

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.

Strengthening fellowship for mission

By Peter Carruthers, Executive Director

Since the last Village Link, we have held our annual conference, once again at the Elim Conference Centre in West Malvern.

Our theme was 'strengthening fellowship for mission'. We were blessed with two outstanding guest speakers as well as inspiring input from our trustees and team. And we enjoyed times of worship, prayer and fellowship amidst the beauty of the Malvern Hills. As you know, our former chairman, Tim Shelley, stepped down in January this year and John Plumb was elected as our new chairman. Both Tim and John attended the Conference, so we were able to thank Tim formally for his many years of service as trustee and chairman and to

introduce John, who addressed us on the Saturday evening. We have provisionally booked the Conference Centre for 26 - 28 April next year. Please put the dates in your diary.

Prayer

In April, we launched the first 'Seeds of Prayer' as part of the Hope for the Countryside project, in partnership with Agricultural Christian Fellowship, Top Barn Trust and the World Prayer Centre. The project aims to mobilise and resource prayer for rural Britain. Seeds of Prayer is a monthly prayer guide, which can be used for personal prayer or as a resource for church services and prayer meetings. We have already received good feedback from those who have found 'Seeds of

Prayer' useful and inspiring. The latest edition is enclosed. If you are not already receiving this, please contact us to join the mailing list.

The Village Hope Fellowship continues to grow and provide a focus for shared prayer and reflection via the monthly prayer framework and online forum. If you are not already a member, please consider joining by contacting Tim at the office.

Understanding

I realise the launch of our new website has been delayed somewhat, but it should be up within the next month or so. As well as explaining what Village Hope is and what it does,

Welcome to another 'bumper' edition of Village Link.

Just as last year, we felt that our annual conference had been such a blessed and challenging time for everyone present that we decided to take all the different aspects of the weekend and report on them in full for the benefit of all. It is our prayer that something here will also speak to you.



God is still working His purposes out in our villages and rural spaces. The evidence for this is not high profile, but then so much of what God does is hidden from the glare of publicity.

Simple faith and trusting obedience remain the primary qualifications that God needs in each of us to do His work, wherever we find ourselves.

As someone has said, "take New Testament faith, apply New Testament methods, and you get New Testament results."

Tim Prince

the website will signpost resources for rural mission and ministry as an expression of our vision to promote 'understanding' and share good news and good practice. So, please check back at villagehope.org.uk. In the meantime, Tim and I are blogging at villagehope.uk/blog and this is live now. (Please note, these addresses have no '.org')

Teams

Part of our vision is to mobilise

apostolic teams to support and strengthen rural churches. One way we hope to do this, and in which you may be able to play a part, is explained in the article below on 'making the connections'.

Centres

We also remain committed to our vision of centres of prayer, study and equipping, and continue to work with associates and friends to take this forward.

Other matters

In April, Grace Tucker resigned from our Board of Trustees. We are very grateful to her for nearly three years of service. We recently mailed out a questionnaire survey to all our subscribers, along with information on data protection. If you have not completed the survey (which you can do on paper or online), we would be very grateful if you would do so. Your responses will be a great help to us and we hope to you also.

Strengthening church

by Peter Carruthers

On the first evening of our conference, our Executive Director, Peter Carruthers, introduced the weekend with a personal take on the conference theme, 'strengthening fellowship for mission', concentrating on 'church'. Below is an edited version of his address.

Strengthening

'Strengthen' occurs about twenty times in the NT, translating Greek words, with meanings of 'supporting', 'upholding', 'making more firm', 'straightening out' and 'fixing in place'.

In Hebrews (12:12), the writer exhorts us to 'strengthen our weak knees'. Anyone who has had a knee injury knows that strengthening the knee means strengthening the muscles around it so that the joint is supported. This calls for time, perseverance, and, ideally, the help of a physiotherapist. Strengthening is not just about words of encouragement; it takes knowledge, skill, discipline and effort.

The main verses of interest to us, however, are in Acts 15 & 16. Here, we see Paul and his co-workers first planting churches and then returning to strengthen them, so that they both deepen in faith and increase in numbers.

'Strengthening the churches' is at the heart of Village Hope's purpose. But a commitment to strengthening churches poses something of a dilemma, particularly for a rural ministry. There need to be churches to strengthen and they need to be capable of being strengthened. Rural areas have more churches (in the institutional sense) per head, but there are often few

people in them; some may be resistant to anything other than 'business as usual', and some may not bear a great deal of resemblance to churches in the NT sense.

So, what is 'church' and how do we strengthen it?

Church

Church matters, because the (local) church is a "sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society" (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, SPCK, p 233). And, for us here now, it is an essential locus of fellowship and the agent of mission. But what is church?

Centuries of Christendom makes applying NT ecclesiology difficult. Yet now, our post-Christian world looks more like the world of the NT than it has for most of Christian history and maybe this makes reconfiguring church a little easier.

For churches to be truly prophetic and effective in mission in our present context, some argue that churches must rediscover and reaffirm their heritages ("hold to the traditions", 2 Thessalonians 2:15), while others urge us to abandon the old and start afresh with one or other understanding of the NT pattern ('new wine needs new wineskins', Matthew 9:17). (Others offer new paradigms

altogether - seemingly informed more by the spirit of the age than the words of Scripture).

Thinking about this prompted me to revisit my own experience of 'house church'. Following the common pattern, my group left a denominational church and met informally in homes. We were influenced by the then 'restoration' movement, with its compelling vision that under the leadership of a new breed of apostles and prophets, the Lord was restoring His Church, freeing it from the shackles of the old, worn-out institutions, and bringing it back to its NT roots. Yet, it was not long before these groupings began to look somewhat like the institutions they had left, moving from 'back-to-basics' house church to



hiring halls, buying buildings, and setting up hierarchies. Today, some have become successful new denominations in their own right.

My own group, however, did not go down that road. Rather, we made a decision to reconnect with various denominational churches, while still retaining close fellowship and community. At the time, I think the argument was: the denominations are here to stay, most of our Christian brothers and sisters are in them, they have the resources and visibility, so why try to reproduce them? Simply relocating church achieves little, or just produces more institutions. And the traditional churches had much that we were still drawing on or even discovering for first time.

At the same time, the traditional churches did not provide the fellowship and community possible around households (and that seemed for us more in line with the NT pattern). The answer was to combine church affiliation with home-centred fellowship and community.

Things have moved on since then. Some denominational churches have experienced something of a renaissance, with successful outreach programmes, growing congregations, social-care initiatives, etc. But the 'alternative' church movement (in the broadest sense), configured around 'back-to-NT basics' and/or 'cultural relevance', has also burgeoned – into an array of house churches, 'simple church', 'emergent church', 'fresh expressions', 'new forms', 'missional communities', cell groups, prayer networks, '24-7 prayer', 'new monasticism', houses of prayer, 'church on the streets', walking church, 'Celtic communities' and so on. There is also an increasing number of people who believe, but do not belong – an unchurched, de-churched or post-church community!

So things have become decidedly more complex, perplexing, confusing! Nevertheless, I still believe there is such as thing as authentic church and there are marks of maturity in a church - and we are to press on to maturity (Hebrews 6:1) and strengthen churches so they become more authentic.

Strengthening church

So, how do we strengthen church? My concern here is to answer this question in NT terms rather than in terms of the latest church-growth 'fix'. I suggest six strategies, which reflect the key characteristics of authentic, mature church. There are, of course, more.

Order

Strengthening a church means setting "in order the things that are lacking" (Titus 1:5), in terms of leadership and ministry. Paul urged Titus to "appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5) and explained to the Ephesians that the church grows to maturity and is equipped for service through the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-teachers (Ephesians 4:7-16). The NT also has much to say about church discipline, an aspect of church life that runs right against our current culture!

Conduct

The NT also has a great deal to say about how we should live and especially how we should conduct ourselves in the "household of faith" (Galatians 6:10) and as "God's chosen ones" (Colossians 3:12-14). The distinguishing mark of Jesus's



disciples, after all, is that we love one another (John 13:35).

Doctrine

A third mark of authentic and mature church is a concern for "sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). The new church of Acts 2, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Paul urged the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

This is, I believe, an absolutely critical issue now, but not necessarily a popular one. In the not so distant past, there was perhaps a fairly simple division between 'liberal' and 'conservative' understandings of Scripture. But now, the whole church

scene is much more complex and fragmented, reflecting the wider culture.

Deception has always been a possibility, and we are warned that it will become more so in the "latter times" (1 Timothy 4:1). In such times, it is essential to 'underpin' our (biblical) foundations.

Fellowship

The early church also "devoted themselves to fellowship" (Acts 2:42), to sharing meals with one another "from house to house" (Acts 2:46) and even to a shared economy (Acts 4:32).

Deepening fellowship is not just an imperative at all times, but also a specific response to our present times (Hebrews 10:25). And this may be worked out within, alongside or even outside institutional affiliation.

Fellowship is not a cup of tea after a church service, nor a club or common interest group, but a shared life of prayer, loving relationships, and service of others. Ultimately, fellowship is 'of the Holy Spirit' (2 Corinthians 13:14) as we affirm every time we share in the Grace. The church is the community of the Spirit and our fellowship is with the Lord and with believers present and with the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before.

Mission

Finally, strengthening church means strengthening mission. Authentic church preaches the Gospel and makes disciples. How to do this was the concern of other Conference presentations, some of which are reported in other articles here.

Bringing hope to the villages of Eastern Europe

by Tim Prince

It is becoming customary at our conferences to spend a portion of our time praying for others away from our immediate areas of concern, and this year we were led by Magnus Proctor. Magnus is our accountant, but when he is not busy doing figures, he is to be found encouraging the churches in Bulgaria and Ukraine.

Europe is now the neediest continent in the world as far as spiritual things are concerned; only 2.3% of the population are practising Christians, and there are over 250,000 towns and villages in Europe without a church. In Eastern Europe, the Church is predominantly Eastern Orthodox, although there are many evangelical and charismatic groups. The Orthodox church is political, and it often opposes evangelism with the threat of excommunication. However, many churches are small and rural, and the people that make up these churches are committed and love the Lord Jesus with a passion.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a population of around seven million, including persecuted minorities of Gypsies and Muslims. Many rural people travel to the UK for the summer months to work in the fields before returning to their families for the rest of the year, who are becoming Christians while they are here. Magnus met a Gypsy whilst he was in England who became a Christian and then returned to Bulgaria determined to start a church. When Magnus visited some months later to encourage him, he found a congregation of fifty joyful new Christians packed into his basement.

Despite persecution, the Gypsy church continues to grow. They are not afraid to turn up in a spot, block the road and hold an evangelistic service there and then, attended by hundreds of people. Part of Magnus' work is to encourage them to come together with the ethnic Bulgarians in their churches, but this does not come naturally to them.

Please pray for the saints in Bulgaria;

some have lost their lives because they stood up against factions who oppose biblical Christianity, such as the Mafia, Communist sympathisers and even some elements of the Orthodox church itself.

Ukraine

The situation in Ukraine is no better. There is an on-going war in the east with Russia, and there is much ministry going on amongst soldiers travelling eastwards to participate in the defence of the country. There is also a constant stream of refugees flowing back westwards away from the fighting, which has caused crisis among the population, but has presented opportunities for the church to show compassion.

Magnus is involved with a team of young people who passionately minister Jesus in this environment. He asks that we pray for an alcoholic man who met Jesus when he was about to shoot himself, and now looks after ten children, seven of which are refugees. Pray too for another alcoholic whom Jesus rescued from bondage, who worships in a village church, and for a man whose ministry is to help Jews to emigrate to Israel.

This is a country that knows hardship. Even after fifty years of Communist persecution when over three million Ukrainians died, their suffering is not over. As a consequence, the few Christians there really mean business; a three-day conference consists of fasting and prayer throughout the entire duration.

When asked how we can pray for the church in these places, Magnus requested that we pray for the



Magnus Proctor

Christians to be given a heart to reach back into their largely abandoned home villages, and for a sense of joy in their calling to follow the Lord. He also asked that we pray for God to continue to raise up Christians in unexpected places who can minister His grace. Pray for a police chief in a remote area who has become a Christian through former officers in the Soviet Army. Pray for Christians among asylum seekers and refugees from the east and the Crimea who are often very open to the gospel. Pray for links to be established between churches who are evangelising the people around them.

Magnus will be back in Ukraine very soon, when he will be joining a day of prayer in Kiev led by David Hathaway. The prayer of the people is urgent: with Russian invasion and a government crackdown on evangelical churches both real possibilities, they are crying out to God and fasting regularly, and he is going to offer support and encouragement. He is also in Bulgaria in a couple months time where he hopes to build some links between churches in both countries. Finally he is speaking in churches around the UK in order to bring the situation to the attention of God's people here at home.

Disciples who make disciples

by Tim Prince



Sally Gaze

Once again this year we looked to the Anglican church in East Anglia to supply one of our guest speakers, this time The Rev'd Canon Sally Gaze who is the Dean of Rural Mission Consultancy for the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. Sally previously worked in Norfolk in the Tas Valley Team Ministry. She has been asked by the Diocese to take what was effective in Norfolk and spread it throughout Suffolk, and she came to share some of those insights with us so that we might be enabled in the same way.

Rural church

Sally began with an open session to discuss the different factors that influence rural church. Some of the thoughts put forward were:

- Rural church is more relational, because everyone knows everyone else, and a 'family' church generally arises, which can be a needs-based church with an emphasis on individuals.
- Rural church can be more traditional, but also more diverse. The increasing mix of backgrounds, cultures and resources of rural people can be a tremendous asset and not a stumbling block.
- Smaller, rural churches tend to try to copy large town and city churches, and often fail due to a lack of resources. There are other, unique ways to minister as church in the countryside based on local needs.
- Rural churches often have farmers, who can be a great asset to the church, particularly as more farmers seek ways to use their farms in ministry.
- Rural churches are often about the minister, who runs around trying to do everything. A healthy church seeks to encourage ministry throughout the whole body of the church.

Tas Valley

Then Sally began to tell her own story by reflecting on the fact that all mission

starts with God and not our own good ideas. Jesus said to His disciples "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you," and, "Receive the Holy Spirit," (John 20: 21&22), to explain that all of our mission must be empowered by Him. Consequently, within her own Norfolk benefice of six churches she began with 40 days of prayer to seek God's will and to look out for opportunities.

Her churchwardens all wanted to see more teenagers in the church, so they started a small group in the week, which would become 'church' for them. This meant that all six churches had to be willing to give up any teenagers that they already had, and the group began on Monday nights with just five teenagers. Over a period of years this group grew to around 20-25 people, and some of them formed a worship band which regularly went back into the six churches to play for services.

A lady came to Sally who said that she wanted to be confirmed - the only problem was that she did not believe in Jesus! Sally decided to start an Alpha Course to help explain the faith, and 27 people turned up to the first session. Soon after, the lady had a waking dream of Jesus and she miraculously came to faith.

Following further commitments, the churchwardens agreed to plant a new church to accommodate these people who had become used to sharing life at a deep level. Despite some setbacks, this church grew to be the biggest

church in the benefice, and consisted of lots of small groups, each seeking God in their own way yet united together, and thus became known as the Tas Valley Cell Church. The Cell Church was eventually raised to the same level as the parish churches.

Values

Out of all this, Sally discerned 5 key values:

- All involved - everyone has gifts and a voice.
- Becoming disciples - everyone is on a journey, even those within the small groups who did not yet believe.
- Creating Community - supporting each other in an outward-facing community that meets the needs of its members.
- Doing things together - Evangelism was done as a group, inviting friends to various events.
- Encountering God - when they set up a 24/7 prayer tent, all sorts of people came to pray.

Once again, one important point that recurred within Sally's message, and paralleled with what Magnus had earlier presented, was that God is using small groups. These groups only become effective, however, when the leader is a facilitator who allows the other members to 'lead' and 'do'. In this way the group members become 'disciples who make disciples'.

Tim and Helen Prince

Our experience of how God has led us recently has been very different and unexpected. We have found that the ministries that we were involved in have naturally come to an end so that we can give much of our time and effort into working for Village Hope. That is not to say that we don't have local contacts, and we do hold events occasionally to maintain those contacts, but the thrust of our work had changed, and this has been challenging as we seek to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Our fellowship at Prior's Frome, Herefordshire, remains strong and is a great blessing to us, and together we explore what it means to be the children of God.
Pray that God's guiding hand remains strong upon us as we seek to balance the needs of the chapel with those of Village Hope.



Paul and Hannah Lee

We first visited the church at Bamford in the Hope Valley, Derbyshire, in 2003 and began praying and asking God how we might support the work. In 2006 we felt led to start the International Mission Church in Sheffield, and every year since then the whole church has relocated to Bamford for three days of worship and evangelism. *Pray for Bamford church as many of the older members are being taken to be with the Lord, and the younger people are leaving for university. Pray for the children's*

worker there who has built a youth work of nine young people, and for further growth among older people. Pray for our young people's drop-in centre at Castleton every Friday.



Alan and Sue Vincent

We have been pastoring the church in Chorley, Shropshire, since 2002. In 2013 we felt that God was leading us to move into the village. It has been a long journey, but we finally moved last year, and have experienced the leading and provision of God every step of the way. As always, God's timing is perfect. We have many opportunities for ministry with local people, and we do outreach via our counselling course, called 'Healing Life's Hurts', which we ran for the first time last year and again this year, as well as our on-going ministries throughout the week. We also support another local church.
Pray that we could be much more 'at one' with the two other expressions of church within our village, and for opportunities for youth work that have presented themselves.



Sam and Ginni Brinkley

We have been in Burston, Norfolk, for exactly twenty years and have built up a network of contacts that spreads far beyond the chapel walls. While our Sunday service remains central, we minister through assemblies in local schools and through the local Youth For Christ branch, and sometimes reach up to 400 people throughout the week. Our children's group, 'Jamie's Gang', continues to attract 25 children per week throughout the year.

Pray for God's provision as we minister to local people with all their various issues.



Grace and Roger Tucker

We have been ministering at Ruardean Hill in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, for ten years now and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, seek to walk with the community and build a church without walls. We seek to walk alongside individuals the Lord has brought our way. Some have particularly harrowing needs, for example one young mum who has medically 'gone through the mill' yet is experiencing Gods profound touches of grace and knows His reality, and a fostering couple in the fellowship who had two Muslim Afghan boys placed with them.

Pray for our toddler group which has suddenly mushroomed in size, and for us to realise our dream of raising up a missional community in this place.

Jonathan Kear

I am a self-employed youth worker in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, and I work with churches to help them connect to their local communities. I run children's services and youth groups, and my aim is to bring young people throughout the Forest together. I am passionate about keeping youth in rural churches and communities.

One of the big problems that we face is the power of the Wicca religion throughout the Forest; this is often mixed in with church attendance in the lives of many people, and we are seeking to bring children under the power of the kingdom of God solely.

Pray as we deal with individuals who may have been brought up with this strange mix shaping their lives.



Eric and Karyn Gren

We have now been living in Great Gidding, Cambridgeshire, for two years. The church we pastor has no congregation, and this has forced us back on the Lord to seek what He wants rather than trying to continue what has always been. Consequently we closed the Sunday meeting, changed the church into something much more like a living room, and opened on

Tuesday evenings to try to meet people where they are.

We are both making local connections through work and through children's activities.

Please pray for more workers.



Word and Spirit

by John Plumb, Chairman

On Saturday evening John Plumb shared a number of things that he felt the Lord had been saying to him and the prayer group that he and his wife Betty meet with. In true farming style, he began with a short illustration from his working life.

“The wonderful thing about sheep is that they really do get to know us and to know our voices. They become much more difficult to move when they have lambs because the lambs don’t know us yet, and the sheep are more reluctant to follow us if the lambs don’t come quickly. One day when I was leading the sheep into another field I shut the gate too early and left one sheep on the other side. She struggled to get through and ended up at the bottom of a six foot ditch with a fleece full of water and no way out. When I eventually found her, her eye just said to me, “I’m totally dependent on you.” It was a marvellous illustration to me of how Jesus is our shepherd and that our dependence is completely on Him.”

“Let me tell you what God has been saying to us as a group:

- “Drop the baggage.” I think this refers to many things, as Tim Shelley shared with us last year at conference, but particularly to busyness.
- “Be ready, be serious and be united”.
- “God is sending a tsunami.” But I believe that He is holding back His blessing until His people are ready enough not to be swept away by the

backlash.

- “God will use those whose only interest is in the glory of the Lord”.
 - “Whatever God is doing now, it will look different than before.” I believe that part of that means there will not be a big name or one specific large church at the centre of the next move of God.
 - “The ‘grass roots movement’ prophecy”. If you haven’t seen this, it basically says that God is going to use ordinary folk like you and me to do extra-ordinary things. I’m happy that God will use my failings and mistakes, and that He says “My blessing is in this place, not because you are here, but because I am here.”
 - “These things will come about when the Word and the Spirit come together.” We need to get the balance right.”
- “Change is on the way! Those who want to learn from the Holy Spirit will flourish in this environment, as they seek to be obedient to the voice of God. What will help us through this time of change? I suggest four things:
1. Our identity in Christ and as His church.



2. Our hope in His goodness.
3. Our destiny as His witnesses and His bride.
4. Our dependence on Him for all things.”

“Finally, of course, Jesus must be our focus. The book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is *greater* than all those who have gone before, and ushers in *better* things. The Old Testament points to Him, but it is only in the New Testament that everything fits together and the Son is truly revealed.”



The strength of fellowship

by Tim Prince

Psalm 133 is a wonderful illustration of the blessings of unity, and has applications in the Village Hope community (or any group of single-minded Christians) and in particular the Village Hope Fellowship. Israel, like Village Hope, was a scattered community, united in belief and practice.

They only came together for communal worship every so often, just as we do at our conference. This can so often be seen as a limitation, but it does not disqualify us as 'living in unity', just as it did not disqualify them. The result of such a fellowship is 'blessing, and life forevermore'.

One result of unity is being refreshed, like the dew of high Hermon settling on the hot and dusty streets of Jerusalem. The Village Hope Fellowship is also supposed to be a source of refreshment to its members through shared prayer and reflection, with those being blessed then seeking to bless others by communicating their own inspiration.



The second illustration (actually the first in the Psalm), shows unity as the anointing of Aaron as high priest. Anointing is an outward sign of being set apart by God for a specific purpose. Could

it be that the Village Hope Fellowship in particular, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in general, is actually a potent tool in the hands of our God for His purposes?

Making the connections

by Peter Carruthers

As I have shared previously, we believe the biblical pattern for strengthening churches for mission combines 'ministry on the spot' (ie local leadership) with 'ministry on the move' (ie apostolic teams) (Acts 15:40-41; 16:1,4-5).

In his book, 'Ministry on the Move' (2008, EWID books), the late David Ollerton describes the tremendous impact of such apostolic teams in Wales from the Puritans of the 1600s onwards and how they laid the foundations for the great Welsh revivals of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Ollerton goes on to argue that such an approach to ministry is just as urgently needed today as it was then (and, I would contend, is especially relevant to small, rural churches and fellowships). "Church plants and existing churches that will close if they do not transition to a new model", he writes, "need what the New Testament churches needed: input from itinerant, 'on the move' apostolic teams. Without them the prospects for the towns and villages without any Bible believing church are bleak".

This vision for apostolic teams has gripped us for the last 18 months. Alongside it, as I have also shared before, is our conviction that at this

'eleventh hour', the Lord is calling His 'eleventh-hour workers' (Matthew 2:1-16) to harvest His 'white fields' (John 4:35-38). The challenge is to put the two together.

One way of making this happen draws its inspiration from something much less noble than either the example of the apostles in Acts or the 'messengers' of the Puritan era. Among the most successful enterprises in the Internet era are Ebay, Airbnb and Uber (although they all have a 'dark side'). These companies do not own any of the goods or services they provide, but, in common with numerous other Internet businesses, act simply as 'matchmakers', bringing together supply and demand.

In our case, we see the scope to act as a 'matchmaker' to help make connections between churches and groups in rural areas that need strengthening and see opportunities for mission, but do not have the resources (ie the 'white fields'), and

those whom God has gifted and called to ministry, but who may not yet be fully deployed in their own current contexts (ie the 'eleventh-hour workers').

To this end, we are looking for ways to identify both the 'white fields' and the 'eleventh-hour workers'. You have already received a questionnaire survey, which includes questions that would help us do this. If you have not already completed and returned the questionnaire, then please do so as soon as you can. And please feel free to contact us if you would like to share anything that would help this vision become a reality.



Conference reflections

by David Prince



With the theme of the conference as 'Strengthening fellowship for mission', I felt that the weekend strengthened me in my faith as well as fellowship. Most notably, in the Open Forum, it was encouraging to learn about the rural situations of several friends across the country. For me, this widened my understanding about what the organisation faces as a whole and also getting to know people more. The weekend has challenged me to try to get more involved in our rural mission.

A recent quote from our chapel notices confirmed what I felt about the conference.

"In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."

This could not have described me more. Having encountered lots of people in similar situations at the conference, the inner fire has certainly been rekindled and I am thankful for all those at the conference. I left the conference feeling refreshed and encouraged, but also challenged. I also found Ray's book stall an encouragement as well, having bought books which are thought-provoking and useful. Now, I have decided to join the Village Hope Fellowship as a member to take a step further with my faith.

A challenging time

by David Angus

I first came to a Village Hope prayer meeting over a year ago, having met Peter in a meeting in Shropshire just after he had been appointed CEO of Village Hope, and I also have links with Alan and Sue Vincent.

At first I did not give much prayerful thought to the conference, feeling that circumstances at home would prevent me attending, but Alan and Sue felt strongly that I should be there and that it would be significant for me.

First impressions: the facility was excellent, accommodation first class, and the dining facilities and menu choice were superb (I had the best lamb hotpot I have ever had for dinner one night). Helen, the hostess with the mostest, had prepared "welcome" bags of goodies for us on arrival.



The worship in each of the sessions was led by Tim Prince on the guitar and Sam Brinkley on the keyboard. They were melodic and sensitive, making way for an awareness of the presence of God, and providing us with an appropriate start to each of the gatherings.

We had several speakers. Sally Gaze spoke of a fresh new work based on discipleship and nurturing, thinking outside the box and learning from past failures. I was also blessed by Magnus Proctor who spoke of his mission trips to Bulgaria and Ukraine; exciting, challenging and very inspiring.

Most folks had a few minutes to share a little of their own work, although I would have liked more time to have been given to this. Time for prayer was built in at various intervals across the daily programme as appropriate.

Peter spoke on the need to deepen fellowship and to extend mission, and Tim spoke briefly on the importance of unity. It would have been good to have heard more of the full story and the proposed strategy for the way forward; perhaps it is time to throw out the programme and the clock driven restrictions and just go for it - just as the chairman did!

Our new chairman, John Plumb, is a man of prophetic insight, speaking into various lives and situations, and I sensed a "green light" and an expectation of a new way to work in the months and years ahead. A new day needs a new anointing: forgetting those things that are behind let us strain forward for the upward call of God together.

Thanks to Andrew and Katherine Close who stepped in to take the children's meetings, and to Ray Amey who generously provided books to bless us and for us to give away, along with other resources for reaching out to the lost in our own part of the harvest field.

I am so glad that I was able to go. I did lose some sleep as I felt that some of what I heard demanded a response from me. I will seek the Lord as to what He would have me do as a result of what I had heard, and am still in the process of evaluating it.

KIDS

CONFERENCE

QUOTES



“Lovely place to relax with lovely caring people who help you understand more about faith”

Joy

“It’s a good place to learn something new.”

Christian

“I absolutely loved it. There was no part I didn’t like. I loved all of the activities for people my age”

Katie (aged 9)

“I liked the singing and the breakfast”

Isla (aged 5)

“I loved playing with my new friends”

Jack (aged 8)

“The food and biscuits were amazing”

Thomas (aged 10)



Conference reflections

by Eleanor Prince



During the 2018 Village Hope Conference, I had the privilege of spending time in both the children’s work and the adults’ meetings whilst standing behind a camera. I may have been capturing the conference on record, but I was able to capture some very special moments I could keep for myself.

Despite the disappointing weather for Spring, everyone’s spirits remained high and I saw God meet with people in many ways.

With a passion for children, God once again spoke in numerous ways to me through the children there on the weekend.

It was a joy to have the children mingling in with the adults playing the ukulele and singing their hearts out to their favourite tunes.

Even though I no longer have the energy of a 10-year-old to run around until the late hours of the night at the conference, their passion and enthusiasm reminded me of how important the next generation is.

God made me see how innocent and pure a child’s love for God is and it cast my mind back to when faith seemed so simple.

In a world of ever-changing media and technology, it is so easy to become distracted from what God is trying to say to you and do in your life.

As a teenager, it is even harder. God laid this word on my heart at the Village Hope Conference: “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” Proverbs 22:6.

It was beautiful to watch the children show their love for the Lord on the Sunday morning and I pray it will continue that way for each one of them in their everyday lives.

The poetry of spring

by Peter Carruthers



"Nothing is so beautiful as spring", wrote the 19 C poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889).

Spring was late this year, but finally arrived with its glorious outburst of colour, scent, sights and sounds (Song of Solomon 2: 11-13), when *"... a tumble of life pushes through, signalled by warmth and call of cuckoo"* (from *The Garden*, by Tim Prince). Among all the seasons, the praise of creation (Psalm 145: 10) seems loudest in springtime, when, in the words of American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), *"prayer is made, and praise is given, by all things near and far"* (from *The Praise of Creation*).

I have seen many springs, but like God's daily mercies (Lamentations 2: 22-23), every spring is new and often surprises me with something I have missed before. And where better to encounter the joys of spring than in the British countryside!

For Hopkins, spring looks back to the first spring in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall:

What is all this juice and all this joy?

A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cloy, Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning.
(from *Spring*)

For poet and hymn writer, William Cowper (1731 - 1800), however, spring is a foretaste of the age to come:

...The fruitful field Laughs with abundance, and the land once lean, Or fertile only in its own disgrace, Exults to see its thistly curse repealed. The various seasons woven into one, And that one season an eternal spring...
(from *The Task*, Book 6)

These two perspectives are, of course, two sides of the same coin. As the Bible

makes clear, the "restoration of all things" (Acts 3: 21) for which the creation itself waits with eager longing (Romans 8: 19-19-21) is not only a restoration of what was at the beginning in Eden, but also a "new thing" (Isaiah 43:19). The redemption achieved by Jesus' death and resurrection - whose birth, as Robert Herrick (1591–1674) wrote, in another allusion to spring, saw *"December turned to May"* (from *A Christmas Carol*) - extends to the whole of the cosmos (John 3: 16).

By the time you read this, spring will be giving way to summer. But I hope these thoughts might prompt you to look at spring, and indeed all the seasons, with new eyes.

Celebrating and caring for God's creation is the fourth of the values of the Village Hope Fellowship. It reflects the special privilege and responsibility those of us who live, work and minister in rural Britain have. In the coming months, we plan to explore further the meaning and implications of this value via the Fellowship's online forum. If you would like to share in this, and in other aspects of the Fellowship's life, then please consider joining.