

Belong



**HE PRAYED
FOR US**



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REFLECTIONS ON WHOLE LIFE STEWARDSHIP



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What if every person chose rebellion all the time? What sort of relationships would we have in families and communities? We would have relationships full of mistrust and self-interest. Order, joy, and peace would vanish. Yet God, in his mercy, has not abandoned us to chaos. From the beginning, he has been the One who brings order out of disorder, light out of darkness, and life out of dust.

God has entrusted humanity with time, talents, and treasure so that his creation may flourish and his kingdom might be made known.

Time: God Holds It in His Hands

Scripture tells us there is a season for everything (Ecclesiastes 3). Time itself is God's creation. God gives us days and years not merely as empty containers to fill, but as his appointed moments to reveal his faithfulness.

Anxiety may rise in our hearts because we do not know what tomorrow will hold. However, we know the One who holds tomorrow. In Christ,

**GOD ENTRUSTS US
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God redeems our time by entering history, dying, and rising again for our salvation. He invites us to trust him daily, numbering our days with wisdom because they are his gracious gift.

Talents: God Equips His People

Every skill, ability, and gift comes from God. He fashions the craftsman's hands, the singer's voice, the leader's vision, and the farmer's endurance. When we work, it is God who first worked — creating, shaping, and sustaining the world.

In Jesus, God gives the Spirit to equip his people with spiritual gifts for building up the body of Christ and serving the world. Our talents are not accidents of birth or mere personal achievements; they are God's investments in us for the sake of Jesus' mission through his Church.

Treasure: God Provides Generously

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Treasure — whether money, possessions, or resources — reveals what we value and where we place our trust. Yet before we ever give, God gives. God is our provider, "the Lord who provides" (Genesis 22:13-14).

Throughout history, God has raised up kings, leaders, and ordinary people with resources to serve his purposes. The early Church shared their possessions so that "there were no needy persons among them"

(Acts 4:34). Our wealth finds its true purpose when it reflects the generosity of our divine giver.

Whole-Life Stewardship: God's Generosity at Work

Whole-life stewardship is not simply an act of human obedience but a response to divine generosity. God has given us time, talents, and treasure as signs of his love and tools for his kingdom. In Jesus we see the ultimate generous act: "that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Because God is generous, we can live generously. Because the Father provides, we can share. Because the Spirit equips, we can trust that we are being conformed to the image of Christ. Whole-life stewardship begins and ends with our triune God.

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PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD WORKERS



BY THEO OKAI
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In Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard workers. It challenges conventional notions of fairness and reveals truths about the kingdom of God.

The parable describes a landowner who hires workers throughout the day. Some were hired early, others at noon, and still others late. At the end of the day, the landowner gave all the workers the same wage, regardless of how long they worked. This sparked grumbling about who worked the longest, but the landowner responds:

I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous? Matthew 20:13-15 NIV

This parable reveals key aspects of the kingdom of God. First, it underscores the radical generosity of God. The landowner's decision to

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pay all workers equally, regardless of their hours, reflects God's grace. In the kingdom of God, salvation and inclusion are not rewards for long service or hard work; they are gifts of divine grace. This challenges our tendency to measure worth by productivity or merit, reminding us that God's economy operates on love, grace, and generosity rather than human standards of fairness.

Secondly, the parable highlights the inclusivity of God's kingdom. The landowner hires workers, even up to the last hour, ensuring that no one is left out of purposeful work and earning opportunities. This mirrors God's desire to invite all people into his kingdom, regardless of when they come to faith or how much they have accomplished. "This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4 NIV).

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is called to embody this inclusivity, reaching out to those on the margins and welcoming them into the community of faith. The parable challenges us to examine our attitudes toward those who come to faith later in life or who may not fit our expectations of what a "good Christian" should look like.

The parable also speaks of the role of the Church. Just as the landowner sent workers into his vineyard, the Church is sent into the world to participate in God's mission. This mission is not about earning rewards or competing for status but about faithfully joining in God's work. The Church's role is to reflect God's generosity and inclusivity, ensuring that all hear the gospel and experience God's grace and love. This requires a shift from a scarcity mindset, which fears grace, to an abundance mindset, which celebrates God's limitless generosity.

The parable calls us to reevaluate our motivations in ministry. Do we serve motivated by gratitude for God's grace? The workers who grumbled were focused on what they thought they deserved rather than on the generosity they had received. Similarly, in ministry, we must guard against resentment when we perceive that others receive more. Instead, we are called to rejoice in the blessings of others and serve with humility and joy. Let's avoid the "Jonah Syndrome," where we are disappointed that God's generosity and grace abound, even to those we consider undeserving (Jonah 4:2).



Application includes the Church creating spaces where all feel welcome and valued, regardless of background or how long they have been part of the community. This outreach includes immigrants and people who are unhoused or struggling with substance use. Notice that the landowner didn't stop offering opportunities until the day's end.

In conclusion, the parable of the vineyard workers invites us to embrace a vision of the kingdom of God rooted in grace, inclusivity, and generosity. It challenges us to examine our attitudes and align our ministry with God's priorities. By doing so, we participate in God's mission and reflect his love to a world in need.

As we work in the vineyard of the Lord, may we do so with gratitude, humility, and appreciation for the boundless grace available to all.

Theo Okai is GCI's National Director in Ghana and the Regional Director for West Africa. He lives in Accra, Ghana



SEP 2025



BY GAVIN HENDERSON
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Proverbs 22:6 instructs us to “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (NIV).

SEP, our summer camp for teenagers, is one of the ways that we look to do this as a Church. It provides teenagers from all background with a taste of what it means to be part of a Christian community that lives out a Kingdom culture.

While I normally visit SEP every year, this year was the first time in several years that I was able to participate as a staff member and to stay the whole time. It was so encouraging to see the dedication of our staff members in praying for and supporting the campers.

Like last year, camp was once again held at the Frontier Centre in Northamptonshire. This site is run by a dedicated Christian charity, and it is lovely to have fellow Christian staff work with us

to help ensure the campers had the best possible camp possible.

We were also delighted this year to have a baptism at camp with one of the campers committing their life to Jesus Christ and being baptised in the River Nene.

One of the changes that happened at camp this year is that Jackie Mill announced that this would be her last year as Camp Director. She will be replaced by long time SEP staff member Jeni Ozumba who will take over camp from 2026 onwards. Jackie made it clear that while she was stepping down as Camp Director she still very much intends to continue supporting SEP, and will return next year to help support Jeni in her new role.

Please keep both Jackie and Jeni in your prayers during this time of transition and I look forward to seeing you at SEP 2026!

Gavin Henderson in the National Ministry Leader of Grace Communion International in the UK and Ireland.



HE PRAYED FOR US



BY SHIRLEY MCLEAN
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Isn't it heart-warming when someone tells you that prayers for them have been answered? And how rare and special to find out that you have somehow, even unwittingly, been instrumental in the answer to a prayer. Or to be able to tell someone that they are!

But, have you ever considered that, as church, we all have the opportunity to be part of an answer to a very special prayer? Jesus' prayer, no less—on the night before his crucifixion.

Let's hold that thought, and ponder church mergers—something that's affecting quite a number of churches across different denominations, and provides extra scope for being part of that answer!

My 93-year-old mother's church, St Andrews in Skipton, North Yorkshire, underwent a merger last year with Trinity Church just down the road, and the new congregation is known as Trinity St Andrews. Or, as Mum has been known to say, she now attends St Trinian's! (Images of gym-slips and jolly hockeysticks come to mind... But I'm pretty sure that's just a slip of the tongue; she assures me it's going well.)

The Grace Communion International gathering that I am privileged to look after in Hemel Hempstead relaunched in January 2025 following a merger of the established mainly Zoom-based Hemel, and the in-person Watford, gatherings. While it's great to be a more viable congregation in terms of numbers, to a degree I think we probably all miss the way things used to be. But the past is not a destination, so, following a few months of consolidation time, we are feeling our way forward with goodwill and optimism, with a view to outreach as God leads and enables.

The cartoon on the next page was first published in May in The Church Times and reproduced by permission. It's easy to see the funny side of the cartoon, but it also speaks to the grace, love and patience required to reach the fourth illustration—becoming best friends.

Much could be written about bringing congregations together, but here are three points

that I hope will be encouraging for all, whether in established congregations or new mergers.

First, we must realise that what we call 'church' is no ordinary organisation of people. Its visible presence seen from the outside is as a diverse group of people from different walks of life, often with no logical reason to be together aside from our connection to Jesus – and unbelievers are quick to point the finger when they notice imperfections.

So, what's going on here?

Scripture tells us that the church is the Body of Christ, and that the Body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and further describes the church as the Bride of Christ.

The living, resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus is the head of his body, the church, and his self-giving presence and the love of God are its energising life-blood. I like the way The Message version of the Bible expresses Ephesians 1:20–23:

All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.

Second, Jesus promised that the church is unstoppable! The gates of hell can never prevail against his church – Jesus is in charge, even though he is happy to delegate the nitty-gritty of its day-to-day affairs to imperfect followers! Let's look at that in Matthew 16:16–19, just after Simon Peter has been given the astonishing insight that his friend Jesus of Nazareth is the long-promised Messiah:

Simon Peter said, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

THE NEIGHBOURING PARISH

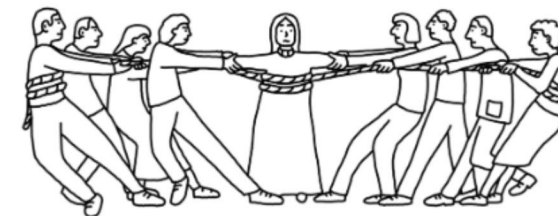
WE ARE WORKING TOGETHER



THE 'GETTING TO KNOW YOU' EVENING



EXPERIENCING EACH OTHER'S STYLES OF WORSHIP



SHARING A VICAR



BECOMING BEST FRIENDS

Church humour from the cartoonist Dave Walker

Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

"And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven."

Third, Jesus prayed for his church! As recorded in that long discourse on the night before the crucifixion, in chapters John 14 to 17, he prayed "sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth". He promised us his love, joy and peace. John 17:20–23:

I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me.

The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with

us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.

The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me.

In conclusion, even as churches of many denominations address the challenges and practicalities of church mergers and unions, let's remember what an opportunity this provides to be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer.

By his Spirit, the risen and ascended Jesus is now at work on the inside, renewing our hearts and minds, transforming his church from within. God's own love, shed abroad in our hearts, is what makes it possible for his church to grow together.

Whether in long-established, merging or emerging congregations, may Jesus' church truly be the witness to the world that he has called us to be – and prayed for us to be.

Shirley McLean is the Pastor of Grace Communion Hemel Hempstead.



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THE PARABLE OF LEAVEN



BY JOSHILA PHILIP
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Recently when we visited our daughter in the U.S., she introduced us to sourdough bread. (Yes! You read that right; I didn't know about it before.) She said it was a healthier option than the typical white bread. Later I learned from "Google university" about the sourdough method. Sourdough is a traditional method of making bread that uses a live fermented culture of flour and water as the leavening agent. It's known as the sourdough "starter." I also learned that there are some bakeries across the world making sourdough with starters that have been passed down over centuries, going back generations!

In one of his parables Jesus said: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." Matthew 13:33 NKJV

The parable of leaven is one of the shortest parables told by Jesus. It's followed by another short one, the parable of mustard seed. In both the parables, Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to small things, a mustard seed and a leavening agent. A very small portion of leavening agent can leaven a large quantity of flour. While the mustard seed's growth is visible in the plant, leaven's action is more hidden, helping the dough increase invisibly. Leaven begins as a small portion, but the entire dough is transformed into the very nature of leaven.

**"THE PARABLE OF
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Likewise, the Kingdom of Heaven and the characteristics of the kingdom culture—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—permeate our surroundings. Kingdom culture spreads to our family, workplace, congregation, and neighbourhood. The Kingdom of Heaven grows till all humanity has seen it, felt it, or experienced it. The kingdom of heaven and its culture is like yeast—at times seemingly invisible, yet it permeates the whole world. Evil, in all its ugliness, cannot stop it.

Meditating on this parable has encouraged me personally, because the persecution that is happening around us in my country is very worrisome. I have often wondered what the future will be for my children. How are they going to stand up for Christ or live their lives as Christians? Will Christianity withstand the fury and hatred that is often projected onto us as Christians in India? The answer is the parable of leaven. The kingdom of heaven will prevail—because Jesus said it will. Like leaven, it will increase, it will spread, and it will take over, permeate, and influence. And the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

The kingdom is immense, but it's unfinished. It came to us 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus. With a leaven of 12 faithful disciples living the Great Commission, it spread from an upper room tucked away in a little corner of Jerusalem to the

whole world. It will continue to spread until Jesus Christ returns in glory. Until that day, let us labour in reaching the unreached, touching the lives of those that are hurting, and demonstrating Kingdom culture.

The parable of leaven illustrates the transformative power of the Kingdom of Heaven, which starts small but has the potential for significant growth. The parable of leaven signifies the power of small things, small numbers, and small acts. It is a powerful reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven may start small, but it will achieve its completion.

Dear fellow workers in Christ, like the leaven of the sourdough starter, the Kingdom has been passed on to us over generations. The purpose of leaven is to transform from within and transmit its nature; likewise, the purpose of every follower of Christ is to be transformed from within and transmit the Kingdom culture to others. Until the Lord returns, let this be our earnest prayer: Dear Lord, the Kingdom of Heaven has conquered my heart and it's taking over everything inside me. Let your work be finished in me and in the world. Let your Kingdom come. Amen.

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UPDATE ON WEST HAMSPTEAD



BY GORDON BROWN
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West Hampstead Picnic

The West Hampstead church held their annual picnic after services on Sunday 17 August. We set out chairs & tables in the shade of a large tree outside the Community Centre where we normally meet and enjoyed a wide variety of food and drink provided by the congregation.

The picnic was attended by 22 members of the congregation, and 11 local visitors. Two of those had been invited by the outreach team who had previously knocked on some doors in the area. The others were local people invited by a member who lives nearby and is known through his work at the community centre.

A new and colourful banner was on full display outside the Centre, to inform passersby of our name and Christian beliefs.



Visit by London City Mission (LCM)

On 24th August, Andrew Barnettt, a missionary employed by LCM, spoke to the West Hampstead congregation. He gave a short message on John 1, showing how John testified about Jesus, encouraged us to share our faith at every opportunity, and he complimented us on our outreach to the community.

Four members of the leadership team have also attended evangelism training days run by LCM, and we have material from LCM which identifies the different groups they are serving. At present, we seem to fit best with befriending people living on their own in London and visiting elderly people in sheltered housing. We already have a good relationship with Petra Zimmerman, an LCM missionary who has joined us on one or two outreaches and keeps in touch with us,

We already have 2 new people who attend services, and there is the possibility of a 3rd who attended our picnic, got on well with us, and clearly needs some support.

Gordon Brown is the Pastor of Grace Communion West Hampstead.



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