



The

Messenger

No 26

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Census 2021

The fruit of prayer

Warm spaces

and more...



Welcome...

Editorial	2
Mission Notes - census 2021	3
The fruit of prayer	4
A unique Care Home	5
News from Wales	6
World news	7
Getting to know: Sister Barnabas	8

One of the most charming titles ever given to a volume of verse is R. S. Thomas' Song at the Year's Turning. The eponymous poem expresses disappointment, disillusionment and unrequited love:

Now the dream decays.

*The props crumble; the familiar ways
Are stale with tears trodden underfoot.*

The heart's flower withers at the root.

Bury it then, in history's sterile dust.

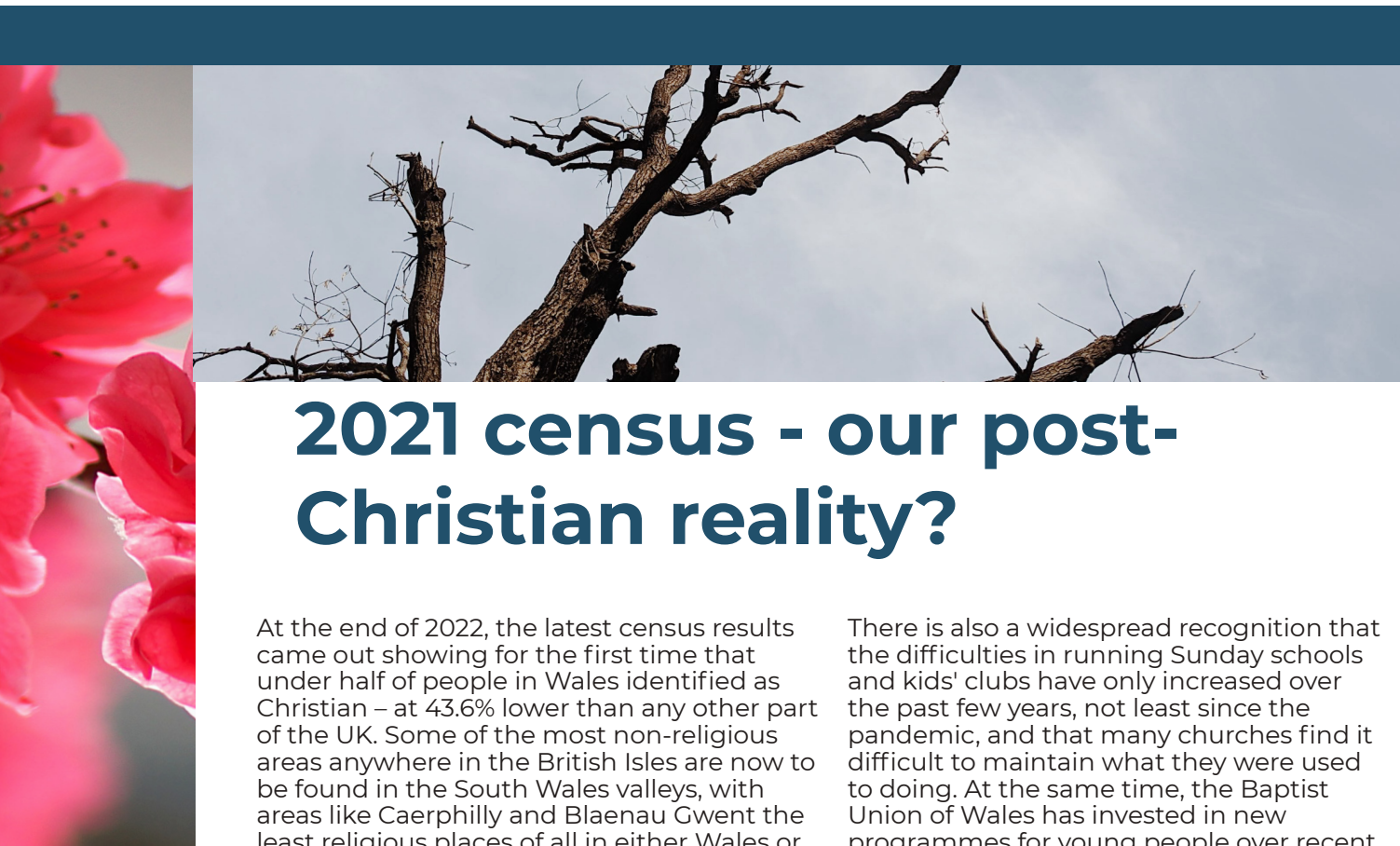
By now 2022 lies 'in history's sterile dust', and the gloomy vision of the poem mirrors accurately the year that we have just endured. Can any of us remember such a bleak, despondent period? Covid and the pandemic, the climate emergency, the Ukraine war, the interminable aftermath of Brexit, political instability and strikes across the board, immigrants arriving in their thousands in flimsy boats, fuel prices rocketing, homelessness, inflation and the ever-deepening cost of living crisis. And in last month's census returns the disconcerting news that only forty or so per cent identified as Christians. Having learned the new word 'permacrisis', it would seem that at the year's turning we have little to celebrate.

Whether or not that is the case, as Christians each new year affords the opportunity to remind ourselves of hope, confidence and the ageless comforts of our faith in the light of Jesus' announcement at Nazareth of 'the year of the Lord's favour'. The gospel never offers cheap grace or a superficial optimism but support that is greater than our circumstances and stronger than doubt and unbelief. At the beginning of 2023 we have not been offered cheap grace or superficial consolation, but a hope which is real - however bleak the circumstances. The Prophet Jeremiah knew this well: 'My soul is bereft of peace', he says, 'I have forgotten what happiness is, so I say "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord"'. Many of us could echo that sentiment in 2022. But that's not how the prophet concludes:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion', says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him...' It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. (Lamentations 3:17-26)

Such is my wish for you all at the turn of this new year.

D. Densil Morgan, President BUW



2021 census - our post-Christian reality?

At the end of 2022, the latest census results came out showing for the first time that under half of people in Wales identified as Christian – at 43.6% lower than any other part of the UK. Some of the most non-religious areas anywhere in the British Isles are now to be found in the South Wales valleys, with areas like Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent the least religious places of all in either Wales or England.

We all know that the percentage of practising Christians has been substantially lower than this for many decades, but even so there is a sea change here within our culture and context that we need to recognise. No longer is it the case that most people know what chapel they belong to but simply don't attend; for most people in Wales it is nearer the mark to say that have very little idea why the chapels even exist, and even less concept of what it would mean to follow Jesus Christ.

There has been healthy, if vigorous debate among Christians as to whether this change should be embraced as a good thing for the church or whether it is a loss to be lamented. There is surely a lot of wisdom in both perspectives. The one thing that will not, however, happen is a return to the old days. God is now clearly calling us as churches to follow him and to witness to him in a different landscape to the one most of us grew up in.

A major part of this recognition – and our challenge as churches – is how we disciple and form the younger generations to follow Jesus in a post-Christian society. We know that fewer and fewer children and young people in Wales have any connection with church or Jesus as they grow up, with Scripture Union putting the proportion with no connection at 95%.

There is also a widespread recognition that the difficulties in running Sunday schools and kids' clubs have only increased over the past few years, not least since the pandemic, and that many churches find it difficult to maintain what they were used to doing. At the same time, the Baptist Union of Wales has invested in new programmes for young people over recent years in the form of Action Teams and internships – and like churches advertising for ministers and youth/children's workers, we have found that the pool of potential candidates seems to be getting smaller.

In light of this and for the sake both of Christian witness and ministry in our country in the coming decade, it seems that investing to support our churches in children and youth work is now a key strategic move for BUW. For us to see a new generation of Christian leaders in Wales we need to start further back. If our churches are to see these new leaders emerging we need to look carefully at how we can support churches in their outreach and work with children and young people – which is our intention over coming months. We know this work isn't easy, so please pray for us and do remember to pray for those children and young people who are in our churches as well as the great many who are not. The future may well be post-Christian; but that doesn't mean it can't contain a vibrant Christian witness to all generations!

Carwyn Graves

Mission and Communications Officer



"I think what this church is doing here is great," says *Steve as we share tea in Bethel's Thursday morning café to the backdrop of a steady buzz of activity. A food bank and fashare project had been open all morning; downstairs the church's worship band was practicing while a craft group was running in the other room. But ten short years ago, Bethel Baptist church in Pembroke Dock had dwindled to a group of eight or so elderly members meeting in the vestry. The transformation that has taken place is down, above all, to faithful prayer.

'Things aren't easy!' says Mike Baye, pastor of the church since 2013, 'we're all working hard here! But we're so thankful for what God is doing among us and in this community.' Fifteen years ago, when local boy Mike was still pastoring in the USA, there were conversations taking place as to whether the church had a future, and what closure might involve.

The small congregation was getting older and the chapel building large and in a worsening state of repair. But one of the deacons, Maggie, had gone home after a meeting feeling that pressure was being put on them as a church to close. She got in and turned on the radio. There was a preacher, speaking from Haggai, and in particular the verse that says 'my house is deserted' (Haggai 1:4). Challenged, Maggie decided to pray – and the rest of the church joined in.

There were many obstacles, but two obvious ones were the decaying building and their need for a leader – not that they could afford to fix the latter or hire a pastor. But they prayed into these and applied for a £40,000 loan from the Baptist Building Fund for Wales, which along with miraculous discounts from builders and doors opening unexpectedly with the chapel's listed status, meant things were suddenly happening. At the same time, Mike and his wife Mary were happily leading a church in Boston, never thinking God would lead them to Wales again. 'I had actually been preaching from Genesis on mission,' Mike recounts, 'and expositing God's command to 'return to the land of your fathers', which of course is also the Welsh national anthem.

I repeated that sermon three times this particular weekend and then realized the third time that this was meant for us!

But they had no idea what a move to Wales might look like. For Mary it would involve dealing with UK immigration, and Mike's US denomination had no churches in the UK. A series of unexpected events and seemingly chance conversations later found them being shown around Bethel's building in Pembroke Dock and realizing, dumbfounded that God seemed to be leading them here. The practical obstacles gradually fell away – the VISA granted, denominational questions discussed and settled, and even the finances provided for by God. And in 2013, Mike was inducted as minister of the church.

'Since then we have been slowly building,' Mike reflects. 'A lot of our ministry has been built around food'; as well as the café and foodbank the church also runs a pay-what-you-can restaurant serving a roast dinner each week, and holiday events for children from the town, which include plenty of food. 'This is a deprived area, but with a strong community. We've had to do a lot of work to make the building more welcoming for people who are just not used to an old-fashioned chapel setting and have put in a lift for easy access to the upstairs, massive cupboards for the food bank and more.' And there's still a need for prayer – a 3-year process to apply to remove the pews may be nearing its completion, with key meetings happening this autumn.

'Of course it's a joy to see the church grow,' says Mike with a gentle smile as he tells me they are now usually over 40 people on a Sunday. 'But the greater joy is seeing people come to faith – that is what it is all about really for us.' It is humbling to think that the faith of some of these new believers is due in no small part to the faith-ful and persistent prayer of the little group that Bethel had become fifteen years ago – and what God has done with that.



Glyn Nest Care Home *highly commended...*

'It's a big thing to put the person you love most into someone else's care!' The real challenge for any residential home is to honour that sentiment – and that is precisely what Glyn Nest, BUW's residential home, has managed to do in receiving a glowing report from the Care Inspectorate for Wales this year.

This unique residential home with 28 occupants is nestled on the edge of the market town of Newcastle Emlyn. But while Glyn Nest is a Baptist home, it is not just a home for Baptists. 'We follow the principle of the good Samaritan here – welcoming everyone, and trying to give them the best Christian care.' That's what the inspectorate has acknowledged in its recent report, which praises the home's 'welcoming' and 'accommodating' environment, noting that 'individual needs... matter' to the 'dedicated' staff of the home. So what lies behind this – especially in an age when so much bad news comes out of the care sector?

'Oh, I think there are a number of things,' said Jane, the Home's manager who has worked there since the mid-80s. 'I often think a key factor is the ability to spend a day in one of the residents' shoes to get a real understanding. Respecting each person properly really matters to us, and that means that individuals' wider families are an important part of the home – when you take in a person, you take in the family too, in a metaphorical sense!' And that intimacy is evident, not only when talking to the Care Home staff but also the (voluntary) directors who are so dedicated to the place. 'I remember coming across Charlie, now deceased, sweeping leaves one October day outside the Home' said Rev Irfon Roberts, one of those directors. 'Why was he doing that, I asked him? "Well, this is my home now!" he said, and he'd buy flowers from the garden centre, or catch the bus to Glangwili hospital in Carmarthen to fetch a prescription for another of the occupants.' Then there was Frida, who would organise a calendar events for all the other residents, or Arwel, a former minister who would take services to help out in the

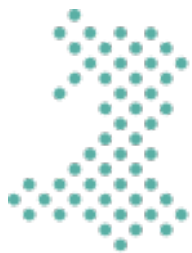
chapel nearby. 'You get very attached to them – real characters!'

Although each day is different, a relaxed community rhythm characterises the Home's life. After switching over from night staff to day staff and arranging the morning medication, breakfast time rolls along and with it a choice for residents to take it in bed or downstairs with others' company. Then a hot lunch of homecooked local produce (chicken casserole, Sunday lunch, gammon in parsley sauce etc.) and a chance for a nap, or afternoon activities; everything from hairdressing and card-making to crafts and pet therapy.

Then each month there is a communion service organized by the Home committee, and other services conducted by the Chaplain, Rev. Sian-Elin Thomas. 'It's a privilege to be in a relationship with people like this, and to be a listening ear! I'm in and out of the Home all the time, but the services are special because one thing that is absolutely certain is that the residents of Glyn Nest love to sing! And several people have said over the years how much they love to preach here too – they form a fab congregation!'

So what explained the unique atmosphere of the place, when maintaining that is so challenging in our day? In Jane's view, there was a combination of things at play, 'and maybe one of those is that we try to espouse here a sort of homely Welsh welcome.' And, Irfon notes, that while not all staff are Christian, they all appreciate the importance of the person-centered ethos that emerges from the foundations of the Home's faith. 'There is no place in the Bible at all or any justification for what we call ageism', he said, 'Rather, God promises to be with us in our old age, to sustain and protect us. That is what we seek to emulate'

Is there someone in your church or family considering care options for the future? Please do not hesitate to contact the Home for an informal chat by calling 01239 710950.



News from across....

The Baptist Union of Wales

Warmth with company



'Sadly, the needs in our society have grown to such an extent that warm spaces have become a necessity, with spaces popping up in libraries, community centres and even museums. But many of them are run by churches, and Baptist churches have felt compelled to see how they can use their facilities to contribute to meeting this real need – often combining the need for warmth with food and companionship.

'Like many churches, we have been challenged to see how we can help people in our community this winter,' said Phil Hibbert, minister of Bethel Baptist Church in Llantwit Major, Glamorgan. The church itself has set up what it calls "Warm Wednesdays", which runs directly after school pick up times when the foodbank (hosted at Bethel) finishes. 'The warm space is just that,' explains Phil, 'a relaxed, warm environment.' There are hot drinks, snacks, toys and an area for homework to be done. Phil says they have tried to keep it as open as possible in terms of what they offer 'because we want those who attend to tell us what they need, rather than us assuming.'

Similarly in Cardigan, Mount Zion Baptist have opened their space every Tuesday from 3:30 till 9pm, with a two-course meal forming the centrepiece of this time – whether cawl and crumble or jacket potato with brownie for afters. And in Caernarfon, Caersalem Baptist now run a 'Cawl a Chwmni' / 'Cawl and company' session over an extended lunchtime every Thursday. As Rhys Llwyd, pastor, explains 'if we as a church community are going to spend money on running a building, then we do need to use it to serve. What does it mean to show Christian love in this season if not doing something like this?'


Bills ... and blessings

The rising levels of utility bills are presenting our churches with opportunities we have been slow to take up in the past. Our little group of three rural chapels has joined together with two more little chapels, which do not have their own minister, to share services – initially during the winter months. We are now working out the logistics of services moving around the chapels, and of sharing transport: it may prove a significant decision. This gives us new opportunities to get to know each other better, to support each other and to maintain a Christian presence in our communities.

As over 90% of our congregations are of mature years themselves, we are more able to be aware of the needs of the older people in those communities and to respond wherever possible: anxiety over the cost of living is just one issue. Since becoming an Anna Chaplain – offering spiritual care in later life – I have been very aware that I am only touching the tip of the iceberg and that there are so many older people who need someone to talk to and to listen to their concerns, and who still have so much to give.

Over the coming weeks I am hoping to enthuse people to share in the privilege of walking alongside the most amazing people in their old age, who often have wonderful stories to tell; stories of resilience, humour and hope. This deep connection, of fellowship and mutual support on life's journey, is what will keep us 'warm' this winter. The cold reality of increased levels of heating bills can open up the warmth of surprising blessings.


Rev Maggie Rich, Montgomeryshire



The Power of Story

A fun-filled day for the entire family with powerful stories of God at work in Wales - with Adrian and Bridget Plass!

10-4pm, June 10th, Carmarthen. Tickets £12, children free. www.buw.wales/story23



Kingdom buds in Turkey

Turkey is growing in secularism. Islam is present all around but is increasingly ignored by the younger generation. Like Western Europe in a post-Christendom era, Turkey appears to be becoming post-Islamic. The mosques are still there with their calls to prayer but fewer people are gathering. This is having a significant impact on the Christian church. Baptist churches can now register, rent or buy a property and engage in public worship. Great wisdom is still needed when it comes to evangelism. To become a Christian is culturally challenging and may result in a variety of family problems. However, there are more people coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and being baptised as a witness to their new faith.

Working in this context is a small group of church planters who are experimenting with a variety of approaches to mission and ministry under the banner of the Turkish Baptist Alliance. In Izmir, an Anglican Church building was given to the Baptist community over 20 years ago to use as a place of worship. Worship happens on a Sunday, with a midweek Bible study and access to seminary studies once a week – and many locals come to look at this unique place in the city and receive guided tours by church members who explain as they do so what motivates them.

A family has gone to Bergama to plant a church for the first time in a century. But no one in the city knows what a church is. Is this an American thing like we see on TV? What does a Turkish church look like? What would they do? Up til now, the requests for premises have been refused. So, the church continues to meet outside in the park. And in Istanbul a flat has been turned into a church, though no signs outside advertise that fact. Currently, over 600 people are asking for support to explore the Christian faith.

Alan Donaldson, European Baptist Federation



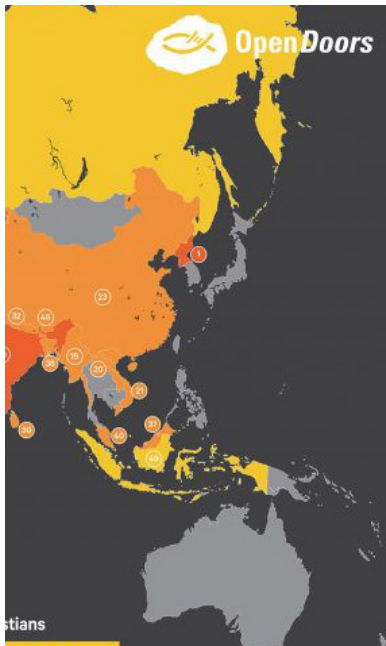
Worsening persecution in North Korea

North Korea is again number one on the World Watch List: the place where Christians face the most persecution for following Jesus. It had been number one since 2002; last year, even though the nation fell a place, persecution was worse than ever. This year, the persecution score of 98/100 is the highest a country has ever received in 30 years of World Watch List research.

It has long been a brutally hostile place for Christians to live. If discovered by the authorities, believers are either sent to labour camps as political prisoners where the conditions are atrocious or killed on the spot – and their families will share their fate as well. Christians have absolutely no freedom. It is almost impossible for believers to gather or meet to worship. Those who dare to meet must do so in utmost secrecy – and at enormous risk. Even owning a Bible is a serious crime and will be severely punished.

This year, in one horrifying incident that Open Doors heard about from reliable sources, several dozen North Korean believers from different underground churches were discovered and executed. More than 100 members of their families were said to have been rounded up and sent to labour camps. Another contributory factor is the recently introduced 'anti-reactionary thought law', which makes it clear that being a Christian and/or possessing a Bible is a serious crime and will be severely punished.

With thanks to Open Doors. Why not take a moment to pray now for Christians in North Korea?



And from around...
The World



Ten minutes with... *Sister Barnabas*

There are people of all sorts in our churches, all with different stories of how God has worked in their lives. This time, we're meeting one of the Union's prayer warriors....

Thank you for letting us hear your story! Your real name is Valerie Davies, but can you start by telling us how you came to be called Sister Barnabas?

I was a Baptist minister happily serving in Abercarn, Gwent for 23 years, but in 2005 my husband died, and I just didn't know what to do. But one morning, when I was praying, I felt God's presence fill the space and a conviction that he was calling me to be a pray-er. Further confirmation came from a couple of different places, and I realised that with this new vocation I ought to have a new name. The former secretary of BUW used to tell me that I was an encourager – and so the name 'Barnabas' from the NT came to mind!

That is wonderful. But what does a prayer ministry look like for you day-to-day?

It starts every day in the shower! 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid...' I ask him to give me everything I need spiritually so that I can be a vessel he uses – everything starts in prayer with being in the right place with God. Then I have morning devotion; scripture passages and a hymn book, before moving on to prayer diaries to intercede for the world (BMS) and matters at large, before finally coming to prayer requests I have received that week.

I expected it to only really involve prayer, but the ministry has led to do a lot of preaching and I am also involved with Ffald-y-Brenin centre, down the road from where I live near Fishguard.

It is such a challenge to hear about your prayer life! How did you first become a Christian?

Well I certainly wasn't brought up a Christian. I came out of a difficult first marriage wanting to find out the truth about life. I started looking into all sorts of philosophy but each time I got so far and it was as though there was a cliff edge and I could go no further. Then one day I was sharing this with a Christian friend in work and she said 'have you considered the person of Jesus Christ?' I felt as though I'd been punched! In the best possible way. I went away, and through reading the Bible for the first time and being led miraculously into a local Baptist church, I came to faith – and later on into the ministry too.

Finally, what has been encouraging you recently?

I think it's the confirmations I get again and again not just about prayers being answered, but how God's little promptings turn out to be exactly what somebody needs. There was one just this past week, where a message I had been given from the Lord for someone and passed on was exactly right – and ended up deeply encouraging that person, and me too!

Thank you, Sister Barnabas

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Y Llwyfan, College Road, Caerfyrddin, SA31 3EQ

Tel 0345 222 1514 [9-5 Mon - Fri]

post@ubc.cymru

www.ubc.cymru

