SUMMER 2024

IGNITE

SPARKING PASSION FOR THE GOSPEL ACROSS THE UK



EVANGELISM IN ITS MANY FORMS - CHURCHES ACROSS THE COUNTRY SHARE THEIR VISION WITH IGNITE.

ALSO "GROWTH THROUGH DOING LESS." WHEN A WEST MIDLANDS CHURCH PLANT CUT BACK ON ACTIVITIES AND PUT THE GOSPEL FIRST IT BEGAN TO GROW.

counties

EVANGELISM IS NOT JUST ABOUT 'CONVERSION' BUT BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS. WE HEAR FROM A CHURCH IN EXETER.

WELCOME TO IGNITE



QR codes

We have introduced 'QR codes' to Ignite to make it easier to access our website. Just open your mobile phone camera, point the camera at the QR code image, tap the link that appears on your mobile screen, follow any instructions which will take you to the Counties website.



Welcome to our Summer 2024 edition of Ignite.

As we celebrate 125 years of God's goodness and faithful provision to the work of Counties, we would love you to join us in person at one of our regional celebrations. These events will focus our hearts on what the Lord is doing now, and will seek to set out a vision of what we believe, in God's hand, is possible in the days to come. Some of this is laid out on pages 8-9, along with dates and venues for some of the regional celebrations.

I trust that you will be blessed as you read what God is doing through evangelists, church planting and in the life of local churches like Belmont in Exeter.

Thank you once again for your support.

Yours in Jesus

Martin

Martin Erwin, CEO

Making Jesus known: inspiring and equipping local churches

Design: Amperative - amperative.com

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IGNITE COUNTIES MAGAZINE SUMMER 2024 NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS IN BRIEF

YOUR LETTERS AND COMMENTS

Dear Ignite,

Many thanks for sending Ignite and the Prayer and Praise diary over the years.

The daily prayer notes are extremely helpful and encouraging.

The Spring edition of Ignite – just delivered – brings back many memories in respect to David and Wendy Iliffe.

My involvement was more recently as a volunteer at Dalesdown on a Wednesday when, along with others, the day was spent in various items of maintenance on the building – preparing the site for the mobile home, putting in a shower room off the kitchen site, replacing the guttering and many more interesting projects plus, if David was there on the day, keeping up with his enthusiasm!

NEXT STEPS

We love hearing from you.
So, if you would like to comment on an article in Ignite or Counties' work, please email: communications@countiesuk.org



Since moving to Dorset and age creeping on, contact with Dalesdown has been reduced, although I still know a couple of the volunteers.

Our prayer is for the work to flourish and it's good to see the opportunities that are opening up in schools.

Just a few thoughts on looking back.

Every blessing,

lim Dean



A drawing of David Iliffe

LIFE EXHIBITION GOES FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH.

Earlier in the year, St Paul's Church in Barrow, in Cumbria, hosted the multi-media installation.

The Rev Robin Ham, Vicar of St Paul's Barrow, explains:

"In terms of engagement we've seen teachers messaging their friends to say, 'You need to get your school along to this.'

"As for the kids, in our conversations with them afterwards it's clear that they've taken things in and are thinking about Jesus."

In April the Life exhibition visited Scotland. Life exhibition Coordinator, Kevin Baldwin said:

"It's fantastic to get north of the border. We received such a warm Scottish welcome, and the children loved it.

"We've been so busy this year visiting as far afield as Barrow-in-Furness, Shildon, Torfaen and Carlisle. I have a feeling the next MOT will say 'new wheels needed!"

To book, contact: **kevin@lifeexpo.co.uk** • **07968705623** • **www.countiesuk.org/lifeexpo**



A TRIBUTE TO COLLEEN RHODEN



Colleen was an evangelist who worked alongside Counties evangelist Lee Marsland at Encounters Ministries. She featured in our Summer 2023's edition of Ignite, talking about faith through suffering. She survived cancer five times and had the disease in both her lungs. She went to be with the Lord in March this year.

Here Lee pays tribute to her and her life:

"I've struggled to write this as I just knew as soon as I did it would become real! My dear friend and sister in Christ, you fought so many battles; won so many victories. This time God brought you home back to Himself. You were an inspiration to whoever had the privilege of meeting you. When you prayed I would often feel Heaven move and hell shake with fear! Whenever Lesley and I needed a warrior to pray with and for us, you were always our first call. We are so saddened that Jesus took you but at the same time so blessed that you finished your race, that you are now in the Glorious presence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ with no more pain or suffering.

When, and I mean when, we meet again in my Father's Kingdom we will once again dance in the presence of God Almighty. But until that day go and receive your eternal reward you beautiful lady, wonderful soul, amazing friend, our Colleen Rhoden, you good and faithful servant."

Lee Marsland

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HAPPY 125TH ANNIVERSARY, COUNTIES

In the third part of our 125 anniversary celebrations, we look back 80 years and preview this year's regional conferences. The style may be different, but the Great Commission never changes.

We received this letter from Les and Edith Voke who now live in Arundel and are Counties supporters.

As a family we grew up in the Brethren Assembly at Argyll Hall, Littlehampton, West Sussex (later Parkside Evangelical Church from 1973 onwards) and my first contact with Counties was at the end of World War 2 (1944/45) when George Gaunt came as the Evangelist for the region.

He came from Leicester and spent the Summer here. He had no car and cycled from village to village sharing the Gospel from door to door; once he ended up in Surrey as all sign posts and place names had been removed! He was a faithful man, and God honoured his faithfulness. He had a wonderful expression: "How luvly!"

Once the war had ended and restrictions were eased he began holding tent

missions in some of these villages and elsewhere, including Littlehampton on some waste ground. One stormy night George sent for help as the tent was in danger of blowing away, and I, with others, spent the night hanging onto guy ropes for dear life!

He lived in a caravan (with tented loo alongside!) and this was stored on my father-in -laws farm at Rackham and he towed the caravan and the marquee with his Landrover (1st Model after the war) from place to place every August from the mid 50's to early the 60's. George (Uncle George as we called him) came to Littlehampton to take the children's beach mission and his caravan was parked on our farm at Court Wick.

He had lunch most days during this time with a lady living in a farm cottage whom he nicknamed 'Esmerelda'.



He amused us with his conjuring tricks! But many young lives were won for Christ during these days.

We were very blessed in those days with men who were gifted in their own ways in making the Gospel known and as I have said, many came to know Jesus as their own personal Saviour and Lord.

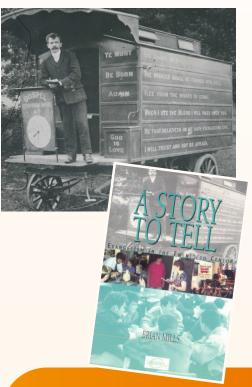
We do thank God for every remembrance of them.

The Lord bless you and all at Counties.

Les and Edith Voke

Do you have any old photos of Counties caravans or tent missions you would like to share with us. If so, please email to: rachel.rounds@countiesuk.org







NEXT STEPS

about you can support the work of Counties:

www.countiesuk.org/supporters/individuals

MARTIN ERWIN SHARES HIS THOUGHTS ON OUR ANNIVERSARY AND HOW COUNTIES IS LOOKING FORWARD.

Jesus came and told his disciples:

"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20

As a reader of Counties Ignite magazine you may be aware that 2024 is a very special year for us, as we mark our 125th anniversary!

In 1999, to celebrate our 100th anniversary, we launched a book, *A Story to Tell*, written by Brian Mills (some copies still available from the office). Brian was a former Field Secretary of Counties, the role that has now morphed into CEO. Along with the book, we held a huge centenary event in Brentwood, Essex, attended by 2000 people, with Charles Price as our keynote speaker.

Today, Counties is on the cusp of significant changes, as we seek to remain relevant to the culture into which the Lord has placed us as agents of the Gospel. The Good News of Christ is the unchanging Gospel, and it remains as relevant to each person today as the first day it was sounded. However, society and church life are unrecognisable from that which existed 25 years ago, never

mind 125! So here are three things to look out for in 2024 from Counties.

1. A new Network



Counties Trustees completed a two-year strategy review in March 2024. Reflecting on our mission statement, *Making Jesus known: inspiring and equipping local churches*, we are committing to supporting local churches in prioritizing and implementing strategies that deliver on the Great Commission, namely, making disciples, and, as a result, to see growth in the maturity and numbers of local congregations. A key step will be the full launch of a Network – *Counties Connect*. Under the Counties Connect banner, our

goal will be to build broader and deeper connections with churches who we hope to encourage, inspire, and support in evangelising and disciple-making. We plan to say much more about this both online and in our autumn *Ignite* edition. Please pray for the success of this step of faith.

2. A new Book

Well, OK, the book actually came out in October 2023, but we are delighted that Making Jesus Known Today and Tomorrow is proving to be popular, with the GLO Bookshop manager in Motherwell recently writing to encourage us and asking for two more boxes of books! If you haven't



MAKING

KNOWN

TODAY

TOMORROW

purchased your copy, please use the QR code here and order yours today.

Having spoken on various Christian media outlets and radio stations, we are thrilled that TWR have agreed to work with us to turn the book into 13 Podcast episodes to be broadcast this autumn, and to be made available on various podcast channels.

3. Regional Celebrations

Rather than host one large event, like the Brentwood day in 1999, this year we are planning a variety of regional celebration events. Perhaps the largest and most ambitious of these is the event to be hosted at the Cracknell Farm, near Newent, Gloucestershire, where we hope to attract perhaps 500 to 1000 people for two days of worship, celebration, and teaching.

Other days are planned around the country, with not all details fully finalised, but here are some dates for your diary.

29-30 June, West Midlands at Cracknell Farm. Newent

7 September, South Wales at Union Theological College, Bridgend

2 November, East Anglia at Bridge Church, West Road, Bury St. Edmunds

3 November, Essex at Tile Kiln Church, Chelmsford

9 November, South-West at Grosvenor Church, Barnstaple

As the title of our book suggests, the plan for these regional gatherings is not to be backward looking (though we will certainly be giving God thanks for 125 years of faithfulness to Counties). Rather, each event will share inspiring and thrilling stories of how the Lord is changing lives, growing churches, and blessing new things, including new church plants.

We believe that the Gospel is STILL the power of God to save everyone who believes, and that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is our calling until Jesus calls us home or comes to receive His bride! Thank you for joining us thus far, and I'd love you to commit to come with us on the next exciting stage of this great adventure!



FOR BELMONT, A CHURCH WITH LONG CONNECTIONS WITH COUNTIES, EVANGELISM IS NOT JUST ABOUT 'CONVERSION' BUT BUILDING LIFE-LONG RELATIONSHIPS WHICH LEAD TO DISCIPLESHIP.

Young Families Team Leader, Rachel Morris, tells Ignite, how it starts with antenatal classes.

Belmont Church, in Exeter, has a congregation of between three to four hundred people on a Sunday morning led by a leadership team. We are very passionate about inter-generational church life that's not just catering to one type of person. We encourage the generations to mix and do 'all-together church'. But because our church is so big we have to have smaller groups within it.

So, whilst Belmont segments the different age groups into toddlers,

primary school and youth work etc. the church has a purposeful strategy which means we stay with families right from the beginning. We are there at those milestone moments and try not to lose people along the journey.

The decision to create my job was part of the recognition that we wanted to stay with people over a long period. So, with 0-11s, for example, our activities and support aim to give consistent opportunities to connect with families as they grow (up). This starts right at the beginning with the antenatal course we run, called 'Begin Well', which was set up by Christian medical staff for parents-to-be.

This gives us the opportunity to meet people at the start of their family life right through to when their children move to secondary school where our youth team continues its work.

As part of this strategy, the church has baby and toddlers' clubs in the week, including a club for dads and toddlers, and a Friday night club for primary age children. I am also involved with school work – including Counties' Life exhibition. In addition, we have larger local worship gatherings for 8-11s. There are also holiday clubs, and one-off events, where families are encouraged to come into the church together.

A lot of under-fives work is outreach focused, but we find that when children start school we risk losing contact with families when the midweek toddlers' groups are no longer relevant to them.

But for those families with whom we have built a significant relationship overtime, we are much more likely to see them come on a Friday night, to holiday club, or one-off events.

During this time, we build up significant relationships that enable us to share faith as part of sharing life with people. People get to see Jesus in the way we welcome people, the way that we share with people, and the way we talk about Jesus and give them continuous exposure to our faith over a long period of time.



This also gives families the opportunity to meet a range of people from across the church who do different activities. They then see what it looks like for us to 'be Jesus' in those different environments.

Our team has found, time and time again, that people get curious and want prayer for many things as opportunities to talk about life arise. This has been a huge affirmation of the relational model of evangelism.

The person who is now the church's paid family support worker, who's worked at Belmont for nearly ten years, became a Christian through going to the toddler group. She was invited to a Bible study and then started the Alpha course where she became a Christian. Shortly after, her husband also became a Christian. Her children are now 18 and 21.

She just talks about Jesus really naturally when she's in conversations with other mums. It's normal for her, and not a scary thing. She doesn't need to give a five-point sermon about creation, the fall, sin, the cross and the resurrection.



I think sometimes we give the impression that there has to be this proclamation moment and obviously that is part of it, but I think we do a lot of our proclamation in snippets. There are small ways that build up a picture for people about who the God is we love and serve.

Because we have a large building we can host all our activities in, there is an expectation that when someone comes to our toddler group at the church, it's harder for them to be offended when we talk about Jesus because they have chosen to come into this building, into this space, where we know God is at work amongst us.

Somebody said to me recently: "None of the other groups I go to are like this one." We believe that's because of the way we love people and invest in relationships with people; we show them God's faithful love which goes beyond providing 'a local service' (i.e. the structured toddler group). They're the ones that are turning the cogs in their mind and asking themselves about what makes the difference.

The starting point of our outreach is to try and say to people: "Come and build genuine friendships." When a child is really small we go through the challenges of life with people, and we walk with people.

We have seen fruit in terms of conversions but also change of perspectives, more openness, curiosity towards faith, and our reputation across the city, which makes a difference with young families.

For example, we have a couple of mums whose kids are upper end of primary school. They first came when their children were toddler age. Since then, both of them have come to Alpha and become Christians. They are now bringing their whole families to church. The daughter of one lady is now 10. She loves coming on Sunday morning. She now wants to get involved in church life and has been saying: "I really want to start getting involved in church life. Can I start serving tea and coffee? Can I start cutting out crafts for toddlers?"

That's really amazing because you see the transformation in parents and then you see how that's influencing their children. So, it's not just one adult that's

become a Christian, it's the potential ripple effect on that family for generations to come. This is what building the kingdom is. It is lasting fruit. Sometimes we can get so excited about converts we forget about disciples.

Someone comes along and they have that moment, and they say: "This makes sense." Then the rubber hits the road in the reality of their life - something happens which is difficult and challenging and suddenly it's like: "Well, I knew this made sense to me at that time, but how does it make sense to me at this time?"

But I think that when you are with people for a long journey they get exposure to

"I REALLY WANT TO START GETTING INVOLVED IN CHURCH LIFE. CAN I START SERVING TEA AND COFFEE? CAN I START CUTTING OUT CRAFTS FOR TODDLERS?"

faith through the ups and downs of the everyday, and they also see us going through our ups and downs. Then we are both able to say: "Actually, I am having a really hard day. Can you pray for me because I am struggling?" We want to help them know that our faith is a relationship with a God who can be known in Jesus, and who really makes a difference to our lives.

So, people can see God is the same: "Yesterday, today and forever" even when we are not. He's the foundation of truth on which we stand that never changes. Praise God.





MAKING JESUS KNOWN TODAY AND TOMORROW

SPREADING THE GOSPEL IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BRITAIN.



Matt Rich is a Counties evangelist and has been in full-time mission work of various forms for more than 30 years. He set up the first UK online mission in the year 2000. He is currently both a global online missionary and a pastor of an independent local church in Cumbria.

If you haven't yet acquired a copy, here's his edited excerpt from the book:

Sharing the good news online.

Over the last twenty years, up to 2020, I tried again and again to encourage churches and others to take more of their mission online—some churches dabbled, some ignored my encouragement, but God used the pandemic to force our hand, to make us go where the world already was - online!

If you are reading this, and your eyes are already beginning to glaze over, can I implore and encourage you and your church with these simple words: "Don't go back!"?

Whether we like it or not, the online world is where most of those we are seeking to reach are spending an ever-increasing amount of their time.

Johannes Gutenberg, the German publisher who used movable type for the first time to produce the Gutenberg Bible in the 1450s (one of the most important technical and intellectual developments in history) wrote:

"Religious truth is imprisoned in a small number of manuscript books. Let us break the seal which seals up holy things and give wings to Truth in order that she may win every soul that comes into the world by her word no longer written at great expense by hands easily palsied, but multiplied like the wind by an untiring machine from which shall soon flow in inexhaustible streams the most abundant and most marvellous liquor that has ever flowed to relieve the thirst of man! Through

it God will spread His Word. A spring of pure truth shall flow from it! Like a new star, it shall scatter the darkness of ignorance, and cause a light heretofore unknown to shine among men."

In a recent Online Nation report, Ofcom reported that adults are spending an average of four hours a day online.¹

In other research, it was discovered that two-thirds of our population use social media, with the user averaging 1 hour 50 minutes every day.²

Here are some suggestions about what your church could do online.

BASICS:

Church Website

The look and feel of your website is incredibly important. If you don't have a church website, please create one and have the church web-address prominently displayed outside your church. If your church website is more than five years old, create a new one and test it on a smartphone.

Don't create a website for the people in your church: design it for those whom you are aiming to reach out to.

Avoid Christian jargon. Also, most people are very lazy online; each extra click feels like hard work and can be enough to lose people along the way! And keep your website up-to-date.



INTERMEDIATE:

Video your in-person Sunday services

Record your Sunday service and upload it to YouTube or Vimeo on the same day and provide clear links to it on your church's website and Facebook page.

Facebook

Post regularly to your church Facebook page. Make sure you post at least once a week, but the more often the better.

Social media advertising

Advertising a Sunday service, or a one-off or regular outreach event, on social media is cheap and effective. The easiest place to begin is Facebook Boosting or Facebook Ads (Facebook Ads are also automatically shown on Instagram too).

¹ www.iabuk.com/news-article/ofcom-timespent-online-hits-record-levels

² www.tigermobiles.com/blog/how-much-time-do-people-spend-on-social-media

ADVANCED:

Live stream church services

Make your services available live on the Internet as they happen—livestream on Youtube and/or Facebook, but still make sure that you post the same service online for viewing later by those who were not able to be present or to view it live online.

Social media WhatsApp group

If you have a number of people in your congregation that are pretty active on social media, then set up a WhatsApp group for them, so that when the church posts something on social media the group can all be quickly and easily informed.

So, they can like, comment on and share the information, ensuring more local people will be shown the church's post.

Video stories of hope

People enjoy watching short, real-life stories about local people. Record two-to-three-minute video stories of hope, life, encouragement, testimony, and so on. Make sure the videos are short, snappy, and have a genuine feel about them.

What about personal evangelism online?

A high percentage of people feel free to respond very frankly, harshly, critically, and instantly to what others write online, which is why discussions by email and on social media can easily escalate into polarisation of positions.

When we seek to use the Internet for evangelism, it is important that we are very conscious of this tendency, so that we don't slip into the same pattern.

Tips for personal evangelism online

- 1. Don't argue with people in online public places. It is very rare that arguing in public achieves a good result; more often, it is detrimental and the opposite of the injunction in 1 Peter 3:15:
- "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."
- 2. Have genuine interest in people.

 Try to show a real interest in the people you interact with online—be interested in what they are interested in, be interested in their families, their personal lives, their opinions, in what they write and share online.

- 3. Imagine you are wearing a large hat with the words: "I'm a follower of Jesus", emblazoned on it in bright, bold letters; so now you don't need to hide your faith and nor do you any longer need to force it unnaturally into what you write to people.
- 4. Be natural about things. Aim to be genuine about your beliefs. If it's relevant to mention your faith in what you write, then write about it, bring it up naturally, don't hide it.
- 5. Know what you believe about Jesus and how to explain it in normal everyday words that will be understood by someone who doesn't know anything about God, or who has never been to church, or never read the Bible.
- 6. Trust that God is taking people on a spiritual journey and so it is okay to be only one part of that journey.

 Understanding this will free you to realise that you don't always have to share everything with everyone all the time.
- 7. Actively look for places to share your faith online. Why not set aside some time each week to be intentional about sharing your faith over the Internet.





Chatnow

If you enjoy talking to people about Jesus and you are happy to spend time online, then volunteering to take chats from websites like chatnow.org would be a great fit for you. Chatnow.org is a website that is primarily evangelistic in aim and offers anyone, anywhere in the world, the opportunity to chat live one-to-one with a Christian at any time of day or night.

All the information about how to be is available on the chatnow.org website, or you can email matt@chatnow.org to ask for more information.

This is a condensed version of the vital tips Matt has to offer about how your church can work online effectively. To

read more, purchase the book at:

www.countiesuk.org/ home/#our-book

COUNTIES EVANGELIST, PAUL WILLMOTT, WORKS ALONGSIDE A NUMBER OF LOCAL CHURCHES IN THE WEST MIDLANDS, WHERE HE CREATES LINKS WITH PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

REBECCA RUSSELL IS A PART-TIME SCHOOLS' WORKER, WHO FREQUENTLY WORKS WITH PAUL. SHE SHARES WHAT EVANGELISM LOOKS LIKE FOR HER CHURCH.

Paul has been visiting Blanford Mere Primary School, in Kingswinford, since 2007.

During this time, he's also been working alongside the local church – Arise. It has a part-time children's worker, Rebecca Russell, who goes into the school with Paul. She joins him in Assembly, connects with staff, talks to the Head Teacher, and chats with the children.

- "All of these visits have opened really valuable conversations with the school," says Paul.
- "After Covid and lockdown, a lot of children came back into school with well-being and behavioural issues due to a lack of social interaction. Arise Church recognised this and by working with children it's starting to bear fruit."

Recently, Andy Aston, the Church Leader, had a meeting with the Head Teacher and said: "How can we help? What can we do for you?"

So, Rebecca is now spending one afternoon a week, having 10-15 minute 'check-in' times with a few of the children.

And she's become a connection point and someone they feel comfortable talking to about their feelings.

Beyond that, the church has a qualified counsellor, Heather Barton, who does one day a week of play therapy with specific children. Paul adds:

"The relationship between school and church is a real inspiration that I hope others can think about creating locally in their communities."



From left to right: Rebecca Russell, Kerry Crook (Head teacher), Heather Barton (trained play therapist) and Paul Willmott

Rebecca Russell – Arise Church Children's Worker

During assemblies, Rebecca joins Paul as the children learn about Jesus. But in her role as a one-to-one mentor, she focuses more on listening and supporting the children.

However, Arise Church doesn't see her role and its mission as any less valuable because, for the church, evangelism starts by building relationships within the community. Rebecca says:

"As a church, we try and look out and see what the community needs and how we can help. So, when opportunities arise we are a recognisable face, and we have credibility."

The year before last, the church built a Christmas Grotto. It took them hours to set it up, but it was only used for a few hours. So last Christmas, Arise Church built the Grotto and invited the school to come along. They brought their nursery and reception children who loved it. It also gave the teachers a break as they had the chance to have a cup of tea.

"Heather and Rebecca have been invaluable to our children. They have supported our children to develop their self-esteem and open up if they need to. As a school, we have lost access to outside agencies and support. Heather and Rebecca allow us to support our children during the most challenging of times."

Kerry Crook, HeadTeacher

"They were blown away. They had really wanted somewhere to take the kids and we provided it. It's those little connections. I guess it's being a visible face to the teachers and the pupils. And showing them that we care and want nothing in return.

"I have also found that going in with Paul, the children recognise me when I do meet with them in a one-to-one setting. The other day I was getting in my car and a little girl was riding her bike and she said: 'I've seen you in my school. You're from Arise Church aren't you?'"



"Playing with Heather helps me to show my feelings. She gives me time to think, and I can talk to her if I want to. She listens."



"WHY DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?" WHAT A GREAT QUESTION THAT CAN LEAD TO A LIFE-CHANGING DISCUSSION. BUT HOW DO YOU ANSWER SUCH A QUESTION IN JUST TWO MINUTES, TO A 10-YEAR-OLD?

Since telling Ignite about his work at Blanford Mere Primary School, Paul has shared another great testimony with us. In his chapter of our book, *Making Jesus Known Today and Tomorrow: Spreading* the Gospel in Twenty-First Century Britain, Paul writes:

"Let me begin with this bold statement, children are people too. It may seem a little obvious, but we can often think of children as junior humans or, worse, we can end up treating them as less than people. Maybe this is because they are young, with lots to learn and much growing to do. Children do have much to learn, but then so do all of us."

It's often easy to forget that the most profound questions may come from children, and it's good for us to be prepared to answer them with the respect we would give to an adult – as Jesus said:

"People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it'." Luke 18:15-17

"Why do you believe in God?" What a great question that can lead to a life-changing discussion. But how do you answer such a question in just two minutes, to a 10-year-old?

When I lead my usual assemblies in local schools, I often get asked some great questions. These questions range from: "How do the puppets talk?" to: "How do you know so much about the Bible?" Some questions I am asked are quick and easy to answer - my favourite question is: "Are those real puppets?" And my answer is, of course: "Yes, they are real puppets."

But some of the best questions are when I get asked about my personal faith. Following an assembly, as I was leaving the hall recently, one of the boys in Year 6 asked me a question that I began with: "Why do you believe in God?" I could tell this was a genuine question, and not just a kid being sarcastic.

I only had a couple of minutes before the boy needed to be back in class. So, we sat on a bench and I told him my answer (your answer may be different). I talked about hearing lots of Bible stories in Sunday school. And then hearing from other Christians that the Bible was real and everything I had heard about God and Jesus was true. He listened, nodded,

and said: "Ok, I get it." Then it was time for him to go back to class. I pray that he finds more answers to his questions, which ultimately leads him nearer to Jesus.

MORE GOOD NEWS

Paul also had an email from a Christian grandmother, Enid Flavell, who was happy to share her good news.

On taking an Easter gift to my 6-year-old granddaughter, Abbie, I mentioned to her mum that it's a difficult subject to explain to a child.

"Abbie knows all about Easter," her mum said. Then she proceeded to tell me about the cross, the nails, how somebody told the soldiers where to find Jesus, and how three people

She said: "I know this because Paul told us in assembly at school!"

As a lover of Jesus, my heart soared, and I just wanted you to know what wonderfully effective seeds you're sowing - please be encouraged.

Thank you and God bless you.

From a very grateful nanny.



NEXT STEPS

Could you support our evangelists in the work they do? If you'd like more information on ways to donate regularly or just give a one-off donation visit our website:

www.countiesuk.org/supporters/individuals

COUNTIES EVANGELIST, MARK BINGHAM, HAS A NEW ROLE AT THE NEW GLORY CHRISTIAN CENTRE INTERNATIONAL MINISTRIES IN CHATHAM, KENT. HE'S PASSIONATE ABOUT OTHER CHRISTIANS UNDERSTANDING THAT "EVANGELISM IS A WAY OF LIFE, RATHER THAN AN ACTIVITY".

Catching a moment with Mark is like catching up with a 100 metres sprinter. His enthusiasm for evangelism never stops and it's contagious. Our conversation reminded me of Paul's letter to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith:" 2 Timothy 4:7.

Mark doesn't just wish that for himself but for every non-Christian. Mark exudes the belief that evangelism should be part of every Christian's DNA.

To put it more bluntly, Christians should be like sticks of rock with 'Jesus' stamped all the way through them. And no opportunity to share the Gospel is too big or too small.

"There's a real desire amongst many Christians to 'get out there', so they do, but it doesn't always work, and they get disheartened," says Mark, "but we have to keep on going 'fighting the good fight." New Glory Christian Centre set up a new Neighbourhood Chaplains group (which we featured in Spring's Ignite) late last year and they've asked Mark to join their leadership team.

"My role will be trying to encourage the church in evangelism. We are all called to witness and share our faith.

"It's not just about coming to church on a Sunday but it's about sustaining a culture that sharing your faith with others is what should drive us as a church."

Mark also regularly visits two care homes for the elderly: "I do a little half hour service where we do some hymns and then I share a five-to-ten-minute Gospel message with them."

"Some of the residents have dementia but I have prayed with others because they had









sore legs, cuts and bruises. It's building that ongoing connection and chatting to them – just being there.

"I believe that these people who are reaching the end stages of their life may not be in a place where they know how to make a commitment, but God might have spoken to them through the preaching of the Word and the sharing of the Gospel.

"So, it's about faithfully preaching the Gospel and leaving it up to God to save people."

Mark's also been busy – not exactly sprinting the streets – but going with a group of people onto the streets of Maidstone. He often draws pictures on whiteboards or puts posters up to get into conversation with people.

"We never have a time where we don't have at least two or three meaningful conversations. We recently had a girl who was into the occult, and she looked withdrawn.

"She said she believed in a 'higher being' and we asked her 'who' this higher being was. Then she said a few people she knew had committed suicide and become very ill. So, we shared the message with her which was really rewarding.

"Recently, another guy said he had seen us around and talked to us a few times and, whereas most people don't make a commitment to Jesus then and there – this guy said he felt like he 'needed to'. So, we prayed with him."

Mark says that most of the people who are interested in Jesus are in the 18-30 age bracket which, he adds, is the group which the church says: "Aren't interested in God". He admits, though, that the hard part is moving on with people from those initial encounters.

"At the end of the day you can't guarantee these people will come to church or follow up on your conversation but just by going out on the streets, you meet people that you wouldn't have done otherwise.

"My prayer is that churches here in Kent will become more involved in evangelism because there are people out there who want to hear the Gospel and they are open to it."

If you live in the Kent area around Chatham, feel free to get in touch with Mark. mark.bingham@ countiesuk.org



"GROWTH THROUGH DOING LESS."

COUNTIES CHURCH PLANT, 'CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY WOLLASTON', OPENED 2021. IT TRIED LOTS OF DIFFERENT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES, BUT IT WAS ONLY WHEN IT BECAME LESS BUSY, AND PUT THE GOSPEL MESSAGE FIRST, GROWTH BEGAN.

LEADER, JORDAN ARMSTRONG, TELLS IGNITE HOW IT HAPPENED.

The regular congregation, at a Sunday gathering, for Church in the Community, is around 40-50 per cent non-Christian which is an incredible figure for a church that only opened three years ago.

"It's really interesting to see people so

committed to church even without a faith," says Jordan. But what's just as interesting is the journey it has been on to reach this point because at its heart is the power of the Gospel.

When the church first opened, Jordan says: "As most community churches tend to do, we started gathering and then we started doing things to gather the community and let them know that we were there.

"We wanted the church to be open for the community every day of the week if we possibly could. If we could think about doing it – we did it."

The church had a toddler group, a youth group, a coffee shop ministry. They ran events for local small businesses and had lots going on throughout the year. They also ran an Alpha course, life groups, and prayer meetings. At one point, the building was open six days a week.

"It was great. We loved it for community engagement on a mass scale. At the height of the coffee shop and youth work we



probably engaged with 40-50 different young people across a week or the month depending on whether they came in regularly or occasionally to the church. That was amazing as it was a very large non-Christian youth ministry."

However, in the middle of last year, the church was about to lose a lot of volunteers who had only been on placement for a year and a lot of young people who were going back to college and university. The leadership team realised that if they carried on at the pace they had been running at, they would face burn out just to keep things going "for the sake of it."

The team also realised that although they had 'quantity' it didn't necessarily translate into 'quality' – Jordan admits that they had been so busy running events and keeping so many plates spinning, that actual relationship building and sharing the Gospel with people hadn't been happening.

"At that point we were just a social enterprise. We weren't actually getting to know anyone. We weren't having conversations. People would come back week-after-week for a cup of coffee and we were struggling to know their names, let alone get to know them as people. That broke our hearts.

"One of the things that we would say we do well is family and community. So, when we are a community church, doing community well, but don't actually become communal, it doesn't reflect the values we have."

In early September, last year, the church paused for six weeks. They stopped



everything, except for their Sunday service and small groups on Tuesdays. Instead, they committed to praying and listening to what the Lord was saying in terms of what their mission should look like and their priorities.

Since then, the church has been much more intentional and strategic in the way it runs its ministry by putting the Gospel at the "forefront of everything we do" in order to make real disciples.

"After this period, we found that we'd entered into a new rhythm. Because we didn't want to lose impact with people, we had continued to meet regularly with them through the week – just not in an 'organised church setting'.

"We very quickly realised we were seeing far more value in the one-on-one relationships and small group relationships that didn't require us to be in the church building running a ministry."

So, the team stripped back a large proportion of what they were doing and asked: "What does it look like for the church to be physically outside of these four walls and reach the people we find across the community?"

Throughout the week they started meeting people individually for coffee and some church members now regularly go to McDonalds to chat with young people over a cheeseburger about whatever issues may arise.

Jordan and his wife, Lacy, also invite people to their home five or six times a week:

"We love to have people over and share a meal and we can have far more in depth, relational conversations and we've encouraged the church to do that. What we've seen is that people are far more receptive to spending time outside of a



church ministry just doing life the way that church should.

"It should be more than just a youth group ministry, it should be more than just a coffee shop ministry, it should be ministering to people.

"The church has grown more in the last six months of doing 'less' than we did in the first two-and-a-half years we spent doing everything we could think of. We might have connected with two hundred people across a month, but we saw little fruit for our labours.

"But since we dug in with relationships and asked our congregation to share Jesus with the people they really cared about, and meet Jesus through them, rather than running a coffee shop, we've seen the congregation increase from 12-15 to 25 on Sundays."

The church has run two Alpha courses. Ten new people came along to the last course, and in March someone gave their life to the Lord. Jordan says the emphasis of the toddler group has also shifted.

"THERE'S ONE LITTLE BOY WHO
ASKS HIS MUM TO SING 'MY GOD
IS SO BIG, SO STRONG AND SO
MIGHTY' WITH ACTIONS BEFORE
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JUST LOVES THAT SONG."



"When we opened, we responded to the community's request for a place for children to socialise, who'd been born during Covid. But we found it just became an open play area with toast and fruit. So, after our six-week pause we committed to sharing the Gospel with the young children and their parents.

"What we have now is a little group that feels like its own little microcosm of church on a Wednesday morning. We sing nursery rhymes, but we mix in a selection of Christian children's songs with the actions. We also pray with the children and have a Bible story every week.

"There's one little boy who asks his mum to sing 'My God is so big, so strong and so mighty' with actions before he gets out of bed, every morning. And I don't think they are Christians, but he just loves that song."

Having seen the change at Church in the Community, Jordan believes that too many churches feel there is an expectation on them to be a provider of 'things' for the community and that we often doubt the power of the Word:

"We don't think that Gospel is enough of a provision for people. We feel like we need to provide the things people want before we ask them to listen to things we want them to hear.

"If we really believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News and we share that with people, then we'll realise that the Good News isn't a toddler group or the coffee we serve because we've got a nice coffee machine - it's the message that people need today, just as much now as they did when Jesus walked the earth."



NEXT STEPS

Are you considering a church plant and would like to find out more:

www.counties-training.org/counties-church-planting

COUNTIES EVANGELIST JONATHAN BRAIN AND HIS WIFE HEATHER, LIVE NEAR CHIPPENHAM IN WILTSHIRE. THEY'VE SET UP MARANATHA HOUSE CHURCH AND ARE ATTENDING THE M4 CHURCH PLANTING PROGRAMME.

So how is the House Church progressing?

It's encouraging. Jerry (who featured on the front page of Spring 2023's Ignite) became a Christian. Seriously born again. We had been out for a drink and afterwards we sat in my car for four hours and I said: "Why are you sat on the fence? I could probably give you a bit of a push, but you need to decide."

And he did. He's the most convincing convert I have ever come across. He has absolutely, completely got it. He has read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and John's gospel. He's sending parts of scripture out to people. All the things you dream about are happening.

I had then been thinking about him getting baptised and he sent me a message saying: "I am thinking about getting baptised."

So, he said he doesn't care where, as long as he can do it, and we are baptising him soon in a trough in our back garden.

The church is still tiny but it's like God is glueing the pieces of a house church together really well. Instead of being a mile wide and an inch deep we are a mile deep and an inch wide.

What do you think 'pushed' Jerry off the fence?

He acknowledged life wasn't working and that what was on the other side of the fence was all that was good – even though it might be hard. He said:

"I don't really know why I am sitting on the fence."

The obvious conclusion was jump off the fence and leave his old life behind.

We've also been joined by a lady 'A' from the village. She has health issues and a lot of complicated family problems, like us all. I think she is a Christian and she has a beautiful heart. She's super friendly and very open. I think she's found a spiritual home.

There's room for her to grow – as there is for all of us. There's no rush, we don't kick people out.

Along with a couple more who are coming, there are some neighbours who I think will start coming, but we are in the early stages. Just made another renewed contact...God is moving and blessing Marantha House Church.

How are you finding the actual 'experience' of church when you meet?

We have so much time to really listen to people's stories. We make plenty of space to really get to know much more about people at Maranatha House Church.

We look into the Word, we pray, and spend enough time to share and listen. It's very different from anything I've experienced before and it's morphing in that way of knowing God and knowing one another so we can love Him more and love one another more.

What have you learned since the church started?

You have got to keep your eyes open for the curve balls – the way the evil one works, especially through people. valuable thing I have learned is giving enough time and encouragement for everyone to be really known.

You can't pray too much. The most

What happens in the church, stays in the church but people are encouraged to share what's on their heart, and making sure the Word is our rudder and letting it mould us. I love it. It's been brilliant.

Due to your father passing away you missed the last M4 gathering – are you continuing with it?

We were really sad we couldn't make it, and we are going to carry on. M4 really blessed us when we attended the first session, and we will be back.

Any final thoughts?

The Lord is glueing this tiny little house church together. And I have become more and more convinced that church was always meant to be little house churches everywhere, rather than big churches. You can get lost in a crowd of 50. You can't really be lost in a house, I recommend it!





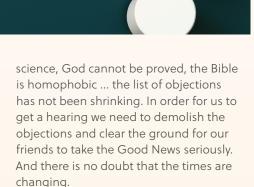
NEXT STEPS

Are you considering a church plant and would like to find

www.counties-training.org/counties-church-planting

CHRIS SINKINSON IS AN AUTHOR AND ASSOCIATE PASTOR AT LANSDOWNE CHURCH IN BOURNEMOUTH.

HE LOOKS AT HOW
THE LOCAL CHURCH
MIGHT TACKLE THE
'BIG QUESTIONS' AS PART
OF ITS EVANGELISTIC
STRATEGY.



An Apology for Christianity

The word 'apology' has shifted meaning over the centuries. Today we use the word to simply mean saying sorry or showing regret for something we have done.

But it is originally a Greek word – used in the Bible – to mean something more like "defence" or giving a response (1 Peter 3:15). That's what we mean by apologetics, and it is necessary for evangelism today like never before.

Criticisms of Christianity are all around us. The Church is irrelevant, Christians are hypocrites, religion is opposed to

A Brave New World

The 2021 UK Office for National Statistics census showed, for the first time, that less than half the country considers themselves Christians. While in 2011, 59.3% described

themselves as Christians, ten years later only 46.2% do so. You only have to go back to 2001 to see 71% of the population ticking the Christian box. That's fast.

However, if people don't identify with the Christian faith what do they identify with? On this question, the UK census is of less help. The next highest response was "no religion", at 37.2%. But what does it mean to identify as "no religion"?

The census certainly reveals a growing diversity of beliefs in the UK. Apparently, those identifying as Shaman has risen from 650 to 8000. The numbers of Muslims and Hindus have also risen but it remains obvious that more and more people prefer not to identify with any religion. Earning the nickname "nones" we have a growing section of the population who just don't want to be associated with religion at all.

Cultural Christianity

However, it is far from 'game over' for Christianity in our national life. This easter Richard Dawkins declared himself a "cultural Christian." Of course, if you listen to the interview (LBC radio) where he revealed this, you find he is not saying anything new – he does not have faith in God, but he does benefit from the Christian culture he is part of. He explained: "I love hymns and Christmas carols and I sort of feel at home in the Christian ethos." Richard even admitted that Christianity is: "a fundamentally decent religion."

Richard is expressing here something many people may still think about Christianity.
They like the culture but not the beliefs.
They want the outward form but not the doctrine it is built upon. You could call Richard Dawkins a Christian atheist.

The way he describes himself reveals the basic contradiction in liberal western societies. The values of the western world – pluralism, tolerance, freedom, progress - have not been shaped by Islam or Hinduism but by Biblical Christianity.

The values remain – tolerance and freedom - but on what basis? We need to point out to the many like Richard Dawkins, who want religion without God, that without God there is no basis for the religion. This brings us back to the crucial role of apologetics in the life of the local church.

Apologetics and the local church

It is a big mistake to think that apologetics is only for university missions or to engage with intellectuals. It should be part of the local church's approach to both evangelism and discipleship.

Here is one key reason. Knowing "what" we believe is not enough, we need to know "why" we believe it. Much of our preaching, Bible study, youth and children's work give us the content: they tell us what we believe.

A more basic question is "why do we believe this?" When we get the answers to those kinds of questions our faith is firmer, our convictions stronger, our discipleship more robust.

Whether it is evangelism with teenagers first encountering the Christian faith or Bible study with elderly life-long church goers, we need to build on rock not sand.

The shifting sand of mere emotionalism, witty anecdotes or heart-warming stories don't provide a firm foundation for faith.

But on the rock of clear reasons and compelling evidence we can demonstrate why we believe the Christian faith is true. Then when we encounter objections or life gets hard we have a faith that can weather the storm.

Faith in the Community

How can we use apologetics across the range of Christian ministries? I think there are many ways – in fact, Peter's command in the Bible is to: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15) With gentleness and respect we can always find opportunities to give the reasons for our faith.

Special events, breakfasts and film nights.

These are great opportunities to have a speaker come and share reasons for their faith in relation to the theme. I recently spoke at a youth event in Swanage where they screened an Indiana Jones movie. With my own interest in archaeology, I could talk about how the Bible has been confirmed by various discoveries made in the Holy Land.

Sermons and Bible Studies. Don't just preach to the converted. Even if your

congregation are all believers they still need to know 'why' these things are true. How do we know Jesus existed? Why do we know that for all the talk of 'holy wars' in the Old Testament, the Bible has no place for genocide or jihad?

We are surrounded by myths and fairy tales, who is to say that your text for today isn't from the world of Disney? Every sermon I preach I am conscious of the need to present a reasonable faith that is grounded in evidence, makes sense of life, and withstands critical scrutiny. Christians need to hear this as much as the unchurched.

Schools and children's work. Apologetics has often been preserved for work among teenagers when confidence has grown to rebel against received wisdom. This is a mistake. I don't think you can start apologetics too early.

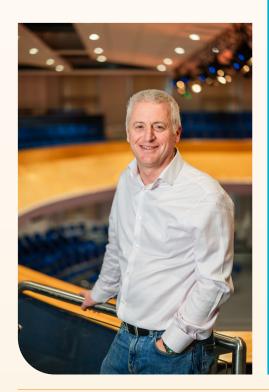
Children are being exposed to the wisdom of the world from pre-school and, if you stop to listen, you can hear profound questions being asked by the youngest among us. Who made God? Why can't I see God? Will my hamster be in heaven? These are not simple questions and not to be dismissed. Whether it is a school assembly or a carers and toddlers' group, finding ways of addressing the questions young people are actually asking (rather than the questions we want them to ask!) will find a listening ear.

Special Events. I have been bored witless during sermons at special events – Christmas, weddings or funerals. How can we miss such gift-of-an-opportunities for

apologetics? Those occasions are times for big questions of life and death, meaning and purpose, hope and ambition.

The Church is not only a place to do apologetics, it is itself an apologetic. Christians in fellowship together demonstrate that God is there. Most of us, somewhere in our testimonies, will point to the witness of Christians we met who drew us to Christ.

Francis Schaeffer, a great apologistmissionary of the twentieth century, described it as the ultimate apologetic for the Christian faith. He wrote: "Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our



message is truthful – Christian community is the final apologetic."

Schaeffer wrote many profound books, delivered insightful lectures and debated the Christian faith. But he never lost sight of the local church, Christian community, as the foundation of all our apologetics.

NEXT STEPS

If you are interested in reading more about the subject of Apologetics, here are few introductory suggestions from Chris:

Amy Orr-Ewing

Why trust the Bible? Answering 10 common objections to the Christian faith (IVP, 2020)

Timothy Keller

The Reason for God: belief in an age of scepticism (Dutton, 2008)

Chris Sinkinson

Confident Christianity: Conversations that Lead to the Cross (IVP. 2012)

Andy Bannister and Gavin Matthews

Have you Ever Wondered? (10ofthose, 2024)

JUST A MINUTE WITH...

TIM AYRTON, COUNTIES EVANGELIST



Tim and his wife, Joy, run the family and community centre Number 72 in Sudbury, Suffolk. It is based on Isaiah 61:1 "He sent me to bind up the broken hearted and set the prisoners free." They do that by offering, informal, easily accessed, help, support and friendship.

How did you become a Christian?

I was brought up in a Brethren Assembly. I remember, my mum telling me the story of the Lost Sheep when I was five and asking me if I wanted to make a commitment to Jesus. It started to impact me in my teens when I was baptised, and I started to develop spiritually.

How did you get involved with Counties?

Joy and I joined Counties in 2007. We knew our ministry would be with families. So, after much prayer we got the keys for the 'Number 72' building in Sudbury, Suffolk, at a reduced rent for three months, to try out our ministry. Then we had to find £1200 a month which we had to 'pray in' every month. We did that for three years. Eventually, the landlord decided to sell the building and Joy and I prayed a simple prayer: "Lord if you still want us to be at number 72 please send us someone to buy it for us. Amen." Then a wonderful Christian lady bought the building for us, and she gave it to us on a lease. After she died she left the building to our charity in her will. It now needs £30.000 for a new roof and we are currently fundraising for that.

What's your favourite Bible passage and why?

"When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross." Colossians 2:11-15 (NLT)

You can really see in those verses the nature of the two-edged sword that God has given us. It is so important why we not only understand the nature of God's leading but also the way He has equipped us.

YOUR LOCAL EVANGELISTS

NORTH OF ENGLAND

Steve & Debra Cowles
Julian & Ella Gutteridge
Phyllis Jenkins (Senior)
Martin & Angie Korchinsky (CP)
Lee & Lesley Marsland
Matt & Nicola Rich
Rob & Sarah Watson

MIDLANDS

Jordan & Lacy Armstrong (CP)
David & Lindsey Brown
Roger & Hazel Chilvers
(Seniors)
Angela Cooper (Senior)
Tim & Katrina Cracknell (CP)
Andy & Isobel Hodson (CP)
Bob & Rita Telford (Seniors)
Paul & Vanessa Willmott

EAST OF ENGLAND

Charles & Elizabeth Addoco
Will & Lynne Andrews
Tim & Joy Ayrton
Madelene Bathgate (Senior)
Mark & Amanda Bingham
Lionel & Katy Clargo (Seniors)
John Hardwick
Kim & Jo Hobbs
Tony & Ruth Hood
Victor Jack (Senior)
Andy & Miriam Jelfs (Seniors)
Colin & Linda Johnson
Jane Martin (Senior)
Caleb & Adanesh Mathewos (CP)
Andrew & Rachel Mugford

SOUTH WEST

Jacquie & Tim Bodman
Jean Campbell (Senior)
Steve Ellacott (AE)
Mike & Su Strange (Seniors)
Alex & Beth Symons (AE)
David & Katie Symons
Stevie & Natalie Walker

SOUTH CENTRAL

Jonathan & Heather Brain Gordon & Penny Curley Ray Dadswell (Senior) Stephen & Jean Gillham (Seniors) Wendy Iliffe (Senior) Steve & Dawn Loader

WALES

Grace Anderson (Senior)
Clive & Fiona Cornish (CP)
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