



February 2012

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## Keep holding on...

'Keep holding on,' a song written by Avril Lavigne, was sung for Children in Need 2011 – yet I have only just heard it. I have heard of Avril Lavigne and I do know about Children in Need but I didn't watch the programme on the 18th November so hadn't made the connection.

But I have seen programmes in which Gareth Malone takes group of people and gives them their voice – literally and metaphorically. It was he who helped a group of teenagers overcome their problems of being bullied and helped them find their voice and sing for Children in Need. Having caught up with it on You Tube, what an excellent job he did! The transformation wasn't just in the young people – it was also in their parents and their families, their friends, their school mates – and those who were the bullies. The experience changed those young people. It was a transformation that meant so much; 'I don't think I'll be scared again' said one of the singers. His life was revolutionised.

February 22nd sees the beginning of Lent, a period of reflection, of anticipation, but not necessarily a period of revolution. Yet the time leading up to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was a period of revolution and transformation bringing freedom.

This year's [CTBI Lent course](#) is entitled 'the way to freedom' and the revolutionary powers of freedom in God. It was Bonhoeffer who said "To be free is to be in love, is to be in the truth of God. The one who loves because made free by the truth of God is the most revolutionary person on earth." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1932)

So keep 'holding on' to the faith that brings freedom, transformation and revolution.

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## Searching for unity must remain our goal

"Divisions between churches remain a scandal that we have to overcome," Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) said today at a "Pilgrimage of the Holy Robe" an ecumenical preparatory event being held this week. Tveit made these points in his speech on "ecumenism in motion" at the International Ecumenical Forum taking place from 30 January to 3 February in Trier, Germany.

The event was organized by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Trier in partnership with the Evangelical Church in Rhineland, the Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Germany and other church organizations, focusing on the theme, "And join together what is separated". The theme was based on the woven fabric of the robe worn by Jesus before his crucifixion (John 19:23).

In his speech, Tveit called ecumenical dialogue a key to addressing changes in our societies and communities. He stressed that strategic cooperation requires a strong "will to stay together and search for unity, which must remain our goal. Unity among the churches is a gift of God and a calling to be received so that the churches are the living mystery. Unity is the sign and instrument of God's reign to come and contributes through their very being to reconciliation and healing of the world that is suffering from injustice, war and environmental destruction," he said.

Tveit also introduced to the audience the theme of the upcoming 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Korea: "God of life, lead us to justice and peace". He called this theme an opportunity to address the challenges faced in the life of the planet and the future of the churches. "The Assembly theme is a liberating statement at a time in history when part of humanity has accumulated the power to alter and destroy life on planet earth as we know it," he said. "Praying that the God of life will lead us to justice and peace as one fellowship, the churches are giving account of their hope," Tveit added.

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## Guy Liagre to be new General Secretary of CEC

Revd Dr Guy Liagre, President of the United Protestant Church in Belgium, will be the new General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches starting in June 2012. He succeeds Revd Prof. Dr Viorel Ionita who retired as Interim General Secretary of CEC in October 2011. He was elected by the Central Committee which met in Geneva on 24/25 January.

After his election Dr Liagre commented: "For many years CEC has worked to ensure that the Christian voice is not neglected on the European scene. I see it as a challenge to work as a general secretary of a European ecumenical organisation in a time in which Europe and the world are rapidly changing into something too hard to easily predict. CEC is in the midst of renewing its organisation and I am delighted to be able to participate in and stimulate that renewal".

The new General Secretary was born in 1957. After theological studies at the Protestant Theological Faculty in Brussels, he was pastor of churches in Menen (1984-90) and Brussels (1990-2005) before being elected President of the United Protestant Church in 2005, a position to which he was re-elected in 2009. In addition to being President of his own church, he has participated in, and currently chairs the Belgian Council of Religious Leaders as well as the organization in which the Belgium churches (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox) cooperate. He is also President of the Council which represents all Protestant and Evangelical churches in their relations with the Belgian government.

Dr Liagre has represented his church at many international ecumenical meetings being active in the World Methodist Council, the World Community of Reformed Churches and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe. He was a delegate at the CEC Assemblies in Trondheim and Lyon and is currently a member of CEC's Church and Society Commission. He gained a doctorate in Modern Church History from the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Brussels and has written extensively. He speaks Dutch, English, French, German and Afrikaans. He is married with four grown children and three grandchildren. [Back to top](#)

## New challenges for the Churches' witness in Europe

News The Joint Committee of the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences has underlined the need for common witness by Christians to tackle new spiritual, demographic, political and economic challenges facing the continent. At its 26-28 January meeting in Geneva, the committee also highlighted the necessity to support members of parishes and local churches who are affected by such developments. This year's meeting marked the 40th anniversary of the creation in 1972 of the Joint Committee, which is the highest body for dialogue between CEC and CCEE, and takes place annually.

In his opening remarks, the President of CEC, Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, described the current economic crisis as one of the issues "that raise questions about the ability of Europe to bring about a sustainable policy for the European Union". Such a policy needed to respect at the same time human dignity, the environment and cultural diversity.

The President of CCEE, Cardinal Péter Erdő, from Hungary, noted that the meeting came at the end of the worldwide Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18-25 January 2012). He described ecumenical commitment as a necessity that needs to involve all Christians rather than being the work of a few experts. "The Catholic Church is committed to this path of ecumenism," he said. Working for ecumenism is not only a human effort but also a spiritual task that required the prayers of all Christians in the assurance that visible unity is a gift of God, Cardinal Erdő stated. He spoke of the new evangelisation, which in recent years has guided the work of Catholic faithful. This could not take place without being placed in an ecumenical dimension, the cardinal said.

In a presentation to the meeting on its main theme, Dr Alister McGrath, professor of theology at King's College, London, described the development of a secular or "atheist" position in Europe. Religion is seen as being a private matter that ought not to impact on the public domain. A secular position is regarded, incorrectly, as a neutral position. Religious institutions had been caught up in a general suspicion of institutions such as governments, banks and corporations "on account of their power, lack of transparency, vested interests, and financial recklessness". While there is a widespread interest in "spirituality", this is seen as a personal and individual matter, not necessarily being linked to institutional affiliation. Moreover, churches needed to respond to a widespread concern following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 that religion fosters extremism. They needed to find ways to be seen as offering both historic and contemporary voices of moderation, Dr McGrath said, "able to generate social capital, promote toleration, and above all to encourage ways of thinking that avoid fanaticism". The "new atheism" in some parts of Europe has at the same time generated immense public interest in the issue of God, he noted. Here churches have an opportunity to engage in the intellectual debate, and to show Christian faith as a force for good in society.

Professor Gian Carlo Blangiardo, lecturer in demographics at Milano-Bicocca University, focussed on the demographic challenges facing churches and society. He noted a significant fall in the birth rate in European countries coupled with an ageing population. Such developments are creating significant challenges for European welfare systems. At the same time, demographic changes are leading to new patterns of family life. Marriage rates had fallen almost everywhere during the past 40 years, Professor Blangiardo said, while an increasing number of children are born outside marriage. Against this background, he urged churches to find ways of reinforcing the family.

Alongside discussion of major trends facing Europe, the Joint Committee examined local and pastoral experiences of churches, and theological and practical answers to the new challenges.

The Revd Cordelia Kopsch from Germany, a vice-president of CEC, said that in many places churches are facing decreasing membership and finances. At the same time, they are trying to deal with a spiritual crisis, the financial and economic crisis, and changes in society, such as a growing number of migrants and the need for more interreligious

dialogue. She urged churches to “withstand the temptation to draw back from their presence in the public sphere because it is the credibility of their public witness which is at stake”.

Mgr Matthias Heinrich, the auxiliary Bishop of Berlin, described how in a largely secular environment his diocese is trying to relay the Christian message through word and deed. This required an “inner evangelization” to strengthen the faith of Christians within the church to equip them for the “outer evangelization” of the wider society. An evangelizing church needed to open up and not be afraid to enter the public realm. Such a presence could be achieved only “by the testimony of Christians in their working and living environment as well as the presence of the church in the public sphere”. The church should use opportunities such as collaboration with the secular media, being present in the fields of education and culture, and finding ways to demonstrate Christian faith through diaconal activity, Mgr Heinrich said.

The Very Revd Rauno Pietarinen of the Orthodox Church of Finland described the pastoral challenges at local level that resulted from the current economic crisis. Here the church had the task to bring hope to situations that to individuals appeared hopeless. Archbishop Józef Michalik of Przemyśl spoke of the encouraging experience of the new evangelisation in Poland. There was, however, still the need for a continuing presence by Christians in the public arena, and there are many areas where the world is awaiting a witness to the courage of faith.

During its three-day meeting, the Joint Committee heard reports on the European economic and political situation, the work of churches with Roma people, and future cooperation on dialogue with Muslims in Europe. Participants visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, where they met representatives of the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the ACT Alliance, the international church-related humanitarian network. They also met members of local churches, and were received by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Apostolic Nuncio and the Holy See’s Permanent Observer to the United Nations and other International Organisations in Geneva. The Joint Committee expressed solidarity with Christians facing difficult situations in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, and especially in Egypt and Syria, as well as expressing concern for victims of violence in Nigeria. [Back to top](#)

### WCC speaker addresses Catholic superiors general

How is Christian identity defined today? What is the relationship between Christian identity, spirituality, religious plurality and Christian-self understanding? Revd Carlos Emilio Ham addressed these and other questions at the International Union of Superiors General’s (UISG) Assembly of the Constellation of Rome, on 12 January.

“Our identity is always defined in relation to the other. As human beings we are not individual islands,” said Ham, who serves as the programme executive for Diakonia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, at the World Council of Churches (WCC). “Rather, our identity or ‘sameness’, relates to affinities and affiliations, to forms of belonging, to experiences of commonality, connectedness and cohesion,” he added.

Ham was addressing the theme “Who do you say that I am? (Luke 9:20): Our identity in relation to the other” at this assembly of the UISG, an international forum where superiors general of institutes of religious Catholic women share experiences, exchange information and mentor one another in their role as leaders. Based on the gospel text, Ham said that “Beyond the question of identity is the issue of confession”, and added, “We are called not only to confess the Messiah, as Peter did, but also to be faithful disciples, and the nature of our discipleship always reflects our understanding of Jesus’ lordship.”

Reflecting on the concepts of religious plurality and Christian self-understanding, Ham also emphasized the significance of embracing the “other”. “The work of the Spirit shows that at the heart of the Christian faith lies an attitude of hospitality that embraces the ‘other’ in their otherness,” he said. Ham called his participation at the UISG an honour, and thanked Josune Arregui, executive secretary of the UISG, for the kind invitation. He also appreciated the initiatives of dialogue carried out by the UISG, in collaboration with other religious congregations within the Roman Catholic Church, with other confessions and the larger society. [Back to top](#)

### Recommendations for advancing toward Christian unity

Representatives of a broad range of Christian churches and organizations met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 14 to 19 January to complete a report and make recommendations for significant advances toward Christian unity and inter-religious cooperation.

The Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century came into being following the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2006. It will submit its report to the diverse bodies its members represent during the build-up to the 10th Assembly of the WCC at Busan, Korea in 2013. The committee’s membership was designed to include participants drawn not only from the WCC but also from the Roman Catholic Church, global Christian confessional communions, regional ecumenical organizations, national councils of churches, specialized ministries,

youth movements and renewal movements, as well as members of Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical communities. Their recommendations are aimed at suggesting concrete patterns, through which Christians may explore "constructive ways of living out our unity even in the face of the challenge of engaging the theological and ethical issues that threaten to divide."

In a time of worldwide cultural upheaval, the report aims to motivate world Christianity to pursue the biblical calling to unity in Christ (John 17:21) and to promote abundant life for all (John 10:10). This common vocation ranges from actions undertaken in the global context to those of congregations and their associates on the local level. The group acknowledges, "The ecumenical movement has its centre in the Triune God and not in us nor our own efforts, plans and desires." To enable dialogue and cooperation among Christians, the committee recommends that the WCC "take on a convening role as a gift to churches and ecumenical partners", while noting that this convening role "is exercised in recognition of and within the limits set by the 1950 Toronto Statement, which clarifies that the WCC is not a church nor a super-church." Those who are active in the ecumenical movement are advised to take into account today's "financial constraints" and to discover creative ways of "staying focused and coherent while encouraging churches to invest in the vision and work, and finding resources to sustain the life-giving impact of the ecumenical movement."

The report calls on Christians to reflect on the implications for churches, ministries and mission programmes of the ongoing shift in the demographic centre of Christianity from the northern hemisphere to the global South. During their meeting in Addis Ababa, members of the committee met formally with leaders of two national churches: the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

Patriarch Abune Paulos, who currently serves as a president of the WCC, encouraged the committee to "be bold" in its recommendations and recalled important contributions made by the ecumenical movement during times of tribulation and triumph for churches in such places as Ethiopia and South Africa. [Back to top](#)

### CTE Presidents commend 2012 celebrations

The Presidents of Churches Together in England issued this statement on January 26:

2012 is a year of celebrations in England. The Olympic Torch Relay, the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty The Queen, the XXX Olympiad and the Paralympics will provide opportunities over the four-month period of May to September for people to gather and celebrate together in ways which will both enhance and deepen community life.

As the Presidents of Churches Together in England, on behalf of all its members, we rejoice that so many of England's churches are committed to being at the heart of these celebrations and are already preparing practical ways to build and support communities in their localities. In the build up to the Olympics and Paralympics, the work we are doing through our own denominational staff, and through the work of More Than Gold (UK), is unprecedented. More Christian communities from different traditions than ever before are coming together to plan practical ways of serving the project of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, which can bring many and diverse benefits.

The end of this week of prayer for unity amongst Christians (18-25 January) also marks six months until the 2012 Games officially begin. At this significant moment we reaffirm our commitment made ten years ago in the presence of Her Majesty The Queen to work towards the visible unity of all Christians in the one faith, expressed in common discipleship, worship, witness and service.

The Revd Michael Heaney, Moderator, the Free Churches Group  
The Most Revd and Rt Hon Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury  
The Rt Revd Jana Jeruma-Grinberga, Bishop, Lutheran Church in Great Britain.  
The Most Revd Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster

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### Healing the Memories

At 6.15pm on Tuesday, February 7th the United Reformed Church and the Church of England both participated in a Service of Reconciliation, Healing of Memories and Mutual Commitment at Westminster Abbey. The service marked the 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection of 2,000 nonconforming ministers following the 1662 Act of Uniformity.

The historic service marks a significant step forward in the development of a closer working relationship between the two Churches. At the service, the Archbishop of Canterbury preached and the Archbishop of York, together with Mrs Val Morrison and the Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe, moderators of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, led a litany of penitence and act of commitment.

The service arose from a joint report – Healing the Past, Building the Future – which was agreed by the General Synod and the URC's Mission Council in 2011. The timing of that report and this resultant service are significant: 2012 is the 40th anniversary of the founding of the URC as well as the 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection which

followed the Act of Uniformity 1662 in England. Approximately 2,000 ordained men left their positions as Church of England clergy, following the changes after the restoration to power of Charles II. The Act of Uniformity prescribed that any minister who refused to give their "unfeigned assent and consent" to the Book of Common Prayer by St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August, 1662 should be ejected from the Church of England. Almost 2,000 left their livings and joined those Congregationalists and Baptists already serving outside the Established Church. This significantly increased the ministerial strength of Dissent in England.

The Revd Elizabeth Welch, the URC co-convenor of the group that wrote the Healing the Past, Building the Future report, said: "I'm delighted that, in this significant anniversary year, when we remember both the separation of churches and the coming back together of some, through the founding of the URC, we can meet for such a historic service. I hope this is the beginning of a closer drawing together, as we commit ourselves to further shared work."

The Rt Revd Christopher Hill, Bishop of Guildford and chair of the Council for Christian Unity said: "Churches of all denominations contribute greatly to the life of communities in which they are located, and this strengthening of the relationship between the URC and the Church of England will improve that local level work."

Some 1,300 tickets were allocated for the service, with roughly equally numbers of applications from both Churches.

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### **"Benefit Cap will make the UK a darker, less humane place for us all"**

The Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the United Reformed Church and the Quakers in Britain have called for Parliament to hold to the humane principles of the welfare state and reject a benefit cap. Church leaders said that the principle of a cap was flawed and would inevitably put vulnerable families at risk of poverty and homelessness.

The Revd Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church, said: "The principle that all who play by the rules should receive enough to meet their basic needs has been at the heart of the welfare system for 65 years; if the benefit cap becomes law that principle will be destroyed. Only families whose basic needs are less than £500 per week will be safe. Families who have greater needs, however rare, will be left behind."

The Churches agreed with the Government that the vast majority of families require less than £26,000 to meet their basic needs. Church leaders said that when a family qualifies for more than £26,000 in benefit, it is because the means testing rules have found exceptional need. If these rules give too high a level of entitlement, then the rules themselves need to be changed. They added that an assumption that no family can ever need more than £26,000 was contradicted by every reputable piece of available evidence.

The Revd Leo Osborn, President of the Methodist Conference, said: "We regret much of the tone of the debate around welfare reform especially where it has encouraged people to blame the workless poor for their struggles. Rising unemployment, the deficit and flat economic performance are not the fault of the poor, nor will capping benefits solve these problems or realise any significant savings for HM Treasury."

The Revd Jonathan Edwards, General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, said: "Minimising the struggles of the workless, implying a high standard of living where there is none, and trivialising the problems of homelessness further pollute the debate. A benefit system which deliberately ignores the needs of a vulnerable minority will make the UK a darker and less humane place to live in."

Paul Parker, Recording Clerk for the Quakers in Britain, said: "We know the Government intends to make cuts, but we object to it being at the expense of those who are unable to work. We challenge the benefit cap which takes no regard of family size and could split families. It is a principle of the Beveridge settlement (or welfare state) that those who meet the strict criteria for benefit should receive them. The welfare cap is a blunt and cruel instrument for reducing the deficit. We consider that the test by which proposed government cuts should be judged is the impact that they have on equality."

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### **Birmingham Churches to open new winter shelter**

5 churches in Birmingham have confirmed their involvement in the launch of a new Winter Shelter due to open in February providing basic accommodation to homeless people who would otherwise be sleeping rough.

This new initiative to help homeless people is being led by the Birmingham Diocese and Thrive Together Birmingham team with support from Housing Justice and the Birmingham Christian Homeless Forum. The shelter is being viewed as a pilot project with the aim of opening for a longer period with more churches involved next winter.

The churches based in Newtown, Ladywood, Birchfield, Weoley Castle and Quinton have all agreed to open up their church halls to provide a refuge from freezing temperatures. The shelter will open on Thursday 2nd February for one month. Homeless people will be able to access the project via the Helpdesk team at St Martins in the Bullring.

While the most recent street count only identified a handful of rough sleepers in Birmingham city centre, most churches and agencies giving help and accommodation to homeless people recognise that there is much hidden need; many rough sleepers take refuge away from the public gaze, in underground car parks or in unheated disused buildings. At a time when central government funding is being reduced and housing need is growing, churches across the country are responding. They have a valuable role to play in providing help and hospitality to those in need.

Housing Justice convenes a forum for church winter shelters, and has created "Shelter in a Pack" a resource for churches responding to homelessness in the community. The new Birmingham shelter was launched during Poverty and Homelessness Action Week (28th January – 5th February) which is organised every year by Housing Justice, Church Action on Poverty and Scottish Churches Housing Action. The 2012 theme is "Breaking Barriers"

The winter shelter steering group includes representatives from 3 local homelessness agencies and will work closely with SIFA Fireside, Reach Out Network and the Health Xchange ensuring that the shelter links in with local established services. St Martins in the Bullring will be providing on going sign posting and support to people staying in the shelters, especially helping shelter guests to access appropriate move on accommodation and other support services as required.

Dr. Graham Stubbs of St Martins in the Bullring said: "This will give people who sometimes struggle to access other accommodation a valuable safety net". Sarah Turner of Thrive commented: "The level of response from churches wanting to support this project has been extraordinary and we have volunteers from a range of different denominations offering their time. It is amazing to see the church, in all its diversity, come together to help those in need". Paul Reily of Housing Justice added: "What is so exciting about this project, when many fear for the disintegration of society, is the way in which the Christian faith community and others have come together to work to help those who are at the margins. This collaboration is what will form the foundation of so much healthy regeneration in the future and is but a part of what is happening nationally." [Back to top](#)

### Story of the Magi in Wotton-under-Edge

This January Wotton-under-Edge church gave around 450 local junior school children an experience of the Epiphany. Members of the Wotton churches presented the story of the Magi by inviting the children to go on a journey following the Magi with a star carrier as their guide. The journey began in the observatory and moved on to the desert where the children were visited by a very angry Herod; lit candles of memory or repentance; wrote prayers of thanksgiving and sang songs.

The journey concluded in Bethlehem where Joseph welcomed everyone who came to see Jesus, who was played by a lively one year old clapping his hands in all the right places. After presenting their prayers, the children were urged by an angel not to go back the same way (the teachers did not relish a detour back to school).

Godfrey Marsland said: "New stunning costumes were made for the event as we needed three sets of identically dressed magi accompanied by three haughty looking camels. The whole programme was written and devised by [Sue Marsland](#) from Wotton United Church and Sue Plant from St Mary's Parish Church." [Back to top](#)

### Church of Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes, celebrates 20th anniversary

When the iconic Church of Christ the Cornerstone was opened in Milton Keynes in 1992 it was the first purpose-built ecumenical city centre church. The service was led by the then Presidents of Churches Together in England – Archbishop George Carey, Cardinal Basil Hume, Revd Dr John Newton and Revd Desmond Pemberton – in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. The sermon was preached by Cardinal Hume, the first time a sermon had been preached by a Catholic Cardinal in the presence of a British Sovereign since the Reformation!

Twenty years later the congregation is international as well as ecumenical and the building is used by a wide range of civic and community organisations as well as the worshipping congregations. The partner Churches are the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the United Reformed Church but the congregation brings together a wider variety than those.

The celebrations begin on Saturday March 10 when Margaret Barker, a Methodist Local Preacher who has developed an approach to Biblical Studies now known as Temple Theology, will give two lectures on The Church as the New Temple. She will also be the preacher at a service of Holy Communion on Sunday March 11 at 10.00 am. On Monday evening at 7.30 a video recording of the opening service will be shown and the weekend will conclude on Tuesday

March 13, the anniversary day, with an Ecumenical Service of Celebration and Thanksgiving with a Vision for the Future with the presence of the Presidents of the Milton Keynes Mission Partnership and the Rt Revd. John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford. For further information, see [www.cornerstonemk.org.uk](http://www.cornerstonemk.org.uk) [Back to top](#)

## Church makes progress on equality and diversity

The Methodist Church has made significant progress in addressing equality and diversity issues within its own structures, the Methodist Council heard at its first meeting of 2012. Methodists working on a new equality and diversity structure for the Church have drafted a theological statement that will form the basis of inclusive policy within the Church. The Methodist Council agreed to give more time to stakeholder forums shaping the Church's response to equality and diversity when it met at Methodist Church House in London on 23-24 January.

Jennifer Crook, Equality and Diversity Adviser to the Church, said: "There is so much exciting work that is going on. The purpose of the theological statement is to ensure that the Church's equality and diversity agenda is firmly rooted in Biblical values and core Methodist beliefs, so that when people ask us, 'why are we doing this?' we can say, 'this is what we believe in the Methodist Church: we do equality because it is at the heart of what we know and do in the Methodist Church.' There is a long history of equality, diversity and social justice issues within the Church."

The theological statement, which is likely to be presented to the Methodist Council in March, has been drafted following lengthy discussions by the working groups in partnership with members of the Church's Faith and Order committee who advised the groups on questions relating to Arminianism and the Methodist tradition. The Council, made up of representatives from all over Britain, also discussed pensions, state-funded schools, a new 'dignity at work' policy and refurbishment work to the Methodist International Centre in London.

Council members agreed to create a Methodist Academies and Schools Trust (MAST) in order to comply with the Government's new Education Bill, which received Royal Assent on 15 November last year. They also approved a development bank loan of up to £2,800,000 for the refurbishment of the educational rooms at the Methodist International Centre. Some of the rooms are expected to be refurbished in time to offer hospitality during the Olympics. [Back to top](#)

## Count your Blessings

Christian Aid has launched a free android app designed to help people 'count their blessings' during Lent. The new app provides daily reflections straight to an android mobile phone as well as offering practical suggestions about how to give to those in need. Count Your Blessings is available in printed form and through the Christian Aid website as well as the app.

Former Bishop of Durham, Prof Tom Wright, said Lent was the perfect time for UK Christians to reflect on what they have to be grateful for and stand in solidarity with the poor. 'As economic and political troubles increase around the world, many of us forget just how much we ourselves have to be thankful for,' he said. 'Count your blessings is a great way of using the discipline of Lent to remind ourselves of just how fortunate we are – and of the very practical ways in which we can share our blessings with those in greatest need.'

The app, which can be downloaded for free to any android phone, was designed by Alex Connell who did not charge for his time. Mr Connell, who is married to Christian Aid staff member Lucy, said he was pleased to help out. 'Lucy mentioned that Christian Aid had a campaign which they wanted to turn into a mobile application but were constrained by budget,' he said. 'In the past I had helped out making videos and serving as a barman at a charity quiz night but as I've been a software developer for 14 years I thought this was the perfect project to get involved with. What I liked about this app is the unique approach of making people think about who it is they're helping with donations, telling them how Christian Aid will support them and making us realise how lucky we are to live the way we do. It's good to know code I've written might help improve or even save lives.'

Count Your Blessings can be used as part of a personal journey through Lent, which starts on February 22, or used to lead small group reflections. A children's version is also available for use at home or with Sunday schools.

Anne Phipps of Christian Aid said: "The new Count Your Blessings app is a brilliant way to help people reflect on the good things in their lives and give to those living in poverty. Thousands of people count their blessings with Christian Aid each Lent using our printed version, but we wanted to open up the experience to whole new group of people who are more likely to check their phone than grab a pen.'

Android phone users can download the app by searching for 'count your blessings' in the android app store. In addition users of Facebook can connect with other people during Lent by visiting [www.christianaid.org.uk/Facebook-](http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Facebook-)



[count-your-blessings](#) or searching for the hash tag #cyblessing on Twitter. Paper copies of the reflections are available from Christian Aid and can be downloaded from the website, [www.christianaid.org.uk/lent](http://www.christianaid.org.uk/lent) [Back to top](#)

## Yorkshire Welsh Hymn-Singing Festival May 2012

The Festival will take place on Saturday, 19th May 2012 at Trinity Methodist Church, 43 Monkgate, York YO31 7PB.

The hymn-singing will be led by the international soprano Yvonne Robert, originally from near Prestatyn. She is the Musical Director of the Occasion Choir in York, some of whose members will be performing. The last time the Cymanfa Ganu visited York was in 2007. The organist will be Mr. Nicholas Page.

Most of the Cymanfa hymns are sung in Welsh, with four-part harmony for the proficient, but the spoken part of the services is in both Welsh and English. The event is inter-denominational: all are welcome! There will be two sessions, 2.00 - 3.30 and 4.45 - 6.30, with an opportunity between the two to eat your sandwiches and enjoy the tea and coffee provided.

Please contact Mrs. Eileen Walker on 01535 665829 (e-mail: [jimwalker@mistral.co.uk](mailto:jimwalker@mistral.co.uk)) or Mrs. Beryl Lee on 0113 2 694268 for further details. [Back to top](#)

## Cambridge Summer Schools of Counselling, Theology and Apologetics

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Cambridge Summer School of Theology - 8 - 13 July: Revd Dr. C. John Collins: The Doctrine of Scripture

'Dr Collins is well known for his clear, concise and stimulating teaching.... I encourage anyone remotely interested to avail themselves of this great opportunity.' Bob Letham

Cambridge Summer School of Apologetics - 16 - 20 July: Prof. Stephen C. Meyer: Reasons for Faith

Author of 'Signature in the Cell' (HarperOne 2009) - named a book of the year by the Times Literary Supplement. Dr. Meyer has taught this popular class on 'Reasons for Faith' for nearly twenty years in U.S. colleges and universities.

Apply online at [www.christianheritage.org.uk/courses](http://www.christianheritage.org.uk/courses) For more information contact 01223 311602 or [courses@christianheritage.org.uk](mailto:courses@christianheritage.org.uk) [Back to top](#)

## Churches together making new connections in the context of community service

Celia Blackden writes:

A while ago, in response to an enquiry, I was given a remarkable list of the way the churches are working together in a particular county and engaging numerous volunteers. Areas of collaborative work are: chaplaincy of various kinds, nightstop emergency provision, a food bank, a youth rendezvous centre, a quiet space, a covenant with the poor, street pastors, a quiet space and, of course, preparation for the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

A capacity for caring and for selfless service lies at the heart of our Christian faith and is attractive to people of all ages. Happily it is also central to the moral and spiritual values of other faith communities, given that we are all made in the image of God and are called to live the Golden Rule shared by all religions "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

This month a new project is being launched which builds on all that faith communities are already doing in the spheres of compassion and justice so as to make a contribution to society. The "Year of Service" is a golden opportunity for Christians to make connections with neighbouring communities of another faith or culture in charitable and voluntary work. The idea is to invite our neighbouring faith community (temple, mosque, gurdwara etc) to be part of what we are doing and to get involved in what they are doing. This might be clean up operations, tree planting, feeding the hungry, working on an allotment, visiting the elderly, helping the homeless. It might be on a special day or week, or during a time like Lent or Ramadan. A good number of Christian projects already connect with other faith communities locally, because of the nature of their work with refugees or homeless of different faiths.

However this year will be a chance to build a more solid platform for shared action and grow our appreciation of all the good that is being done by communities locally.

More could be said about how the year is being organised, with funding and backing from the Department for Communities and Local Government involving businesses and the faith communities nationally. If your congregation, churches together group or already developed Christian project wants to get involved in the Year of Service, the website [www.ayearofservice.org.uk](http://www.ayearofservice.org.uk) will give you ample information. [Back to top](#)

## Fruits of Christian collaboration in inter faith

Celia Blackden writes:

The job of the inter faith officer at Churches together in England was created, as Bill Snelson said at the time, to *increase capacity*. This means primarily an increased capacity among Christians and the Churches to work together at every level – with outcomes in *more* people who are *more* confident and active in the inter faith field. There are various facets to the work, from the occasional meeting with the Faith Communities Engagement team at the Department for Communities and Local Government to speaking on the Christian principles of inter faith relations at a local Churches Together group. I collaborate with the inter faith staff of the Churches and with Christians in key inter faith organisations such as the Christian Muslim Forum and the Council of Christians and Jews. One outcome has been the production of resources for Christians which emphasise the deepening of our own Christian faith in view of greater friendship and exchange with our neighbours of other faiths.

It is good to make available more widely the wisdom and insight of those with significant expertise. It is super if this can be both brief and audiovisual. Hence my encouragement to you to view the four new web videos on the [www.youtube.com/churchestogether](http://www.youtube.com/churchestogether) channel: two are about, but broader than, the events they report; two are reflections on topics of interest or interviews with contributors to those events. They can also be accessed from the [CTE website](#).

Nonetheless, the printed word remains an invaluable tool for communication. So I am glad to say that Dr Helen Reid (Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity) and I have contributed a chapter on unity and inter faith to the forthcoming volume *Unity in Process: reflections on ecumenical activity* to be published by Darton, Longman and Todd in October. It was a most enjoyable experience of Christian unity to work with Helen on this. The chapter grows out of our experience as a Methodist and a Catholic involved in very different ways in inter faith relations and ecumenism. It reflects the journey undertaken by Christians and by the Churches over the last 40 years or so. [Back to top](#)

## Passion Conference in Brighton

Avanti Ministries, in partnership with Love Sussex, are holding a Passion conference in Brighton this Easter. This is a Major one day conference designed to encourage, equip and restore the passion, purpose and priority to your walk with God. The conference material is endorsed by George Verwer (founder of Operation Mobilisation), Gerald Coates (International speaker and broadcaster), CCN, CPO and many other respected Christians and organisations. International evangelist and author of "Taming the Tiger" Tony Anthony will be the key speaker. The sessions will be woven between Spirit led worship by some fantastic Gospel groups and performers. John Lawson, a former Bodyguard with the Rolling Stones turned enforcer for Gangsters, who gave his life to Christ in prison several years ago will be one of the main speakers. John Lawson is now available for preaching engagement's throughout Sussex leading up to the conference. John will also be interviewed with Revelation TV in February to share his testimony and to talk about the Passion Conference. Click [here](#) for tickets. [Back to top](#)

## Strong Action on Alcohol Pricing

A coalition of national Churches and charities has written to the Prime Minister asking him to introduce a minimum unit price on all alcohol sold in Britain when the Government's alcohol strategy is announced later this month. David Cameron has indicated that he may be willing to introduce a minimum price of 40 – 50 pence per unit on alcohol, but the group is worried that these plans may be dropped under pressure from the drinks industry. The group is also encouraging individuals to write to their MPs, highlighting the problems caused by cheap alcohol in their local area and asking them to support per unit minimum pricing. A range of resources for the 'Measure for Measure' campaign are available online [here](#).

A survey conducted in December last year revealed that 61% of UK adults believe that excessive drinking is a problem (from minor to major) in their neighbourhood. The survey commissioned by the Methodist Church, United Reformed Church and Baptist Union of Great Britain asked people to judge the effects of alcohol on the area within walking distance from their home, or where they use local facilities. More information can be found [here](#).

## Climate Week

Climate Week is a supercharged national campaign to inspire a new wave of action on climate change. It culminates with thousands of events and activities taking place throughout the week of 12 to 18 March 2012, planned by organisations from every part of society. Showcasing real, practical ways to combat climate change, the campaign aims to renew our ambition to create a more sustainable, low-carbon future.

Climate Week is backed by every part of society - from the Prime Minister to Paul McCartney, the NHS to the Met Office, the TUC to the CBI, Girlguiding UK to the National Association of Head Teachers. During the first Climate Week in 2011 over 3,000 events were attended by half a million people across the UK. Climate Week's Headline Partner is Tesco, which aims to become a zero-carbon business by 2050 - without purchasing offsets. In addition it has committed to work with its suppliers to reduce emissions from products in its supply chain by 30% by 2020, and to find ways to help its customers halve their own carbon footprints by 2020. Climate Week's Supporting Partners are Aviva, EDF Energy, H&M and SodaStream. Aviva was the first insurer to be carbon neutral worldwide, EDF Energy is Britain's largest producer of low-carbon electricity, H&M is for a more sustainable fashion future and SodaStream is the smarter way to enjoy sparkling drinks.

You can register now for the Climate Week Challenge, judged by celebrities including Kate Humble, Bruce Parry, and Liz Bonnin. The Climate Week Challenge in 2011 was Britain's biggest ever environmental competition, with over 145,000 people participating in the one day and one-hour versions. The prestigious Climate Week Awards recognise the most inspirational and impressive actions taking place in every sector of society. The judging panel contains figures such as the human rights activist, Bianca Jagger, the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, and the Bishop of London.

Climate Week Cuisine is a new part of the campaign for 2012, encouraging people to make the food that they eat a part of the solution to climate change. They can do this by joining in the call to action of eating a low carbon meal during Climate Week. There are a number of other elements to the campaign. A T-shirt has been designed by Vivienne Westwood raising money for the Environmental Justice Foundation. The Climate Week Pub Quiz will be run in hundreds of pubs and workplaces. The Climate Week 24 Hour Play at the Arcola Theatre in London features award-winning writers and celebrity performers putting together five 15 minute plays in just 24 hours.

Organisations can get involved right now by starting to plan an event for Climate Week. This provides a unique opportunity to profile their own initiatives and innovations to stakeholders and staff, customers and the community, members and the media. They can also spread the word in advance, so that others find out about Climate Week in time to plan their own activities. Individuals can help right now by asking the organisations they know - such as their workplace or local school - to plan an event or activity for Climate Week. They can also register to take part in the Climate Week Cuisine call to action and plan to eat a low carbon meal during Climate Week.

To find out more about Climate Week, or to register your event, go to [www.climateweek.com](http://www.climateweek.com), email [info@climateweek.com](mailto:info@climateweek.com) or telephone on 020 3397 2601.