

March News Christmas 2020

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.

(Isaiah 42:16, NIV)

'Unfamiliar Paths' was the title of the book David Bjork wrote explaining how God had called him to work in ecumenical partnership with Roman Catholics in France. The verse above was a key verse in our call to France in 2000 to work with him. Recently some bizarre circumstances have 'completed the circle' in an amazing way.

Back in 2010 when our son Joshua went to Stirling University he met up with a missional discipling organisation working on campus. The fact that he was a baptised Roman Catholic and yet had an ardent evangelical faith he could articulate and defend both impressed and challenged some of their denominational prejudices.

10 years later the Scottish Leadership of the organisation sense God calling them to start work in a Roman Catholic country – and that doing this in ecumenical partnership is the right way forward. But who could help them think this through? Then they remember Joshua's dad had written about this and so ask Joshua to put them in touch.

So last week Stephen spent 2 hours in a conference call with two national leaders, helping them think through both ecumenical cooperation in mission with Roman Catholics and also how Fresh Expressions of Church might impact their way of working more generally.

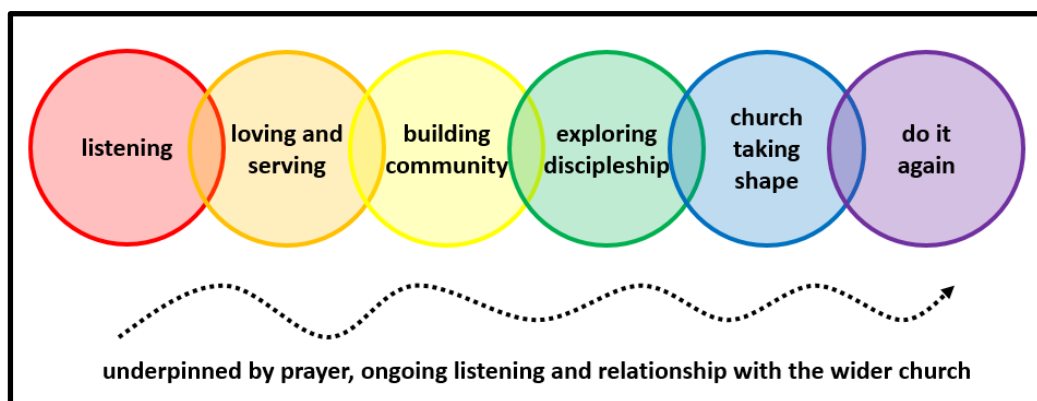
The amazing thing is that David Bjork first went to France with this same organisation back in the 1980s, but left when God called him into a new approach of ecumenical cooperation.

Isn't it a wonderful thing that God has worked to put the pieces back together? Stephen had the joy of being able to put the leaders into contact with David and, who knows, he may be able to help them shape their ministry going forward! It's great when God does things like that!

Going back to the verse above - who could have foreseen that connection? Isn't it amazing God says *'These are the things I will do'*. It is a statement of fact, a certainty, a promise. We are always in uncharted territory, with no map and often no clue – but God promises to lead us even when we can't see the way forward.

Avon-Swift News

Here in our group of churches in Avon-Swift we have obviously seen much change over the past few months. Many of our church buildings remain closed, but we are encouraged that here in North Kilworth, St Andrew's will open again on Christmas Eve as a place at the heart of the community after a major refurbishment.



We have a real sense of things having shifted significantly. The Fresh Expressions journey is often represented by the 6 circles above. After living here for two years, listening to God and to our local community, we now feel we are beginning to connect with people and get to know them, both 'loving and serving' and starting to 'build community' - we no longer feel quite so much 'on the edge' as we did.



As particular examples, Stephen has taken on editing North Kilworth News - our local village newspaper - and although it's a lot of work, this has brought us into contact with just about every community group you can think of! We also felt God prompting us to set up a 'North Kilworth Lockdown Memories' project, recording people from the village talking about their experience of lockdown. We were delighted to receive a grant to pay for a professional video. It will be the centrepiece for a village event that will help us share our stories, lament and celebrate together, and come to terms with what has been a massive disruption of normal village life.

Sharon has been busy trying to think of new ways to celebrate Christmas within the COVID restrictions - taxing, but exciting too! We offered people the opportunity to be part of an 'Advent Trail', decorating a window for others to enjoy. This caught on and throughout December the 'C of E' logo for the theme this year, 'Comfort & Joy' will be displayed all over our village and the neighbouring one! As a result of these many contacts and the number of new houses being built here, there is the possibility of re-starting a parents & baby group again once restrictions lift.

Lockdown has meant that Sharon's schools work changed, slowed down, and recently speeded up again! Life has been tough in our 4 schools. For a while it wasn't possible to be on site and everything was delivered electronically, but recently she has been able to go back in to lead collective worship. The 'Jesse Tree for Advent' project she offered to schools has been very positively received, with grateful staff saying it has helped them with planning.

So what are we spotting looking over the horizon...? Well, lockdown is not going away. We hope to facilitate many more outdoor events and have been asked to produce mini 'pilgrimage trails' around our churchyards for schools. Our prayer is that through these community activities and contacts we might find ourselves having spiritual conversations and helping people 'explore discipleship' - the next phase of the FX journey. The average time for the whole process is 5 to 8 years, so we are in this for the long haul. But it is exciting to see how God is working.

Family News

Perhaps the biggest news is that Stephen has completed the first phase of exploring ordination in the Church of England as a pioneer priest. He will go to a national selection panel which will probably happen sometime between February and May. So by early summer we should know whether this is a door that God is opening or closing...

Since March Stephen has been on a 3 day a week, rolling, 3 month contract. This has been wearing, wondering whether the contract will be extended or not. We are hopeful that the contract, which currently expires at the end of December, will be further extended at least to take us to the end of the discernment process.

Many people's plans have had to be changed or scrapped this year. We were so sad not to be with Caleb & Carole as they celebrated their wedding in Dijon cathedral in July. But we were delighted to be able to meet the newest member of the March family, Elinor Joy, born to Josh & Lindsay on their 3rd wedding anniversary, August 10th. We made it to Scotland to see her - sadly just the once... like all of you, sacrifices have had to be made, and one of the hardest is separation from family and friends.

Ben is now in relationship with a lovely girl Alexia. She is Greek and a boffin like Ben - but in medicine, not IT! They are very happy and Ben has been to Athens to meet her family. Sadly, restrictions have meant we have not been able to meet her yet, but we hope this can happen in 2021.

Recently we have been excited to read the C of E national vision for next 10 years. It describes a church that is Christ-centred, Jesus-shaped, 'Humbler, Bolder, Simpler' - a church of missionary disciples where Fresh Expressions are the norm. This is an incredible vision and we are amazed to find God seems to be putting us in the middle of all this. It will be a difficult and costly journey but also a great adventure! We are so up for it!

We end this newsletter by wishing each and every one of you a very merry Christmas and a blessed 2021. We are very grateful for your continued prayers and support - it means so much to us.

Be blessed, be a blessing!

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