

Leaflet



Greenbank Parish Church
Braidburn Terrace, EH10 6ES

No 629 October 2013

Pulpit Diary

Oct 6

- 9.30am First Sunday Service
led by Springboard
10.30am Morning Worship
with Guild Dedication

Oct 13

- 10.30am Morning Worship
(Special activity for children)

Oct 20

- 10.30am Morning Worship

Oct 27

- 10.30am Morning Worship

Nov 3

- 9.30am First Sunday Service
led by Guild
10.30am Morning Worship

Nov 10

- 10.45am Remembrance Sunday
Service

For information about church organisations,
please contact the Church Office (Mon–Fri,
9.00am–12.00 noon, 1.30pm–3.30pm):

Mrs Virginia Johnston

tel and fax: 0131 447 9969

e-mail: greenbankchurch@btconnect.com

The pastoral team can be contacted through
the Church Office:

Rev Alison Swindells

tel and fax: 0131 447 4032

email: alisonswindells@blueyonder.co.uk

Rev W. Peter Graham

tel: 0131 445 5763

Youth Minister: Rev Bill Stone

tel: 07883 815 598

email: billstoneiii@gmail.com

To make contact with any of the organisations
described in this *Leaflet*, please use the tele-
phone number given, if there is one. Otherwise
please contact the Church Office.

Website: www.greenbankchurch.org

Minister's Letter

Dear Friends,

You may have read in last month's *Leaflet* about some of the things that we did at our Space Academy Holiday Club in August. But this month I would like to tell you about something that happened behind the scenes. Towards the end of the week our Youth Minister decided that the



leaders and helpers were all in need of some extra energy. And so on Friday morning he appeared at our team devotions with a box of donuts from a certain American donut company.

Perhaps you have tried them for yourself! Certainly when the Krispy Kreme Donut Outlet first opened in Hermiston Gait there were such long queues of cars waiting to park that the city bypass came to a halt. However when Sean and I went in a couple of weeks ago the place was deserted. Perhaps it was because there is not a great demand for donuts at 10.30am on a Monday morning! Or has the novelty simply worn off?

We live in a society which is forever chasing the new and the innovative. We want to be among the first to visit the latest attraction. We must have the newest i-gadget as soon as it appears in the shops. But over and against this incessant demand for the new and the novel, the Church dares to proclaim a very different message. What is that message? It is that "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*". We find these words in the bible, in the letter to the Hebrews. And they remind us that at the heart of the Gospel message to which the Church should bear witness, is the constant and unchanging nature of God's love.

But there is a danger here. There is a risk that we take these words and apply them to the church as an institution. Whatever our

church leanings – whether it be towards the Anglican or Roman Catholic tradition or our own beloved Presbyterian tradition we are often tempted to believe that the church must be the same yesterday and today and forever.

But that simply cannot be. For the Church is called

to be the body of Christ to every age. And this will involve changing our ways and our structures as the world around us changes. Only then can the Church continue to serve effectively and witness to the Gospel message which does not change.

It is for this reason that I will soon be making a change to my own working patterns. For some time I have been aware that an increasing number of the groups whom we welcome into our Church building have little or no contact with the congregation. With the help of our Property Committee, Administrator and Caretaker one of the Mackay rooms is currently being converted into an office. My intention is to work from there three mornings a week so that I can get to know and serve better those who use our premises. I will of course also be available for any Church members who wish to see me. I'm only a phone call away, as the saying goes!

In the meantime can I encourage all of you whenever you are in our buildings to make a point of welcoming those whom we serve through the provision of accommodation. Extending hospitality to others remains an important part of our witness to the love of Christ which is the same yesterday, today and forever.

With warmest wishes,

Alison I Swindells
Minister

Nile Grove Playgroup

Have you heard about Nile Grove Playgroup at Greenbank Church?



Our Playgroup is a great place for your child to take their first steps towards independence, to socialise and play with other children, and of course it gives you a precious couple of hours to yourself!

We are a registered charity playgroup providing childcare for 2½ – 5 year olds in a fun and caring environment.

A qualified teacher manages the playgroup in unison with the parent committee, which also organises fundraising and social events. The three permanent, dedicated members of staff have a wealth of experience working with children as well as being parents themselves.

Your children can enjoy playing with our huge variety of toys including dressing up, water and sand, puzzles, construction, kitchen corner and much more. We provide many other activities including arts and crafts, singing and dancing and there are daily opportunities for fresh air and exercise. We offer delicious healthy mid morning snacks sometimes baked by the children themselves.

Playgroup runs between 9.15am–11.45am every week day during term time at a cost of only £8.50 per session. You can add your child's name to our waiting list at any age, as soon as you find out about us!

For more information please have a look at our website: www.nilegroveplaygroup.co.uk, telephone 07505 366 580 during playgroup hours, or pop in to see us.

Donations for the Leaflet and Life and Work

It is that time of year again when you are invited to pay for *Life and Work* and to make your annual donation towards the cost of providing the *Leaflet*. We ask for donations at this time as we will soon have to confirm our annual order for *Life and Work*.

Life and Work costs £20 for the whole of 2014. If you currently get *Life and Work* but wish to cancel it for 2014, or if you wish to start receiving *Life and Work*, please contact me.

The suggested donation towards the *Leaflet* is £10.

For both publications it is a total of £30.

I thought that it would be useful if I mentioned a couple of things:

- The donations for the *Leaflet* last year were significantly lower than the cost of publishing it, **so all donations are very welcome.**
- By bulk ordering *Life and Work*, we receive a significant discount to the cover price of £24.

Donations, along with details of your name and address please, should be put in an envelope addressed to me and delivered through the Sunday offering bags or to the Church Office by post or hand. Cheques should be made payable to "Greenbank Church". All donations received are eligible for tax recovery under the Gift Aid scheme.

Robert Young
Treasurer




Forth Valley Chorus Sing-out for Christian Aid

Greenbank Parish Church

Braidburn Terrace

Friday 25th October 2013 at 7.30pm

Tickets: £8 (including refreshments) from Committee Members, Greenbank Church Office, forthvalleychorus.com, brownpapertickets.com or limited number available at door

Proceeds to 

Contacts: David Ferguson, Pam Jack, John Mowat

UK registered charity number 1105851

Company number N5171525

Scotland charity number SCO39150

The Big Issue

Mistaken Perception?

John Bird, Founder and Editor in Chief of *The Big Issue*, draws our attention in the June edition to perceptions surrounding the magazine which are worth summarising and considering.

He is keen to challenge what he feels is the common perception of the organisation, which is that it is a form of aid for the sellers and not trade. He is anxious in the article to clarify that vendors buy the magazine and run a simple one-person business, labouring on their own account whilst gaining a number of skills which in time allow them to work their way back into mainstream society.

He is concerned that vast numbers of people still do not understand that this is 'A Hand Up Not a Handout'. This, Bird feels, is demoralising for the vendors and for the organisation.

It appears that of 300 businesses who were asked, only a handful understood *The Big Issue* philosophy of helping people to help themselves. Although *The Big Issue* has been helped by free advertising in newspapers etc., Bird feels that the public still need to be educated to understand that selling *The Big Issue* is giving people a chance to become independent of handouts and to experience the independence of earning.

The ability of *The Big Issue* to trade successfully is undisputed; it has prospered in the marketplace for 22 years. Although Bird sees this as a remarkable achievement he says it is dwarfed by the personal achievements of huge numbers of vendors who have turned their lives around as a result of selling.

He feels it is crucial that the public are continually reminded of the principles and importance of *The Big Issue* in giving people this opportunity. He urges us to "put our minds to telling 10 people what *The Big Issue* actually does."

Can you also pass on this message?

Taken from an article in the June number of "The Big Issue" by its Founder, John Bird.

Hazel Macaulay

Greenbank Ladies Badminton Silver Jubilee Lunch

Burns Badminton Peru

What's the connection?

In 1988 Greenbank Church held a very successful Burns supper. Following this event the ladies involved held a debrief session and felt they would like to maintain the camaraderie that they had developed over months of planning.

What did they have in common? What could they do on a regular basis?

Badminton was the answer

So the Wednesday morning Ladies Badminton Club began and 25 years later a celebration lunch was hosted and prepared by Margaret Pitkeathly. 26 past and present members of the club enjoyed a beautiful three course meal. A choice of six desserts



would you believe—some people even had two. The Silver Jubilee theme was evident even down to the silver looking napkins and rings. A few old photos were passed around and even the instructions and plans for the Burns supper appeared—all hand written—prepared long before the days of computers and spreadsheets!

As a thank you to our hostess for her generosity and inspiration behind the event, the club presented her with a T Shirt which we expect to see her wearing on court this session. It has her picture with the words 'What a Racket Player' and on the back 'What

a Racket — Greenbank Ladies Badminton 2013'. We do make a racket from time to time whether it is smashing the shuttlecock or more likely the chat from those on the sidelines!

Where does Peru fit in?

The club decided to make the lunch a fund raising event by donation. Wendy Ashcroft (daughter of Janet Walker) is setting off in May 2014 on the Inca Trail Challenge in Peru in aid of Marie Curie Hospice at Fairmilehead. She has to raise a minimum of £3750 before she departs. A magnificent £810 was raised at the lunch towards her challenge. We wish her well on her venture.



Our new session began on 18th September but new members are always welcome at any time during the season. So even if you haven't played for a while, dig out that racquet (or come and try one of ours) and enjoy some exercise and have fun at the same time.

Susan Black

Congregational Board Notes

At its last meeting the Board was briefed on recent work which had been undertaken and on the latest position as regards finance. The Property Convener, Ian Thom, reported that a range of maintenance works had been undertaken in the Church's properties and that the upgrade of the downstairs kitchen was well in hand. The installation of an industrial cooker and dishwasher (funded by a generous donation), had now been completed and users were being asked for their preferred choice of kitchen equipment.

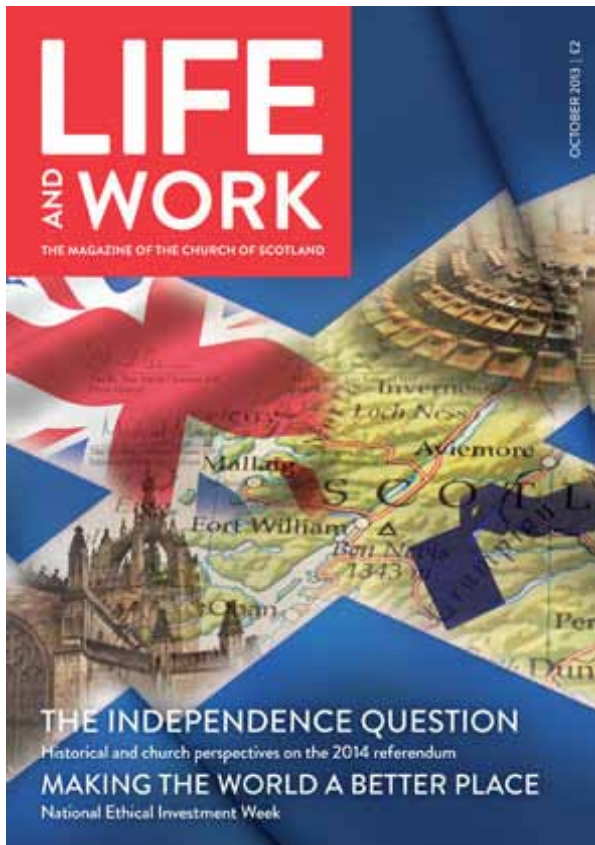
The Treasurer, Robert Young, reported that at the end of August the financial position at the year to date was broadly speaking one of no deficit / no surplus. However he advised that this was due to the impact of a number of one-off income items and that there remained concern that it was likely that costs would exceed

income by the year end. Every effort was being made to consider how to further increase income and to reduce costs.

A small team consisting of Angus McLachlan (Co-ordinator), David Allan, Douglas Allan and Gillian Sweetman had been set up to manage Health & Safety issues in the Church. Angus McLachlan reported that an inspection tour had been undertaken and that no major concerns had emerged. Many of the critical areas identified in 2010 had been dealt with. Draft risk assessments had been put in hand following visits around the Sanctuary and halls and draft policies on areas such as *Working at Height*, *Manual Handling* and *First Aid*, were to be compiled.

The Board had asked Liz Shiel to undertake a green energy investigation into the merits and possible cost benefits of installing photovoltaic panels on the south facing roof of the Church.

Life and Work: October Issue



The Independence Debate – part two

The historical context; a young person's view; and the role of the Church of Scotland.

Plus: The Big Question – What is your church doing to help the community understand the 2014 referendum?

Making the World a Better Place
Murdo Macdonald considers how we can make ethical financial decisions.

'A Priceless and Unforgettable Experience'

Seonaid Knox reports from this year's National Youth Assembly.

The Gift of Sight

To mark World Sight Day (October 10), Jackie Macadam speaks to the Scottish Chair of RNIB Scotland and a Consultant Ophthalmologist working with an overseas disability charity.

Online: Visit www.lifeandwork.org for up-to-date news, exclusive features and tasters of the magazine. Like us at [facebook.com/lifeandwork](https://www.facebook.com/lifeandwork), follow us at twitter.com/coflifeandwork.

'A Tool to Keep in Touch'
The Moderator describes her first steps in social media.

Reaching Out

How an Edinburgh congregation has engaged with a local mosque.

The Silence of God

The Rev Scott McKenna considers definitions of 'God'.

A Miracle of Sharing

The Rev Carol Ford offers a different way of retelling the feeding of the 5000.

James Watt's Church Organ

The Very Rev Dr James Simpson looks at how great hymns can resonate in our hearts and minds.

Plus: news, letters, reviews and cross-words – all for just £2.

Book Review

The Contribution of the Church of Scotland to School Education 1772–1872

John Stevenson

Pickwick Publications, ISBN 13:978-1-61097-344-1

John Stevenson's research, presented in this accessible format, covers a 100 year period in the history of the Church and education in Scotland. In the *First Book of Discipline* John Knox and others set out a scheme for a school in every parish in order that a basic education should be available for everyone with the aim that even the poorest child would learn to read thus making the Bible accessible to all in their own homes. Unfortunately this vision was not fulfilled due to lack of finance.

The story retold here by John Stevenson describes the struggles and achievements of the Church of Scotland as it sought both to control and further the model of education for which Scotland became famous. The Church of Scotland set up schools and established the first teacher training colleges. The Church also arranged school inspections.

Fear of the doctrines of the French Revolution, the decline of social morality, the lack of schools and the poor conditions of the school masters galvanised the Church into action.

A layman might assume that an account of the Church of Scotland's work in education would be technical and daunting but I did not find this a difficult read. The story covers a period of great difficulty in the history of the Church of Scotland which included the Disruption. I think the Church of Scotland comes out of this well: had it not acted in this field matters would have

been much worse. Even now the Church has an influence in the field of education of which I was unaware. A statistic quoted in the book that I think puts the Church of Scotland's achievement into context is as follows: "In 1871, including 1200 parish schools, the Church claimed responsibility for a total of 2,430 schools throughout the country." Just over 140 years ago a basic education was available for all and the Church had achieved its goal. The system of state education that we take for granted and our schools owe a debt of gratitude to the Church of Scotland.

John Ritchie

Work Party

Having had enquiries about the size of knitted squares needed for the blankets mentioned last month, here are the instructions:

Using DK yarn and size 8 (4mm) pins

cast on 36 stitches : plain knit 60 rows : cast off

Or for Baby blankets

cast on 20 stitches : plain knit 40 rows : cast off.

Please leave long ends for sewing up. Squares can be handed to me at church, at Guild meetings or at Work Party meetings.

Even if you can only knit a few squares it will all help.

Thank you.

Anne Oxbrow

Have you looked at the website yet?

www.greenbankchurch.org

Mission and Service

The following is a selection from items in the newsletter of the Church and Society council, which can be found via the Church of Scotland website, www.churchofscotland.org.uk/.

Imagining Scotland's Future

Chloe Clemmons, Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer

The Church of Scotland's *Imagining Scotland's Future* events will offer something a little different which may help to clarify thinking around the decision that participants take at the ballot box on 18th September 2014, or it might just get people thinking a bit more about the values that are important to them in their communities and, by extension, the nation. What is important is that we are committed to getting people talking to each other, imagining Scotland's future. We'll be stepping back from the question of yes or no. The Church of Scotland will remain impartial on the question of Scottish independence. But we are not neutral about our determination that the conversation about Scotland's future goes beyond politicians and activists.

Imagining Scotland's Future uses a guided and structured discussion model which we hope establishes a safe space where everyone – and we mean everyone, from the decided, to the undecided; whether first time voter, occasional voter or seasoned regular voter – will have the opportunity to explore the values that really matter to them: their aspirations and ideas for themselves and the communities in which they live.

By taking this event around the country, we hope to gather a cross-section of opinion from across congregations. We already have confirmed events in small churches, large churches, urban and rural. However you'll see that some areas are better served than others. If your Presbytery or local area looks as if it is missing from our map and you'd be interested in us coming to run an event near you, then please get in touch. If you would like more information please call the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (Tel 0131 220 0246), or email info@actsparl.org.

Christian Aid Updates

Working for Peace in the Holy Land

Christian Aid have produced a discussion book entitled 'Breaking down the barriers – working for peace in the Holy Land'.

Christian Aid Harvest Resource – Bear Fruit for the Future this Harvest. Bebe Albenize and her forest community depend heavily on the Brazil nuts they gather from the Amazon rainforest. This fruit of their labour is under threat. Please stand with us to support communities like Bebe's to help them protect their way of life and bear fruit for the future.

Ecumenical Thanksgiving Service for the work of Christian Aid – Glasgow Christian Aid Scotland, the Church of Scotland's World Mission and Church and Society Councils and the Scottish Episcopal Church invite all to a Service of Thanksgiving for the work of Christian Aid around the world, which will include partner stories from across the Middle East. The service will take place on Sunday 24th November, from 6pm–7pm at Glasgow Cathedral, Cathedral Square, Castle Street, Glasgow, G4 0QZ. For further information on events visit the Christian Aid website, www.christianaid.org.uk/.

National Ethical Investment Week 2013

Find out how your church can get involved

National Ethical Investment Week (www.neiw.org/) is a campaign to ensure that everyone knows that they have green and ethical options when it comes to their finance and investment decisions. NEIW brings together advisers, charities and churches, financial organisations, faith groups, NGOs and community groups to spread the word about green and ethical investing.

Truth and Lies Study Guide

Responding to requests for Bible study materials linked to the *Truth and Lies* campaign, we have produced this introductory study guide for small groups. It links some of the main ideas in the report with biblical theme with questions, group activities and Bible reflection. The material is written to take up to an hour and half, and is easily adapted to suit your situation.

World Mission

The World Mission Council at 121 George Street has sent out a booklet entitled *Life in Fullness – Africa and Caribbean* to world mission groups in local churches to inform congregations about the work of the World Mission Council (WMC). Faith and life are inseparable in Africa and the Caribbean.

Here is an extract from the booklet:

“Lesley Balaj, a WM Council Member who formerly worked in Malawi, recalled: We are all familiar with the Scottish Harvest Thanksgiving, offering part of our harvest to God once all has been gathered in. A ceremony of harvest that we do not celebrate in Scotland is “First Fruits”. Members of the congregation bring a maize stalk to church, when the maize is fresh and just ready for boiling and eating as corn on the cob. During the service, the

congregation dance down the aisles with their offering to lay it at the chancel. This is a spectacular event full of joy and vibrancy. Everyone is happy as the proper harvest is drawing near and the hunger is passing, at least for a while.

One afternoon, when I was living in Malawi, a visitor came to my home bringing maize stalks. Because I had no maize garden, I was considered one of the poor and the church wished to help me. It was a gift from a community which may be financially poor, but has the heart to take care of others.”

One World Stall

The next One World Stall is on **Sunday 27th October** after the 10.30am Service.

John Ritchie



Fresh Start provides a range of services that support people who have been homeless and have recently been re-housed.

Most of the services are delivered by volunteers and only exist due to the contribution of volunteers, the churches and the wider community.

The Starter Packs and Hit Squad services are components of the Gateway consortium that is contracted to the City of Edinburgh Council to deliver different aspects of Edinburgh's Homelessness Strategy.

There is a strong recycling and re-use aspect to our work and we run social enterprises that create employment and training opportunities for people who have experienced homelessness.

The next Fresh Start collections are on 13th October and 24th November in the Main Hall after the morning service. See the list below for suitable items to donate – in good condition, please.

Fresh Start List

Below is a full list of household goods wanted. Please refer to it, to avoid giving unwanted items.

Dishes and Crockery

Dinner plates, side plates, bowls, cutlery, mugs, glass tumblers, tea-towels.

Pots and Pans etc.

Pots with lids, milk pans, frying pans, plastic boxes, cooking utensils, can openers, potato peelers, wooden spoons.

Cleaning Things

Washing up basins, washing-up liquid, toilet cleaner, toilet rolls, hand soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, dust pans and brushes, pedal bin liners, rubbish bags, all purpose cleaner, laundry tablets.

Bed Linen and Towels

Single flat sheets, double flat sheets, single duvet covers, double duvet covers, pillow cases, blankets, duvets, bed covers, towels, face cloths, bath mats, curtains, rugs.

Also Wanted are small household electrical items – not TVs.

To find out more about Fresh Start, pick up a leaflet from me, telephone 0131 476 7741 or see www.freshstartweb.org.uk.

Alison Ambler

The Guild

Well here we are, the summer is almost over and a new Guild session is about to begin. Our first meeting is on Tuesday 1st October when Alan Brown, a vet from Corstorphine is coming to speak to us, and on 15th October our own minister is coming to introduce this year's Guild Theme "A Fellowship to Build".

The Guild meets every 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month in the Braid Room at 7.30pm and for those of you who would like to see what else is happening this session there is a copy of our syllabus on the notice board in the corridor. We are always keen to welcome new members so if you are looking for an opportunity to make new friends, to listen to interesting speakers, to raise money for charities and to have fun do come and join us – a warm welcome awaits.

Ann Pirie

Friendship Club

What better way, on 2nd October, to begin a new session than with how Scotland's new and exciting Tapestry was created. We are delighted to welcome Dorie Wilkie, chief seamstress on the project, to enlighten us. This meeting, as are they all, is open to anyone who is interested. (Banner Group ladies take note.)

On 16th October Ruth Aird will take us on a totally different journey to Transylvania, while on 23rd October the Natural World is Kathleen's musical theme. Bill Barr makes a very welcome return with another of his audio-visual presentations of music and colour at the end of the month on the 30th.

Following Transylvania, our first November meeting on the 13th is about Bats!

Val Smart

Socks Again!

Once again I'm hoping the generous Greenbankers can provide some new/nearly new socks, also gloves, for homeless people. As in previous winters, our Help the Homeless group will be providing hot meals at a few of the night shelters where the socks and gloves will be happily received.

Please leave any items in the Food Box at the church door.

Pauline Walker

Resignation of Elders

Stuart Macmillan and Kenneth Aitken have each intimated their desire to resign from the Kirk Session. Their requests were approved with regret at Kirk Session meetings earlier this year.

Stuart was ordained to the eldership in 1972 at London Road Parish Church and, after joining Greenbank in 1978, he was inducted to the Kirk Session in 1993. Stuart has served the Session faithfully in many ways over the years – most recently as joint convener with Richard Dunbar of the successful Stewardship Campaign in 2011. For the past 20 years he has taken care of the members of District 66A.

Kenneth was ordained to the eldership in 1968 at the Church of the Holy Rude in Stirling and, after moving to Edinburgh, he initially joined St. Cuthbert's Church and served there as an elder before joining Greenbank in 1980 and being inducted to the Kirk Session in 1985. Kenneth has served the Session faithfully in a variety of ways – he looked after the members of District 6 for 17 years. In 1999 he became the convener of the Mission & Service Committee at the time when Greenbank Village was added to the parish and, as he watched the site progress more or less from start to finish, he was instrumental in developing the church's initial approach to the new residents. Subsequently, in 2002 he became the elder for the new district 72, covering Greenbank Village, and has continued to promote the church to the residents, while taking good care of our members.

We are sorry to lose the support of two faithful elders but are very grateful for their contributions to the work of the Kirk Session and to the congregation.

Meet the Author

James Robertson

Scottish author of *The Fanatic*, *Joseph Knight*, *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, *And the Land Lay Still* and *The Professor of Truth*

for

Scottish Love in Action

Virgin Money Lounge

28 St Andrews Square, Edinburgh

Thursday 31st October 6pm–8pm

Tickets £10 (including refreshments)

Raffle

Congregational Register

Omitted from the on-line version

Welcome Teams

October

- 6 **Stuart Sanders**, Moira Davidson, John Murison, Rachel Cadell, Jenny Wright, Sandy Cameron, Carrie Reid, Moira Land
- 13 **Donald King**, Brian Barron, Walter Crosby, Donald MacLeod, Roderick Morrison, Mairi Stevenson, Jim Young, Kathryn Sangster
- 20 **Rosemary McCulloch**, Rona Ferguson, Fiona Grant, Christina Morrow, Alison Murison, Malcolm Reid, Joan Ritchie, Toby Tucker, Alastair Ross
- 27 **Roger Bland**, Eileen Campbell, Richard Dunbar, Clifford Hastings, Chris Horne, Doris Laing, Enid Mowat, Robin Nimmo, Keith Winton

November

- 3 **John George**, Kenneth Aitken, Alastair Hunter, Hazel Macaulay, Kathleen Patrick, Jill Powlett-Brown, Dorothy Whitehead, Tony Foster

Coffee Rota

October

- 6 Country Dance Club
- 13 Friendship Club
- 20 Wednesday Badminton
- 27 Gill Sweetman D22



November

- 3 Rachel McWilliam D58

Crèche Rota

October

- 6 Isobel Thom
- 13 Rosemary Collier
- 20 Liz Foster
- 27 Carrie Reid



November

- 3 Vivien Hutchison

Flower Rota



Provided by

Delivered by

October

- | | | |
|----|----------------|----------------|
| 6 | Ruth Johnston | Moir Little |
| 13 | Rhian Ferguson | Rachel Cadell |
| 20 | Winton Family | Susan Beaumont |
| 27 | Janet Ferguson | Margo Fraser |

November

- | | | |
|---|------|--------------|
| 3 | WAGs | Janet Inglis |
|---|------|--------------|

Material for the November *Leaflet* should be delivered to the Church Office or to the Editors' pigeon-hole in the Main Hall by Sunday 13th October, or sent by e-mail by 9am on Tuesday 15th October to greenbankleaflet@googlemail.com

Some Prayers of the Old Testament

Prayer is an important feature of virtually all religions. Down through the ages people have prayed, either in the company of others, as in public worship, or on their own. When words are used, they can be carefully crafted and chosen; or they may be totally spontaneous. Prayer can be wordless, as the person praying waits in stillness and silence. Despite its universality and variety of forms, for many people today prayer has become a problem rather than a privilege, an obstacle to faith rather than an opening up to God. Prayer becomes hard for two reasons. For many of us, prayer does not come easily so that in the midst of busy and hectic lives it tends to be given a very low priority. And we find it difficult to believe that God responds to prayer.

Just because we do not understand how something works need not prevent us from using it. How many of us have even a basic knowledge of how most of our household gadgets work — and yet we do not hesitate from using them to our fullest advantage? We never dream of saying about microwave ovens or mobile phones or digital cameras: if I can't imagine how something works, then it can't work. But that is what we imply about prayer. What arrogance, what pride!

Praying for oneself or for other people depends upon the double conviction that God does respond and that somehow human prayer can make a difference. This is not to deny that there are many times when prayer does not seem to be answered. It is unhelpful, if not downright cruel, to suggest that God's people have only to say their prayers and God will ensure that everything comes right. From the ancient writings we call the Old Testament right down to our own times, we can see how religious people have often had to understand that the world does not accommodate itself even to their pious hopes.

This was true for the man described as father of the faithful and as a friend of God, the patriarch Abraham. One story in the Bible describes his moving prayer for the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. At some point these twin cities on the plain by the Dead Sea must have suffered a dramatic and sudden disaster, and the distant memory of their destruction has been skilfully and effectively woven into the saga of Abraham. According to the ancient story, God had decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because the sin of these cities was "very grave". (Whether this "grave sin" was sexual perversion or more generally brutality, exploitation and oppression is not specified.) What matters is that God responded to the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah's victims, those who suffered. It meant that God could — and does — hear the cry of the world's abused, corrupted and enslaved millions pleading in their agony and lostness for justice and redress.

Abraham immediately began to plead to God for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He launched on a prayer on behalf of Sodom with its famous refrain, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?* Here we are reminded that praying inevitably involves us in thinking about God, in thinking out the true nature and character of the One to whom we pray. These words presuppose that the God whom Abraham addresses is

a god concerned with all human activity and that as such can be depended upon to act in a way which will commend itself to our sense of what is right. Any other possibility would be inconceivable: the Judge of all the earth must do what is right, in this instance destroy the city and everyone in it. Nevertheless Abraham insists on pushing his questions. His belief that God is just means that the questions must be pushed to the boundary of human understanding.

So Abraham asked how many righteous people there must be in a city if it is to be spared from the punishment its inhabitants deserve. No doubt his motives were not entirely disinterested, because we have previously been told that his own nephew Lot lived in Sodom. But it was Sodom's fate he concentrated on. Would, he asked, the presence in it of fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, even ten righteous people save it from its just deserts? Each time God's answer was that it would make a difference. For the sake of such a number, even ten, *I will not destroy it.* Remarkably the requests stop at ten. Why not five or even one? But Abraham was satisfied. Perhaps he thought that ten was just too few to ward off inevitable destruction. He knew that nothing he could do could now prevent God's retribution descending on Sodom and its neighbours. We should not judge him too strongly for giving up. He can hardly be blamed, living when he did, for not seeing further.

But we can see further. This passage makes it painfully clear that God is not mocked. At its deepest level it is not about a particularly wicked group of ancient cities and their destruction, but about the whole human condition. *There's nobody living right, not even one,* said St Paul. At the same time here we can see biblical faith and biblical prayer on their way to the conviction that a life well lived may be the means of rescuing others. In Christianity this insight will reach its logical conclusion in the saving significance of the one truly righteous one, Jesus. And down through the ages the Church has continued to believe that in otherwise hopeless situations God's cause can be maintained by a faithful minority.

The prayer of Abraham exhibits him as a daring man of faith. Writing of Biblical prayer, Walter Wink says that it is "impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches." This is certainly true of Abraham's prayer on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nor is it the last exchange God's people have with God concerning divine justice, wrath, mercy and forgiveness. And Abraham's example suggests that we should be equally persistent as in prayer and practice we take a stand against racism, sexism, nationalism, ageism and every other "-ism" that separates and splits and divides our communities and our nation, and threatens their very survival.

For further reading:

The whole story of Abraham can be found in *Genesis chapters 12-25*. Abraham's dialogue/conversation/prayer is included in *chapter 18, verses 16-33*.