that benefit the local and regional community.

Top Barn is an interesting mix of commercial, agricultural, educational and social enterprises. As well as a working farm, the agricultural element includes a large packing facility for supermarkets. The University of Worcester has a 'Lakeside Campus' on site, and the thriving Business Centre plays host to around 70 small businesses. The Harvest Shop and Farm Park are open to the public.

But it was the social enterprises that I had really come to see. David and Di Harper, the owners of Top Barn Farm, began their first cooperation with a social enterprise in 1998, and the adventure has grown organically ever since. Growth has brought its fair share of problems, but a strict set of common standards across all projects and a commitment to the Christian way of life has ensured that all the

challenges have been met and overcome. Project leaders meet together regularly to talk and pray, and directors and trustees work with consultants who ensure everything that takes place does so within the strict legal and health and safety guidelines.

As we travelled in our minibus around the farm, we were shown several



inspirational enterprises, the first of which was the **Good Soil Project**. This not-for-profit organisation and registered charity has three elements; the farm project, a supported housing project and a weekly food distribution to homeless folk in the city of Worcester. The project works with the homeless, those suffering with drug or alcohol addictions, and people who have fallen on hard times. Five people are housed in supported housing in the city, and they work for four days a

gardening round, then working on paid short contracts, to finally returning to work. 'Success' is varied, with some people moving through within a couple of years, whereas others remain in the farm environment for much longer.

A short drive round a large lake is **Bonterre**, an alternative education provider that works with children with special educational needs, behavioural problems and other difficulties

In addition to this work, the project also hosts 'Farm to Fork' days for local school groups, and events in association with the National Citizen Service. The staff include a manager, a former teacher, four session workers and a horticultural apprentice. 95% of the children are boys, and Bonterre is working on a 'Land Girls' programme to encourage girls into the project and onto the land.

Finally we made our way to the **Wild Goose Project**, a care farm for adults with learning difficulties. This project is in the middle of a move to a new location within Top Barn Farm, where it hopes to provide a forty acre site including a wildlife reserve and gardens with polytunnels. The current site is run as a permaculture centre, caring for the land, for people and ensuring a fair share for all, and the adults, or students as they are known, are drawn into a family atmosphere together with the twelve staff and fourteen volunteers.

All of these projects have an aim to come alongside people in difficult circumstances and to get to know them on a personal level. They are able to "do small things that make massive differences" in the lives of those they work with. Their Christian ethos must be carefully proclaimed, primarily through what they do rather than what they say, so each one treads a delicate path of cooperation with local authorities and with the God whom they serve.

Top Barn Farm can be found at topbarn.co.uk, and this site contains links, via the 'home' tab, to the other organisations mentioned here, as well as others based on the site.



week at the farm project. Others also come onto the project for two days a week, but the ethos is to work one-to-one as often as possible.

Using these assets the aim of the project is to build up self-worth so that those being helped can re-establish their own lives successfully. To this end there is a return to work 'ladder' in place, beginning with working on the farm project, then progressing onto a small, supervised

including dyslexia. In a similar way, they too use the land to bring therapeutic benefit to the children in their care, coupled with carpentry, bushcraft, fishing and art, while slipping in elements of the National Curriculum without the children noticing. Once the children have reached a certain age, they can also study on site for horticultural qualifications, and the flower garden pictured supplies flowers to a local National Trust property.



A year in farming

by John Plumb

The farming year, like the Hebrew calendar, begins and ends in autumn. On reflection, this year (2018) has been a most interesting one.

About a year ago, a friend of mine, who I know to be a prophet, predicted a harsh winter. And so came the 'beast from the east', closely followed by a seemingly endless period of wet, during which my friend said: 'now prepare for drought', and so it was. During the summer, delightful for some, but disastrous for others, I never prayed for rain, because, if God is warning our nation to repent then all the climatic and political turmoil must point us back to Him. I did, however, ask for the Lord's provision – after all Isaac sowed in a drought and reaped a hundred fold!

Back in the spring there was dismay in the farming industry. Wet winter turned to hot summer in a matter of days, so much essential spring work – seeding, spraying, fertilising – was

rushed, or worse, neglected. And then the drought, moving stock around bare pastures, starting to use meagre feed stocks, watching crops shrivel and a premature harvest. How we appreciated the rain when it came, pastures turning from brown to green in days, the ground softened so it can be prepared for next year's cropping.

The prophecies of Joel and Amos remind us of the connection between apostasy and drought. Let us not forget the brief inconvenience (for farmers at least) of a hot and dry summer, and turn to the Lord in repentance from our idolatrous ways. Ezekiel warns the people who are 'arrogant, overfed and unconcerned, who do not help the poor and needy'. May we heed that warning.

On a political level, the new Agriculture Bill makes it clear that the current subsidies for British food production will be phased out. This will lead to a period of grave uncertainty as the

industry readjusts to a new regime and a new set of environmental priorities.

As I write, we are enjoying a glorious autumn, enjoying the spectacle of dawn and dusk, admiring the 'harvest moon', as we work towards a new year of sowing and harvesting.

May the nations praise you, O God.

Yes, may all the nations praise you.

Then the earth will yield its harvests, and God, our God, will richly bless us.

Yes, God will bless us,

and people all over the world will fear him. (Psalm 67:5-7)

I love this Psalm because praise precedes harvest. God invites an unconditional response from His people, and then blesses anyway.

It is truly a privilege and an awesome responsibility to be a steward of the amazing soil and spectacular ecosystem that Jesus, architect of the universe, has made - so that we might participate in His creation.

Picking grains on the sabbath

by Peter Carruthers

The Gospels record six disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees over the Sabbath. Five concern healing. The sixth (Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5) concerns picking grain on a Sabbath and opens up a wealth of biblical principles for farming and food production.

Sabbath and Jubilee

The Sabbath was instituted as a day of rest - for family, workers and livestock (Exodus 20:8-11). The legitimate work of six days of the week was to cease on the seventh, reflecting the pattern of God's own work of creation. The Sabbath day anticipated the Sabbath year, a year for freeing slaves (Exodus 21:1-11), cancelling debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11) and resting the land (Leviticus 25:1-7). Both anticipated the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:8-55), a Sabbath of Sabbaths, in which 'each was to return to his property and each to his family'. The Jubilee, in effect, placed strict limits on the growth of private wealth, as land could not be sold permanently.

Sabbath and Jubilee protected the voiceless and powerless - servants, the poor, domestic animals and the land itself. Jesus inaugurated his ministry by announcing the Jubilee (Luke 4:16-21), and in this story He drives the same point home, stating 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'.

As Jesus says, the disciples were guiltless. Picking grain by hand from someone else's field was acceptable (Deuteronomy 23:25); their doing so on the Sabbath was a breach of rabbinic, not biblical, law. In contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus proclaimed the Sabbath as a festival of freedom - for people and the land.

Sabbath and Jubilee give us three principles for farming and food production; sharing with the poor, caring for the earth and restraining power and wealth.

Sharing with the poor

'Sharing' is most explicit in the story. The disciples represent the poor and hungry, with whom the good fruits of the earth should be shared. Luke's account

suggests that the grain was barley, the food of the poor, rather than wheat.

The OT economy, in general, shows a special concern for the poor. Laws of tithing (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) and gleaning (Deuteronomy 24:19-22) provide for those without assets or power (ie strangers, widows, orphans). Deuteronomy 14:29 implies that the success of future harvests depends on caring for the poor and needy.

Caring for the earth

The 'caring for the earth' principle is also evident, although less explicit. The Son of Man, descended from him who was made from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7), is also Lord of the earth (ie 'one greater than the temple') and Lord of the Sabbath, the 'Lord of mercy' - a mercy that, as the Psalmist says, is over all His works (Psalm 145:9).

Restraining power and wealth

The principle of restraint, in the use of land, livestock and labour, and on the concentration and expansion of an individual's wealth, is evident in many biblical themes, in addition to Sabbath and Jubilee, including as laws relating to usury (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:36, Deuteronomy, 23:19), security for loans (Exodus 22:26, Deuteronomy 24:6, Deuteronomy 24:10), and moving boundary stones (Deuteronomy 19:14).

Weighed in the balance

These principles show how God intended ancient Israel to live and farm as His people. But they also present a paradigm for farming and living God's way for all people in all times, and they set out the standards by which He judges our stewardship of the earth.

Against the above principles, global farming is 'weighed in the balance and found wanting'. There are huge

disparities between those who have a surfeit of food and those who go hungry, and enormous imbalances between powerful buyers and powerless producers and sellers. Although we are much more aware of the impacts of farming, especially modern industrial agriculture, on the natural environment, agriculture continues to erode soils, species and ecosystems. Instead of keeping the Sabbath, we have a 'sabbathless society'.

Nevertheless, for Christians, who believe the Bible and follow Him who is the Lord of the Sabbath, these principles provide a basis for us to 'buck the trend' and be a 'light to the nations', as Israel was to be. Across the world, many Christian farmers have sought to farm, as far as possible, in line with biblical principles. For example, the 'Farming God's Way' training programme (www.farming-gods-way.org) uses the Bible as the foundation of its approach to alleviating poverty in rural Africa.

And these principles are not just for farmers. All of us, who consume the produce of the land and farming and make choices about what we buy and eat, can be guided by the imperatives to share with the poor, care for the earth and restrain excessive power and wealth.

Hope for the future

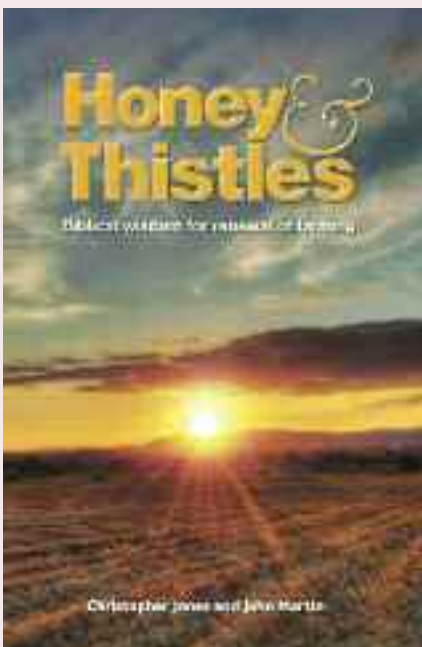
At the heart of the grain-fields story, however, is a message of hope. Sabbath and Jubilee themselves anticipate the Messianic age. Sabbath both looks back to the rest of creation and looks forward to its liberation. And a central part of that vision is of a transformed agriculture, "when the ploughman shall overtake the reaper" (Amos 9:13, ESV), and a world in which "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (Micah 4:4, ESV).

Honey and Thistles

The Bible, land, food and farming

by John Martin

John Martin is co-author, with Christopher Jones MBE, of 'Honey & Thistles - biblical wisdom for renewal of farming' (2015, Agriculture & Theology Project). Here, he identifies some important and timely 'takeaways' from this book.



In the deadly encounter between Queen Jezebel and Naboth the vineyard owner (1 Kings 21) we find contrasting attitudes to land. Jezebel was a foreign princess. She had not been raised in the community of Israel. So it would not have seemed out of line, having seen Naboth's vineyard and liked what she saw, that she would make an attempt to buy it. According to her lights, why not make an offer? The market price. Or maybe another vineyard? After all that is how things worked back home. But Jezebel had not reckoned on the vineyard owner's deeply ingrained attitude to ancestral land, land passed from father to son over many generations. When she finds Naboth immovable, Jezebel gets rough. We know the rest of the story. It is a parable of land and power that is often in play in our day too.

Land grabbing today

Now come with me to modern-day Uganda. Francis Longoli was a small farmer from Kiboga district of central Uganda. He is a lost soul. He has lost his livelihood. "I remember my land, three acres of coffee, many trees – mangoes and avocados. I had five acres of bananas, 10 beehives, two beautiful permanent houses. My land gave me everything. People used to call me 'omataka' – someone who owns land. Now that is no more. I am one of the poorest now." Mr Longoli and his family of six lost everything when, with three months' notice, the Ugandan government evicted him and thousands of others from the Mubende and Kiboga districts to make way for a UK-based forestry business to plant trees, to earn carbon credits and, ultimately, to sell the timber.

Land grabbing has been around, it seems, since just about the beginning of time and historic disputes and quarrels about land linger in many places. And, as the story of Mr Longoli and his neighbours exemplifies, there

is now a new wave of land acquisitions and appropriations by, or on behalf of, outsiders. These are motivated by fears of food security, or by opportunities to produce biofuels or other export crops. Poor communities are losing their homes and livelihoods.

There are other running sores. Many societies are destabilised by the concentration of land ownership into a few hands. For example, in Brazil 3.5% of the landowners own 56% of the arable land and the poorest 40% own 1%. In spite of this, 80% of the produce consumed in Brazil appears to come from small and medium farms.

Experience in the UK with the Farm Community Network suggests that some families' attitude to their land is like that of Naboth. They do readily cash in their land to escape from financial difficulties. Ties between farming families and their land can be very powerful.

Manna: symbol of a new dawn

Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Although we often forget, we rely on God for daily provision. But there is more involved in this petition. Jesus is echoing one of the most poignant stories from Israel's wilderness experience. Israel's migrant convoy suddenly find their stomachs pinching. In their anxiety, they dredge their memories for images of the lush food provision afforded by Egypt's irrigation economy. (I once travelled through the Nile Delta and saw the wonderful produce it continues to grow to this day). So God acts. He sends the hungry people Manna – angel food. To ensure a balance of protein he sends quails. There is more to this than physical provision. Manna symbolises a break from Israel's past. It is a clear red line between the life of slavery and trusting God in this new adventure. A new diet. New priorities

– gathering daily bread instead of gathering straw for bricks.

Sabbath rest

The Manna story is closely allied to the other huge theme emerging in the wilderness. The people were told to gather double rations to feed themselves on the Sabbath. God's abundant provision made this possible. Sabbath and Manna together represent a radical break from the past. The people are delivered from the unceasing grind of 24/7 toil. The people not only needed to get out of Egypt. They needed to get Egypt out of them. The Sabbath principle applied to animals as well as people and to the land itself. God gave Israel a land so that they could demonstrate what living God's way looked like. With it came another raft of principles: "no poor among you"; protection for old people, widows and orphans; gleaning so care for the poorest involved elements of self-help.

The Creator and His purposes

So much current farming policy has lost its moorings in the purposes of God and his ways. Psalm 24.1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's." If we think biblically we will see that we do not actually own land. It is God's provision and we are its stewards. Land and all the natural world is God's creation and it belongs to him. This means that even if, in the fullness of time, it will pass away, abusing it is the opposite of worship.

Hill and valley, hot and cold, rain or dry, soil, vegetation, animals, and opportunity to farm, all are created and sustained by God. This must affect the way farming is done and our understanding of "ownership". It can never be "my farm", "my estate", "our company's mine". What is one life time, one generation, in the time span of the earth?

*Copies of 'Honey & Thistles', are available from Agricultural Christian Fellowship -
cj@agriculturalchristianfellowship.o
rg.uk; 01788 510800.)*

From Shropshire to Ethiopia, and back

by Adrian Cullis

Village Hope has strong links with Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF). Our chairman, John Plumb is current chairman of ACF, our Executive Director, Peter Carruthers, is a former ACF chairman, and we are partners in the Hope for the Countryside project.

This article introduces Adrian Cullis, who has recently started working alongside ACF's long-serving National Coordinator, Christopher Jones MBE, to develop the work of ACF.



I was born on a farm in Shropshire, but moved to a farm in Lancashire, then to Cheshire, where my father lectured at Reaseheath Agricultural College. I joined ACF while studying at Seale Hayne College. After college, I spent two years in Kenya with Voluntary Service Overseas, then returned for further studies at Salford University. At Salford, I married Cathy. We have two children.

Much of my working life has been spent in the dryland areas of East Africa: Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. In Kenya and Uganda, we lived in remote towns in the north; in Ethiopia we lived in Addis Ababa, so our children could attend school. I continue to visit Ethiopia's drylands, working on livelihood-based approaches to drought mitigation. In fact, I am writing this en route to southern Ethiopia to conduct a short study on water for human and livestock populations.

Living and working in the drylands has shown me that families can survive in some of the world's harshest

environments solely through herding livestock. Livestock transform sparsely distributed browse and forage into milk and meat, which can be consumed or bartered for cereal grains. I also learned how central to survival is the mutual support of family and social networks. The people I have worked with are among the most capable and resourceful people I have ever met.

In July 2017, we moved to Church Stretton, Shropshire, where we attend the local church. I am continuing to do on short-term assignments in East Africa and the UK, and working alongside Christopher Jones on ACF matters.

ACF is open to all in agriculture and related activities who are trying to make sense of the blessings, frustrations and challenges associated with producing healthy food and stewarding God's earth. We issue a newsletter and run conferences. At present, we are seeking to bring Christian perspectives to the Agriculture Bill, which is passing through Parliament. Sadly, we feel the draft bill says too little about food and farming, food poverty or food security.

Returning to Shropshire after 13 years in Ethiopia, initially, I found myself out of touch with the many changes that have taken place. As I have caught up, I have found myself reflecting more than once on Franklin D Roosevelt's: "the test of progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little". It seems to me that by almost all measures – social, environmental and economic – that those who have too little, including in farming, are not receiving enough and, hence, that we are not making substantive progress towards God's kingdom on earth. The work of the ACF, therefore, seems even more important than it did when I joined all those years ago.

For more about ACF, visit acfhub.com; contact Adrian on adriancullis19@gmail.com.

The Village Hope Fellowship

by Tim Prince



Photo by Jasper Boer on Unsplash

The Village Hope Fellowship is now one year old. We launched it in November 2017 in order to fulfil an assignment to ‘re-build the community’ of Village Hope, following a period of much change. Just as Nehemiah took time to firstly rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, (an urgent task that put physical boundaries back into place), so he devoted an equal amount of time to setting the community of Israel in order, and Village Hope has been through a similar process. The Fellowship provided a place where those who had been a part of what FEBV used to be could rally around and belong once again.

But it has become apparent over the course of the year that other people who are working or living in rural situations also wanted to join in. At the time of writing there are 68 members of the Fellowship, many of whom have joined throughout 2018. The reasons for this are many, but the main one may be that within each one of us there is a need to belong, and to be part of a community, and the Village Hope Fellowship seeks to provide such a community for those in rural churches and situations. Indeed, a major strategy for the

church in general seems to be the strengthening of its own community in order to stand out as a witness in a land that is rapidly turning its back on traditional Christian values.

One of the difficult questions that we have sought to answer is exactly how does a geographically scattered group of people form themselves into a community? Our Prayer Framework is a part of the answer, providing members with prayers and meditations for the strengthening of faith and the discipline of regular prayer, and therefore helping each one to draw closer to the Source of the power of our lives and ministries. In particular we are trying to draw inspiration from the fact that God’s creation lies all around us and reveals the Creator in its beauty and diversity. Within this we have also allowed room for members to share from their own experiences and devotions. But we have also called members together to pray for specific people and churches, as reported within this edition of Village Link. We have also gathered for a one-day conference on November 17 at Prior’s Frome.

The challenge for the Fellowship is now two-fold; how to deepen that

sense of community, and how to appeal to others from outside of the traditional FEBV/Village Hope family. In order to do either of these things the Fellowship must continue to evolve, and to move with the needs of Christians in the countryside rather than stick to a rigid formula. It is interesting that our organisation has its roots in the Friends Prayer League, founded in 1893, and, as we celebrate next year the centenary of the founding of the Friends Evangelistic Band (FEB, our predecessor body) that grew out of that movement, there may be inspiration to be gleaned from our own history. Also we are making new connections with other Christian groups, some of whom are trying to do similar things in different contexts, and our own ‘Hope for the Countryside’ alliance is growing in strength. Please pray that the Lord will guide and direct the Fellowship to be useful to its members and fruitful in His service.

Anyone who has a concern for the rural church and a desire to be more closely identified with it can join the Village Hope Fellowship. Please contact us for more details, or to fill out a membership form.

Gathering for Prayer in 2018

by Tim Prince

When we received a request for prayer from Ricky Fawcett, who looks after the congregation that meets in Speldhurst Chapel in Kent, we felt that we needed to do more than just add an entry into the Prayer Diary.

Ricky's request was a heartfelt cry; he felt the burden of leading a church with very few people, and in a community that didn't seem to want the good news about Jesus Christ. Our response was inspired by the church at Antioch in Acts 13: 1-3, where they commissioned and sent Paul and Barnabas to go and preach the gospel - they were prepared to lose two of their best people from their own ministry and effort in order to bless others.



Our own efforts were slightly less costly! We called Fellowship members across the country to travel down to Kent for the day, or to pray intentionally for the gathering wherever they were. People from Worcestershire, Monmouthshire, Cambridgeshire, East Sussex and locally from Kent made the journey, and a number of local chapel supporters also gathered.

After a light lunch we joined together in prayer and worship to wait on the Lord. It is not easy to say, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You" (2 Chronicles 20: 12), but if it is done with an attitude of faith, then God loves to respond. Indeed, it was our conviction that, "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of

God", (Matthew 4: 4) that led us to believe that God would speak meaningfully and dynamically into the situation at Speldhurst.

It is amazing how the Lord can use such times to help you see things in a new light. With a combination of scriptures, discernment and fresh eyes, we were able to bless Ricky and the church and leave them genuinely strengthened in the Lord and encouraged that he and his little congregation still had their part to play in proclaiming and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ in the village of Speldhurst. Thank you to all who sent cards and messages of encouragement to Ricky.

Great Gidding

As a result of this day, a second opportunity arose for us to gather together, this time at Great Gidding in Cambridgeshire, at the chapel that is looked after by Eric and Karyn Gren. This chapel has been in the Village Hope/FEBV family for many years, and now it is full of soft chairs, making it a very comfortable place to hold a prayer gathering! Members travelled from Worcestershire, Monmouthshire and Kent, and joined with locals from the village and chapel in order to pray and spend time seeking the Lord.

Once again we were reliant on God to speak into the situation in such a way that the local leadership might be encouraged and inspired to realise their vision. On this occasion we were able to go prayer-walking around the village, which was both an interesting and stimulating exercise. One of the

lanes showed evidence of rushing water down its length in times of heavy rain, and this was used by someone to say that the Lord wants to sweep through by His Holy Spirit, cleaning, washing and restoring (Zech 13: 1).

We spent some time in prayer, and again a number of different words and scriptures were brought forward. Among the themes to emerge was the fact that God wants us to pray boldly (James 4: 2), and it was observed that many of the answers to prayer came when the pray-er was becoming desperate and therefore very real with God. No matter how impossible the situation looks, God is able to change everything for His glory and for the spread of His kingdom.

An unexpected 'side effect' of these gatherings was the sense of blessing that all those who had travelled were able to witness to. It would be hard to say that we had, "left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Me and the gospel" (Mark 10: 29), but the act of setting aside our time and resources produced an echo of this promise within us. What a privilege to stand with fellow Village Hope folks on their humble home territory in the name of Jesus!

Our thanks go to all who came to Speldhurst and Great Gidding, and to all who prayed for us on those two days. Special thanks to Helen who prepared the lunches, and to Ray Amey who brought a book table with many interesting titles as well as DVDs and bibles to both venues.



Land matters

by Peter Carruthers

Exploring the significance of land from a Biblical perspective.

There are many things that distinguish rural areas from urban areas in Britain, but what makes rural areas distinctive, above all else, is land. Rural areas are places where there are fewer people and buildings and more land - most of which is covered with farmland, woodland, water, or natural and semi-natural vegetation. About 17% of the UK's population live in what are defined as rural areas (which includes small country towns), but rural land accounts for about 88% of the UK land area.

And land matters to people. As American theologian Walter Brueggemann (1977, *The Land*, Fortress Press) stated, "land is

never simply physical dirt, but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience".

In Britain, land has many meanings.

Most land is farmland, and land is, first, a resource for producing food. This is widely appreciated by the British public. As a University of Cambridge survey concluded, "farming has a special place in most people's hearts, even though they know surprisingly little about it".

Rural land also provides landscapes and places to get closer to nature (evidenced, for example, by the approximately 1.42 billion amenity visits to the countryside in England made each year or the several million

members of UK landscape preservation and nature conservation charities). And the combination of food and farming and landscape and nature is important, with its intimation of the 'rural idyll' as both aesthetic and economic. As another American theologian, Norman Wirzba, put it, "for the British, rural land is both 'wilderness' and 'workplace' – a working (and not merely scenic) countryside is important to the British imagination".

Land and landscape also play a central role in British national identity. 'Country' in English means both 'rural land' and 'native land'. In a survey by Hovis in 2012, the British countryside was voted as the thing that made respondents most proud to be British, ahead of the British sense





of humour and the Royal Family (www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2116930).

So what might this special relationship between people and land mean for rural Christians?

First, it has strong biblical echoes. God chose to reveal Himself, His character and purposes, His ways and will, through a people and a land. As other articles here reveal, Israel's relationship with the Lord was inextricable from her relationship with the land. Israel (then and now) is only fully Israel when there is an alignment of a chosen people, the promised land and the "city of the great King" (Psalm 48:2). In exile, 'Israel' becomes 'Hebrews' or 'Jews', the land is desolate, and the city destroyed.

Second, it enjoins us to celebrate God's creation in the countryside and be exemplary custodians of the land, as urged in other articles here. Although we "desire a better, that is a heavenly country", we are to be judged by our faithfulness with those things with which the Master has entrusted us in this life (eg Matthew 25:14-30), including the earth itself. This imperative is reflected in the fourth value of the Village Hope Fellowship - 'celebrating God's creation: fully embracing the inspiration of God's creation and acting on our responsibility to care for it'.

Third, it prompts us to consider how we might act as 'conduits' to, and 'interpreters' of, land and nature. For example, our chairman John Plumb welcomes hundreds of

visitors to his farm, including many school children. By connecting with farming, the land and the Creation, they are enabled to come closer to the Creator. The 'Bonterre' and 'Wild Goose' projects at Top Barn (see Tim's article) both make very effective use of the land, animals and farming as therapy for both children and adults with learning difficulties.

Some of the ideas, facts and figures in the above article were originally presented to the 2013 Oxford Farming Conference - read the full report at www.ofc.org.uk/sites/ofc/files/papers/ofcreportfulllow.pdf Watch the conference presentation at www.villagehope.uk/blog/the-value-of-farming/



Name that carol

1. "Shepherds in the fields abiding"
2. "Draughty stable with an open door"
3. "See the blazing yule before us"
4. "And with His blood mankind has bought"
5. "As red as any blood"
6. "Offspring of a virgin's womb"
7. "Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign"
8. "And man at war with man hears not the love song that they bring"
9. "No ear may hear His coming"
10. "Tears and smiles like us He knew"
11. "He who throned in height sublime sits amid the cherubim"
12. "Glory to God in the highest"

Answers: 1: Angels from the realms of glory 2: Calypso carol 3: Deck the Halls 4: The first nowell 5: The holly and the ivy 6: Hark the herald angels sing 7: In the bleak midwinter 8: It came upon the midnight clear 9: O little town of Bethlehem 10: Once in Royal David's city 11: See amid the winter's snow 12: O come all ye faithful.

Christmas Quiz



1. Which town does not dream?
2. Which saint invented the Christmas Crib?
3. In the Muppets' Christmas Carol, who played Scrooge?
4. If you were in Poland, what might you eat on Christmas Eve?
5. In the legend of St Nicholas, were did he leave money for children?
6. Of which tribe of Israel was Anna, who met Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the Temple?
7. Who banned Christmas in Britain for 16 years?
8. Which musical instrument features in this year's John Lewis Christmas advert?
9. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, which Old Testament prophet did he quote?
10. In Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," which is the first ghost to visit Scrooge?

Answers: 1: Bethlehem 2: Francis 3: Michael Caine 4: Carp 5: Shoes 6: Asher 7: Oliver Cromwell 8: Piano 9: Malachi 10: The ghost of Jacob Marley

Giving to Village Hope

Hitherto, we have offered Village Link free of charge, and we would like to continue to do so. However, as we are sure you will understand, publishing Village Link incurs costs of printing and postage, as well as appreciable staff time.

Please will you consider giving towards the costs of producing this magazine and towards the wider work of Village Hope. You can give by cheque or via BACS using the enclosed form. If you are a tax payer and you complete the Gift Aid declaration will enable us to claim an additional 25p for every £1 you donate.

One-off or occasional gifts are much appreciated, but please consider becoming a 'Village Hope Seed Sower'. Seed Sowers share in our ministry through regular giving, and this will enable us to extend Village Hope's work of mobilising prayer, advancing understanding and supporting and strengthening churches in rural Britain.

Village Hope Annual Conference

26 to 28 April 2019

**Regents Bible College,
West Malvern,
Worcestershire.**

Save the date, it would be great to see you there.

Registration forms available in the new year.