



THE GREEN SOCK

NEWS FROM THE SHROPSHIRE AND MARCHES METHODIST CIRCUIT

September 2019

FLOWER FESTIVAL MARKS FAREWELL TO REVD. STELLA LONG

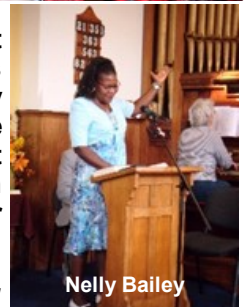
A multitude of flowers adorned every available windowsill and surface, their scents produced an aromatic fusion and Songs of Praise both closed Ellesmere Chapel's annual Flower Festival and honoured Revd. Stella Long for her service to the cluster. Leading worship, Circuit Superintendent Revd. Richard Hall admitting to knowing little about flowers himself, said he nevertheless found flower festivals alluring. "The great thing about a flower festival is that you find yourself being drawn in," he remarked. Of the colourful arrangements themed on Children's Literature he said, "Here we're struck by how powerfully the flowers speak to us of the stories of our childhood. Children's stories show how all of our stories are bound together. We are bound by the common bond of our humanity but deeper than that, we come recognising that our story is that with the story of God himself. His word that spoke creation into being is the very story that spoke of the story of Jesus' birth and of Calvary. Through the Holy Spirit we are his people whether we are in the same room or separated by hundreds of miles, we begin together in his story a story we can tell together of gladness, a story of surprises, of love." He continued, "It seems to me that we often get the wrong end of the stick when we think about what God meant about love, the cosy warm fuzzy feeling, so we get ourselves tied into knots about who we should love. Jesus doesn't tell us to have warm fuzzy feelings but Jesus tells us to love one another 'in the way that I have loved you' the giving up of self, the setting aside of our own best interests in order to serve the needs of others. A dangerous and often uncomfortable path, we're called to walk it together not alone, not in our own strength but to walk alongside the saviour that binds us together."



Sue Parsley



Richard and Revd. Stella Long



Nelly Bailey



Revd. Long's sister-in-law Sue Parsley sang *See what a Morning*, making no apology for so doing, declaring that Easter should be celebrated every day. Nelly Bailey's *How Great Thou Art*, sung in Zimbabwean left Revd. Richard tempted to ask her to teach it to the congregation, but regrettably, time did not permit.

During Stationing, Revd. Long and her husband Richard, despite reservations and not knowing what to expect, had visited the Shropshire and Marches Circuit and seen "something in the faith of the people" they met. They decided they would stay. Addressing the congregation Revd. Long spoke of the warmth and encouragement she has received throughout her four years in post. She said that more recently, in her time of struggle, illness and disappointment she had received remarkable help from her congregations whom she was sad to be leaving. Members of Oswestry, Chirk, Ellesmere and the smaller congregations in the cluster honoured Revd. Long crediting her for among other things, links forged with Christchurch Church of England and thanking her for putting much time and effort towards Oswestry Church's Pre-School's Ofsted inspection. Chirk Church showed their appreciation hailing her a "woman of friendship". Wishing the couple well in pastures new, Revd. Hall said they would go taking part of our story with them and leaving their story with us, adding "though we may part, the story continues as a new chapter, with plot twists in the Story of God."

REA VALLEY SOCIETY CAPTURES ATTENTION OF CONNEXION

Back in July, Revd. Shalome MacNeil-Cooper announced that the Rea Valley Cluster of churches she leads: Snailbeach, Stiperstones, Pontesbury, Vron Gate, Asterley, Minsterley, Worthen and Wattlesborough, were to form a new society. Subsequently, the seven congregations formerly functioning as individual entities amalgamated and begin this new Methodist year as one. The transition which will cultivate significant long-term changes to how the cluster functions, has caught the attention of Elisabeth Clark who in her role as National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Church visited Rea Valley to learn more about the process of bringing the churches together. "It seems to be something that's happening more in rural churches across the Connexion," Elisabeth told the *Green Sock* adding that learning a bit more about how it works will enable her to offer suggestions and a developing model for other church groups seeking to similarly re-establish. The logistics of such transformation, Revd. MacNeill-Cooper states depends



on the context. "I know that there are other places that have done this that have had different obstacles than we've had. I think that each place will have a slightly different process depending on the people, the leadership and the context, so I don't think it can be rolled out across the board as 'this is how it can be,' but I think there can be a general model." In this instance there was a definite plan of action; intentional, incremental and slowly implemented with much prayer, discussion and discernment with support and encouragement from the Circuit, Executive and individual ministers. Forming the new society has avoided the projected closure of some chapels.



The visit took in Pontesbury, Asterley and Vron Gate Chapels. Minsterley had also been on the itinerary but, due to time constraints had to be omitted. Alluding to the Connexional drive to revolutionise church formats in rural areas and thus release energy for mission and ministry, Elisabeth explained her quest for stories of churches, particularly rural churches trying new approaches, will enable her to share examples of good practice. After meeting various members who shared their feelings about the changes, Elisabeth said, "It seems to be very positive, some people are obviously still feeling their way and there'll be one or two saying, 'I'm not quite sure about this,' but they are prepared to give it a go and that's really positive."



Local Preacher Wes Morris met the pair at Vron Gate, the chapel he has attended since he was a child. "As far as Vron Gate Church is concerned we've been nomads for many years, being at different places, as part of the music group (Vron Gate Singers,) and so joining together with other churches has never been a problem for us or the cluster." he said. "We are a society, but we don't actually want to lose our individuality, and this seemed a good way of solving a lot of problems. Vron Gate in theory would have had to close. This has offered so many solutions but also the fact that we join together with worship means there's more in the congregation. You feel the benefit that way. You can pick the real good hymns then, as there are enough people to sing them."



Rev. MacNeill-Cooper, Rev. Elisabeth Clark and Local Preacher Wes Morris

Along with a noticeable change in the "spirit of the people" there's a universal agreement on the benefits of a bigger congregation, including one Church Council and one bank account. Additionally, there has been a rise in offerings, Wes informed saying, "Though we don't like talking about money, it's an important factor."

The practicalities that come with forming a society, the laws of governance, coming together, financial aspects, those are the by-products, Rev. MacNeill-Cooper opined. "But I think for me it's saying we take pride in our rural chapels these have been institutions in our villages for generations and God's not done with them, that's my attitude." She expressed her thanks to the congregations for the courage to be pioneering in familiar places, for the sake of the Gospel.

NEW TO THE CIRCUIT

The Circuit welcomes Deacon Sara Windsor-Hides, who will be working in Knighton, Llanbister and Builth Wells, Rev. Julia Skitt who will be working in the Oswestry cluster and Deacon Carys Woodley who along with Lay Pastor Jacob Molyneux and Rev. Skitt form the new ministerial team for North of the Circuit. Welcome Services were held at Ellesmere and Knighton. To read more visit shropshireandmarches.org.uk

WEM METHODIST JUNIOR CHURCH WEEKEND

Wish I'd Taken the Train...

... and other thoughts that drift through your mind after being robbed on the mountain road.

Luke 10 25-37

Themed on Luke 10's parable of the Good Samaritan, this year's weekend offered arts, crafts and activities to explore perspectives of both a person who assists and the one being assisted. Participants had to collaborate to push cumbersome



barrels along an obstructed road, manoeuvring the barrels past the obstacles into a designated space. Exploring further ideas around helping and caring for each other they experimented with making plasters and bandages to bind each other's fake casualty wounds.

Worship led by Andrew and Felicia Dutton incorporated fresh expressions of church. Origami flowers, created by Felicia which unfolded to expand when dropped in water (the "river of life",) were used to encourage participants to think about what it means to truly fulfil one's potential, in spite of the difficulties life may present.

And, of course there was the renowned Junior Church Weekend waterslide (which makes a comeback each year yet is excitedly received by the children as if for the very first time,) tractor rides and fellowship around a campfire.

For information on Wem Junior Church Weekend 2020 email fdutton@hotmail.co.uk

Contact us at: media.smcircuit@gmail.com 01588 630 769 or visit our website at shropshireandmarches.org.uk