

# Stories of Joy



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A small collection of stories from across our family



## Staying connected

When a St Mark's outdoor toddler event is on the horizon there is a stir of excitement in our household.

Both of my small boys adored attending the fun and energetic Toddler Praise sessions pre-lockdown, so their expectations for the outdoor toddler events were high. We have connected with Toddler Praise online, listening to our mascot Mr Bible's wise words and dancing along to our favourite Toddler Praise songs.

The half-termly outdoor meetings have enabled pre-schoolers and their families to take part in adventures in and around the church garden. Time slots are booked online, so each family can explore activities safely with plenty of space.

On a bright, sunny day in September we embarked on the first outdoor event, 'The Toddler Bear Hunt'. This was the first time that we had been physically on the church grounds for a very long time, yet the little ones felt no sense of trepidation. There was a readiness to get back to their familiar stomping ground, and the children were so excited to get stuck in. The sense of absolute belonging that they felt was tangible, despite the long period of physical distance.

My 3 year old had mulled over the possible temperaments of the bears we might encounter on our adventure. As luck would have it, they were all very friendly (stuffed) characters. We were all delighted by the trail of bear vignettes which led us around the church garden and then to the Stray. Along the way Gail and the team entertained us with interactive stories, craft, and scavenger hunts.

Then, on a stormy November morning, we were treated to a nursery rhyme themed extravaganza. Miss Muffet's Spiders hung from the trees, and Bo Peep's sheep peeped at us through the church windows. The inclement weather certainly couldn't dampen our spirits as we moved to the back of the church garden and spotted the Denning family's Chick Chick Chickens who had come to play their part. Next, a visit to Francis' gazebo for a sing-song. We loved jiggling along to her wonderful violin playing as she recounted the tale of the Owl and the Pussy Cat. Finally, a sweet treat from Cheryl to take home - delicious biscuits decorated to match the characters we had spotted along the way.

The thought, creativity, and preparation that has gone into these events demonstrates the value that has been placed on staying connected with our pre-schoolers, the youngest members of the church community.

Even through this difficult year, which has challenged us all, the joy and love of God has radiated through his people. It was so clearly demonstrated through the work of these wonderful members of the church family, this ripples into the hearts of our children. For this we are so very thankful.



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## Lunches in lockdown

When lockdown brought an end to our Thursday communion lunches at church and the soup was in the freezer ready for Maundy Thursday, there was only one option - start a lunch delivery service. Since Easter, a small group have been taking a soup and pudding lunch to over 30 of our Thursday Community. For Ascension Day we added a Reflection and this proved so popular that it is now part of the fortnightly delivery, with further copies going out by email. Cards, Easter Eggs and Christmas chocolates have become extra add-ons and we even have an informal postal service between members.

It has been a great joy to serve the Thursday Community in this way and maintain the family atmosphere among the members. Admittedly organising a lunch delivery from our garage has had its challenges, not least because it was Paul's woodworking workshop (don't tell health and safety!). When we ran out of freezer space, Dan installed the church freezer in our garage. Much needed soup containers appeared on our doorstep. When one of the team could not help, someone always stood in without being asked. Delivering and chatting on doorsteps has meant sometimes being too cold, too wet and occasionally too hot, but the welcome we receive has always been warm and full of appreciation.

I give thanks for our team which cooks and delivers the lunches: Cheryl, Chris, Deborah, Jen, Judy, Moira, Sue and Olivia's new soup maker. Ruth, Olivia and Cathy together with our mission partners have provided the Reflections. My personal thanks go to Paul, soup taster in chief, delivery driver and solid support. All have contributed with such grace and joy. I also give thanks for the generosity of the Thursday Community who have continued to support our mission partners, Paul and Ruth Turner, with £500 being sent to help those affected by Covid in Peru. Our Harvest collection raised £400 for St George's Crypt and we have contributed towards the Christmas gifts for the lads in Wetherby YO1.

It was early December before the Thursday Communion was back in church and it was lovely to have the family back together. For the time being the services will be held on the 1st and 3rd Thursday in the month and the Reflections and lunches will continue on the 2nd and 4th Thursday. This will enable us to serve both those who can return to church and those who remain more housebound. We do not know when this will end. But we do know that when you step out in faith, God will provide. We did not set out to provide Comfort and Joy, but that is what we have done and we have received it back many times over.

by José Rhodes

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# The joy of the Lord

This year has been really tough and it has been hard to see the joy at times but here's two ways to show that God has totally been with young people - both those linked with St Mark's and further afield, throughout 2020.

The first is the opportunity I have had to be involved with Amplify Academy, the Christian organisation established by the Church of England and others for young evangelists. Natalie put me forward for this back in 2019 and I'm so grateful because it has led to me and a friend from St James' in Wetherby creating an online platform to share faith. My friend believed God was using lockdown as a way for people to talk about their faith and thought we were specifically being called to share online. So, we started an Instagram page - @livin\_it\_out - to reach Christians and non-Christians with simple questions about Christianity. We want it to be accessible for everyone - to give insight, testimonies, answer questions.

We try to post some of the things that non-Christians might not think about, like 'God loves you for who you are.' We hope to inspire them. A lot of people engage with the videos and comment. We message people who have been interacting with our posts to see if they want prayer for anything. All of us on the team have a passion to share Jesus.

We're not completely sure of the future yet but we definitely want to continue with it. It doesn't matter whether one person or 100 people see it. If one person connects with us, that's enough for us and knowing that has brought us joy.

Secondly, quite a different activity but still a picture of the power of the church working together - is the opportunity to be a part of, and hear about, the Youth Phone Call Support Team. I had the opportunity to email Andrew and Mo Clarke during a really difficult time for them and I hope that was able to offer some support. Though you can't change what's happening you can change that moment and be there for them.

It was also exciting hearing other people's stories of how they were connecting with our older generation and this brought me such joy. I feel more than ever that it is so important to connect the generations together and help us as young people realise that one day we may be suffering times of loneliness and isolation, and that support will be so vital. I feel hopeful for the future and all that God has planned for St Mark's and young people across our nation. May the joy of the Lord be our strength.

By Sophie Reid.

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## Gems of joy

Eight out of ten people live on their own, seven out of ten are over 70. We are a young at heart community. Thankfully, we completed the Alpha course on Zoom. We are so grateful to those who taught us how to lead, and pick up Zoom – an exponential learning curve. But the joy of success with technology! So many stories shared to illustrate joy is alive in this year of the virus. God’s provision of a beautiful spring and glorious autumn helped us notice creation with fresh eyes – gardens, parent woodpeckers feeding their young, glorious sunrises accompanied by gold before dawn. Gems of Joy!

From mid March an email plus two or three ideas for prayer were sent each day to our two communities – now Harlow and Wheatlands (we multiplied November 2019). From mid April Di Queripel introduced us to Rev Brian Hutton with his Digital Devotions which were supplemented with prayer ideas. Photos, poems and hymns have been used as weekend inspirations. This is still being continued. Early in lockdown we set a time each day to pray, so we could be together. Midday prayers journeying through Acts meant so much more to those returning from the Holy Land. Several of our group read “Every Day With Jesus” notes – recent titles have been “Deeply rooted” and “More than Conquerors”. You won’t be surprised to hear how well they have complemented all things on at church - God’s affirming power and presence in all things.

“I am always with you” spoke to one member as she ministered to dying friends – joy in serving alongside. Some have been knitting hearts, sewing scrubs and bags taken by The Mother’s Union to LGI. Two new people joined for Alpha and stayed. One has said “To me the group has been extended company”.

Then at the end of August Merle fell and fractured a neck bone, and spent 8 weeks in hospital. She can’t emphasis enough that she would not be in as good a place as she is without our prayers – more than grateful. She values what group members have done more then we will ever know. Please don’t stop she says. What encouragement and excitement to us to celebrate God’s faithfulness in answering prayers and presence in difficult circumstances.

Study of the Minor Prophets since September has shown us God is in control. Joyful certainty! He is lovingly drawing us back to His ways. Connected together – working it out.

Individuals have taken food where needed, walked together, phoned each other, talked face to face at gates, meeting in gardens in the summer – not one person looking after all, but looking after one another. We have recognised how the group is a safe place where we belong as a family, where we can find encouragement and support because the Love that God gives us is to share, and the way He answers our prayers is exciting, giving peace and reassurance. Surely a reason to celebrate.





## Revealing the fondness

A change is as good as a rest, apparently. I joined the staff team in February, which was a change, and maybe would be a rest from busy secular employment. We all know what happened next. Far from being a rest lockdown heralded a busy time working with a group of people who I didn't know very well. I recently described getting to know the members of the staff team as a real treat and it was. They have been a joy to work alongside and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to let them know that.

With my housegroup we haven't needed to get to know each other. Sue and I are relative newcomers having only been in the group for 19 years. Housegroup is, and has continued to be, a joyful experience. We are mainly in contact by email or phone but it was a lovely surprise when, unplanned, a number of us were at a 9am service together.

Finding joy in each other is a lockdown lesson, heightened by missing contact with people. Good though it is, Zoom just isn't the same. Perhaps we have discovered that it's not so much that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but absence reveals the fondness that is already there. I'm going to dare to say that people are the greatest source of joy, after all that great carol says: 'Joy to the world, the Lord is come'. Joy comes with the baby of Bethlehem, with a person. So maybe we should ask ourselves not 'what brings me joy', but 'who brings me joy

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## A band of brothers

2020 has certainly been a year of doing things differently and learning new skills, and it appears that Zoom is no barrier to having lots of laughs! Our Marksmen Community group first got to grips with it when our Alpha Course had to pivot onto Zoom in March. Since then we've met weekly on Zoom and done courses from Tear Fund, LICC and 24/7 Prayer, and we've laughed a lot. 2020 has also highlighted how much we enjoy meeting face to face and so when the sun shone and rules allowed, we met for walks in the Valley Gardens culminating in a socially distanced beer sat on the grass or Sunday lunch outside at the Fat Badger. We've also walked alongside one another in friendship through our various individual ups and downs. Each of us serves in our own way in church and elsewhere but during 2020 we have more than ever valued and thanked God for each other. A true band of brothers. We also give thanks for the selfless service of the many people who have helped St Marks navigate the choppy waters of 2020. Thank you all and we wish you a healthy 2021.

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# A grateful heart

I had been coming to St Mark's for a while, yet still didn't feel quite at home, anymore than I did in this new town I had chosen to settle in. This particular Sunday, by chance, (read 'by design', God's not mine obviously!) I sat next to a couple who not only invited me to join the home-group they led, but were former ex-pats, who like me had returned to the UK after years living overseas. Bingo, common ground! That first evening I joined was peppered with laughter, discipleship and genuine concern towards each of the group. Requests for prayers were honestly shared and often heart-wrenching and deeply personal, but the home-group was, and is, a safe space for all and currently - albeit virtually - a vital connection whilst physical church is not an option. What I hadn't realised was to what extent that support would go; the real love and fellowship that grows from these simple weekly meetings.

My group has prayerfully supported me through a year where my ex-husband lost his job, my own diagnosis with a long-term health condition and at the beginning of lockdown, my mother's death. Then in October my ex-husband declared he was unable to continue paying the mortgage he held on my house; 10 months of unemployment has taken its toll and put

him in breach of our divorce settlement. We prayed for a new job, and for wisdom over the tough decision to put my house on the market. The immediate worry was, however, what I would do whilst waiting for a buyer, now that the six month mortgage holiday had expired. Faced with payments I couldn't afford and no maintenance, I was worried sick. And then, unexpectedly, my housegroup stepped in with financial help (as did two other members of the small church group I am blessed to lead, who I was unaware even knew of my predicament). These very practical and generous acts of kindness gave me breathing space in that first uncertain month, allowing me to realign my finances to keep my family afloat for the rest of the year at least. This Pandemic has hit us all in multiple ways - but throughout, despite the uncertainties, I know I am fortunate, because God's got this; I am in His hands! Just now, I am thankful for my home-group and the blessings of great fellowship, prayers, the generosity of relatively new friends and for God's unending grace.

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**Thank you to all who contributed.**  
**If you would like to share a 'Story of Joy',**  
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