

TABLE OF CONTENTS

From the Editor
Pastoral Letter
Diary Dates
Spring Harvest
From the Rankins
Spiritual 'Health Check'
Evangelical Alliance
Journey to Ukraine
The Holy Family in Egypt

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FROM THE EDITOR

We in Bristo intend to spend much time this year, especially over the new few weeks, considering God's vision for the future of the fellowship and its building. Most of you should have by now read the report compiled by Jim Martin and that of the anniversary church meeting; a brief summary of the former is included in this issue.

Whatever we decide, it must be God centred and God focused. We must not allow our vision to descend to the depths of "a pleasing imaginative plan for, or anticipation of, future events", which is one of the dictionary definitions of 'vision'. Some of the results of the report may trouble some people, or even strike fear in their hearts. If so, that is good, for similar fears struck Daniel, Ezekiel, Peter, Paul, John, and the many other Biblical personalities who had visions and revelations from the Lord. Let us catch God's vision for the future and embrace it with boldness!

Robert Mill

PASTOR'S LETTER

What sort of vision should we have for 2006? Now, let me confess to you, I sometimes get really weary listening to Christians explain their vision! Often so disconnected from basic, Christian truths.

So how do we find a Biblical, Christian vision? Not from 'prayer, finger and closed eyes' dipping into the Bible! The answer lies in 'having the right focus'. That means that we have to look for what is central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is central about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the declaration that something that God promised and what people long for has arrived! Jesus died for our sins and rose again in order to put us right with God in this world now. New life, through the power of the Holy Spirit entering us and filling us in Jesus' name, begins now in this life. God calls us, through the Cross of Jesus Christ, into a place of healing. The New Testament word for 'saving' also means 'healing'. There is healing for everyone. While the ultimate expression of this come when Christ returns, God wants us to enjoy and know it now.

A legitimate vision has to be focused on being a healing community. A group of people who experience healing. A group of people who provide an environment for healing. And a group of people who are confident in reaching out others with the touch of healing.

But remember this. Healing can be a messy business. People who need healing are people who are bleeding. Who have wounds. Hurts. Pains. They are people who can strike out and hit us in their agony and confusion. It's never an easy or comfortable business, bringing healing to people.

But this is the way of Jesus Christ. And discipleship in this way begins with an intentionality to help others. Help them become more human, more complete as the people God created them to be. To let them see and sense healing among us. To be touched by healing taking place in our lives. And for them to feel it affecting their lives.

The healing that Jesus brings needs relationship. Risk. Vulnerability. It involves upsetting tidy, religious habits, abandoning the defences of defined doctrines and risks the open spaces. The healing that Jesus brings

takes us on a journey into unsafe places to bring help and hope to the wounded who are stranded outside the safety of the city.

The vision of Jesus involves ‘doing’ words. Bringing grace, compassion, patience, mercy, forgiveness. Relief. And healing. For when healing begins, hope is born. And when hope is born, there is faith to live in the present.

That’s a vision worth holding on to, isn’t it?

Aye yours in Him,

Jim

DIARY DATES

Bristo Retreat, Friday–Saturday 10 & 11 February at Atholl Centre, Pitlochry. We will be considering God’s vision for Bristo. Please make every effort to attend this important weekend. In February the cost for dinner, bed & breakfast is £26.00 per person (40% reduction for under 18s). There is a supplement of £7.50 for anyone wishing single occupancy. See pastor to book, or for more details.

BMS Women’s Link (East) Saturday 21st January 2 p.m. at Bristo. Speakers Robert and Miriam Young.

“Getting God to Work” Christians in the Market Place Conference, under the auspices of CARE for Scotland and Evangelical Alliance Scotland. *Saturday 25th March, 9 a.m.- 4.30 p.m.*, Jordanhill Campus, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Keynote Speaker: Mark Greene, Executive Director, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. Christine Lumsden has booking forms for this Conference.

Origin Scotland

The next *Praise Nights* are at London Road Church of Scotland on Sunday 29 January at 8.30 p.m., and Carrubbers Christian Centre on Sunday 12 February at 8.30 p.m. Both are free.

Spring Harvest

There are still places available for most weeks at both Spring Harvest venues! These are Minehead (1-16 April) and Skegness (3-23 April). The theme this year is 'One God'. This is part of a larger theme, 'Big Story', which will continue with 'One People' in 2007 and 'One Hope' in 2008. Book now before it's too late! More details from the Spring Harvest web site at <http://www.springharvest.org/> .

Clan Gathering

This year's CLAN Gathering, which has the theme "Heart of the Father", is at a new venue in St. Andrews because last year it outgrew Madras College. The dates are 15th to 21st July; speakers and worship leaders will include David and Mary Pyches, Mike Pilavachi, Mark & Lindsay Melluish and others. Booking fees are £80 (adults), £60 (17-24), £48 (5-16) or £38 (under 5 years) if paid by 10th March; each rate then increases by £4 until 23rd June.

FROM THE RANKINS

It was great to catch up with quite a few folks that we had known from our last time at Bristo, and it was also good to meet new friends. We wish you all the best – every one of you and the Church as a whole – for the year ahead.

All the best and God bless.

Dave and Marcia Rankin

SPIRITUAL 'HEALTH CHECK'

As those who attend Bristo regularly know, the church has had a 'spiritual health check' recently. This was undertaken by Rev. Jim Martin, who was our anniversary speaker in November and now worships with us with his wife. The full results were circulated to those on email late last year and will occupy much of our thinking and prayers in coming months. We are excited at the opportunities that are before us and want to draw the whole congregation into our journey as we proceed to clarify our vision, set our

goals and formulate a plan of action for the next phase of our life, purposefully pursuing God's Kingdom advance together. Those not on email who would like a copy should ask the pastor or Christine Lumsden to give them one. A much abbreviated summary is given below.

Church Profile

A tried and proven method of assessment was used. Scores were rated over 7 areas. High scores, all around 66% or above, were recorded for the fellowship in these areas:

- finding what God wants
- facing the cost of growth and change
- operating as a community
- makes room for all
- does a few things and does them well.

Poor results, under 60%, were recorded in the areas:

- energized by faith
- outward looking focus

We are encouraged to demonstrate 'operating as a community' through togetherness in the Holy Spirit, worshipping, being a house of prayer, around the Word of God. There could be a much greater commitment to worship, especially the evening service. Apart from the cell groups there was a general feeling that there could be more corporate prayer. Jim Martin's feeling is that the lack of corporate prayer is due in part to a lack of goals, a lack of an outward looking focus and a lack of a specific vision for the future. If the vision is laid before us, corporate prayer will be motivated.

Church Personality

For the vast majority, the colour of Bristo Baptist Church is a bright and welcoming colour. It is a place of life. It is cheerful and welcoming. It is warm and refreshing. It is peaceful and safe. It is interesting and international. But there is the feeling that there is a vast untapped potential.

The Building

Bristo is a striking building of architectural importance. Hence it is a listed building and officially important – perhaps too important to be left idle most of the time. However, comments about the building from virtually all members were very negative, using words like dead, closed, forbidding, gloomy, empty, drab, unused. (Not all true, but that is apparently the impression the building gives on the outside). The full report from Jim Martin makes several suggestions, both minor and major, on changing both the exterior and interior of the building and other suggestions were made at the anniversary church meeting in November – these are also available on request if you have not previously read them.

Local Context

By and large everyone had a fair appreciation of the nature of the context where the church finds itself. The perception was of a context that is middle class, comfortable, standoffish, a bit indifferent, isolated behind high hedges and efficient entry phone systems.

Almost unanimously, however, the feeling was that these folks were unreachable, they have money and so have no spiritual needs, and they most definitely wouldn't be interested in coming along to Bristo. However, these are negative views. Bristo has many strong points that would attract the locals and we need to ask, how do we take the gospel to our neighbours and the people we meet every day?

Methods Used

Each one was asked for three ways in which the fellowship makes actual what they try to do. The most common answers were: cell groups, language school, Care Van, Bethany shelter, being aware of newcomers, fellowship meals, personal witness, transporting people to church, Bulgarian link, youth club, mothers and toddlers. Although it is nearly always a painful exercise. it should be asked, "Are the methods being used actually achieving what we are trying to do?" If the answer is 'yes', how can they be improved? If no, what action should be taken?

What's Missing

Various answers were given, the most popular being young people, people, openness to the Holy Spirit, corporate prayer, service to the community. Prayer and young people received the majority of comments as far as what is missing in the church. The report suggests the appointment of a part time youth pastor to address the problem of missing young people.

Conclusion

The report ends on a positive note, saying that the Bristo fellowship is considered to be strong enough to face and embrace radical change. Are we able to see and grasp God's vision?

Précis by Editor from the full Report circulated by email

EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

In a recent letter Mike Parker, General Secretary, advised members of forthcoming changes in Evangelical Alliance (Scotland) staff.

Jeremy Balfour, who pioneered the role of Parliamentary Officer for EA at the Scottish Parliament, will be leaving in March to take up the post of Discipleship Pastor at Morningside Baptist Church. Jeremy has been a member of Morningside for a few years. He served there as interim pastor until Karl Martin's appointment in April. Writing of his work as Parliamentary Officer, Jeremy says

To be the first Parliamentary Officer in Scotland was a learning curve but one that has allowed me to develop in so many ways. To combine politics, theology and church is very unique and one that has forced me to think through many different issues.

We pray that the Lord will bless Jeremy and his wife, Jude, in this new appointment as they seek to serve Him together.

Mike Parker was appointed General Secretary three years ago. He has accepted an invitation to be Middle East Director of Middle East Christian Outreach, an international, interdenominational mission which has worked in the area for 150 years. Mike and his wife, Helen, will be based in Cyprus, where they hope to move in May. Mike writes

Evangelical Alliance is more important than ever in the present climate. We represent a major challenge to the common view that Christianity just causes trouble. Together we express common Christian concerns and seek ways of holding out the word of life to a needy generation.

The post of General Secretary will be advertised on the EAUK website very soon, with interviews early in the New Year. Mike asks for prayer that the appointment of his successor will go smoothly so that the vital work of EA in Scotland may continue to grow.

Christine Lumsden

JOURNEY TO UKRAINE

Most people who read this will have heard of Wycliffe Bible Translators, and know something of their work. For some time I have been a member of Wycliffe Associates, an organisation which exists to service the work of WBT through volunteers working largely from home. Up to now I have acted as an advanced linguistic checker for their Easy English project, making sure that the writers keep within the prescribed rules agreed for the simplification of the text.

When I attended the 2005 WA Conference, I learned that there had been several requests from Wycliffe offices abroad for teams of English teachers to provide short intensive courses in English as a Second Language for local pastors and Bible translators. This would be a completely new venture for WA, as most of the current work is home and computer based. Being of an adventurous frame of mind, and feeling that I needed a rest from computer work, of course I volunteered!

The end result is that now I am preparing for a trip to Ukraine in less than two months, rushing around the post-Christmas sales desperate for an overcoat warm enough for temperatures of perhaps as low as minus twenty! Four “older ladies” will be travelling together (most WA volunteers are retired), all of us teachers of one kind or another, and we hope that between us, and with the grace of God, we will be able to meet the needs of the students. The students will, as far as we know, be about

twenty pastors of intermediate level and above. Our planning has to be extremely flexible until we actually meet them, but I know that I will be in charge of the more advanced class, and that we will be teaching both general English and English to meet the special needs of pastors working in Ukraine (whatever that may be – we will no doubt find out!)

I shall be leaving on 24th February, and returning on 13th March. We will be able to travel relatively cheaply, because instead of flying to Kiev and then driving to our final destination in West Ukraine, we will travel by easyJet to Warsaw in Poland, and then be met by minibus and taken over the frontier into Ukraine by road. The course will be held in Rivne, which seems to be rather a nondescript town in the middle of nowhere! It could be as ‘off the map’ as Lom, the location of our sister church in Bulgaria, and so will give us all a rare insight into Ukrainian life that the normal tourist could not experience.

I would be grateful for prayer both before and during the trip. There is no need to pray for financial resources, as that prayer has already been answered. An anonymous donor has given the Wycliffe Associates management team £900 towards the trip, and this will cover travel expenses for us all, with some left over! However, at this stage, there are three important areas for prayer:

1. For the whole team, that we remain well, so that all will be able to go, as we do badly need all four teachers. Please pray in particular for me that my infected chest will clear up.
2. As preparations are made at the other end, pray that staying with local families will not disrupt life too much for them, bearing in mind the overcrowded conditions in which so many people in Eastern Europe still have to live.
3. Last but not least, please pray for Rachel, the team leader, as she decides what books and materials to take. As we shall be planning the course as we go, and cannot be sure what we need until we actually meet the students, it will require considerable grace from God to make correct choices in advance.

Gill Schärer

THE HOLY FAMILY IN EGYPT

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child and kill him." So he got up, took the mother and her child during the night, and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.' (MATTHEW 2:13-15)

The narrative stops at this point, and nothing more is told us in the Gospel concerning the Holy Family during their stay in Egypt. We are only informed (in verse 19) that the angel appeared again to Joseph and told him to return. To the Egyptians, however, this is a very important part of the nativity story, and the quotation from Hosea is on almost every Egyptian Christmas card. There are many local legends that have survived from early times concerning their supposed route to Upper Egypt, and numerous miracles are said to have taken place in the towns and villages on the way. These stories are important to Christians and Muslims alike, and are the origin of many of the holy places and local festivals that are important to the present day.

According to the Egyptians, the Family stayed in Egypt for about three years. They probably travelled slowly by donkey along the caravan route that ran parallel to the Mediterranean shore. This would have taken them through Gaza in the steps of the Patriarchs to the land of Goshen. Tradition says that they entered the Delta at the ancient city of Bubastis (near present day Zagazig), and went on to Heliopolis, now a suburb of Cairo.

They then slowly made their way up the Nile Valley until they reached the village of El Kais (near present-day Sammalut). Here they took a boat to travel southwards.. They stayed for a few days or weeks in towns and villages on the way and finally arrived at Cusae (El Qusaih). At Cusae a messenger called Moses arrived from Israel with the warning that Herod had discovered where the Christ child was, but Moses died that night from

the exertions of the journey, and was buried under the threshold of the house where the Family was staying. The first church in Egypt is believed to have been built on its site, probably at about AD 60, and 300 years later Saint Pachomius founded the great monastery of Dair el Muharraq there.

Oral tradition in Assyut asserts that the most southerly place visited by the Holy Family was the ancient Lycopolis, or “Wolf Town”. The Family camped in rock tombs on the mountain side, and about 80,000 pilgrims still assemble there every August to celebrate their stay, probably the largest Christian ‘mulid’ (festival) in Egypt.

The copious legends concerning this journey are based on numerous sources, including Christian and Muslim oral tradition, Coptic Ethiopian and Armenian apocryphal and infancy Gospels, medieval Muslim histories, and reports of medieval pilgrims to the Holy Land. The flavour of these stories is very different from that of the Biblical Gospel accounts. Clearly more from the realms of fantasy than absolute fact, their purpose is to increase faith rather than to record history. Jesus certainly does not appear in them as a normal toddler! He teaches and prophesies, curses cities, cures the sick, raises the dead, produces water from rock, casts down idols and tames bandits. Many of the stories relate to water, not surprising in a desert land, and springs and wells said to have been produced from the barren rock by Jesus can be found by the dozen up and down their supposed route.

I will refer to just one of the numerous locations where Jesus is said to have dug a well, as this is the only water site that I have visited myself. Matariyah is now a very poor working class suburb of Cairo, but in the time of Jesus it was a small village near the ruins of ancient Heliopolis. When the Holy Family arrived, Jesus is said to have dug a well with his own hands, taken Joseph’s staff, broken it in pieces, and planted it. Straightway these pieces put forth leaves with a wonderful smell, better than any smell that had ever been. Jesus called the plant “balsam”, and decreed that the oil should be used for Christian baptism. The Muslims have a different story, concerning a palm tree that bowed its head to Mary so that she could gather its fruits – and then gave forth a stream of water from its roots. Matariyah was a very popular site for medieval pilgrims returning from Sinai. An oriental garden was planted there, cared for by Christian gardeners, and both Christian and Muslim pilgrims went there to

bathe in the healing waters. No one was allowed to take the balsam leaves and berries, which were crushed and used for medicine and baptismal oil.

I walked for miles trying to find this heavenly garden, but things are very different now. Overwhelmed by the city, and surrounded by a decaying and vandalised five storey blocks of flats, I wasn't even tall enough to see over the surrounding concrete wall. Barbed wire covered the top to keep marauding children out. The balsam tree had long since gone, replaced in the seventeenth century by a sycamore tree. I went along to the nearby church to get a key, but could not find the priest. Instead I found a quite unexpected and hidden delight – a series of murals by a nineteenth century Italian artist of the Holy Family's journey. As I lived at that time in Heliopolis, I particularly liked the dark and ominous depiction of a tiny Holy Family with their donkey arriving at a deserted city of gigantic temples and monuments. But when Jesus confronted the dark powers of these heathen temples, they fell to the ground, and according to legend have been ruins ever since. In fact, there is nothing left of ancient Heliopolis today except for a few stones.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." So he got up, took the child and his mother, and went to Israel. (MATTHEW 2:19-22)

Tradition tells us that the Family took the same route on their return, but before leaving Egypt stayed for a time at Babylon. This is not the Babylon of Iraq, but the ancient name of what is now known as Old Cairo, or "Coptic Cairo". Jews had lived in Babylon since the days of exile, and the present synagogue of Ben Ezra is built on a site where the prophet Jeremiah was believed to have preached. The church of St Sergius (Abu Sarga) is built over the cave in which the Holy Family stayed. Joseph is supposed to have drawn water to wash Jesus from a well in the crypt, and this water is considered to be holy, and is still much prized by pilgrims.

Festivals commemorating the presence of the Holy Family in Egypt, as well as the birthdays of saints and martyrs, popular with both Muslims and

Christians, probably replace pre-Christian pagan celebrations. For example, the numerous festivals in honour of the arrival of the Holy Family, held at the same season up and down the Nile Valley, were once related to a forecast of the annual inundation of the Nile. Scholars suggest that Joseph took the place of Osiris, who used to be worshipped as a Nile deity. The same can be said of the many saints and martyrs commemorated in mainly rural and poorer urban areas. The official church accepts but does not encourage these manifestations of folk Christianity.

Personally I feel that there must be a strand of truth in oral tradition, and that while the miracles do not convince in the way that the Biblical miracles convince, the route itself may quite well be authentic. I have always planned to go back and follow the route taken by Jesus, but have not yet done so.

Gill Schärer