

Liverpool (North) Circuit

The Revd Neil A Stubbens

33 Trafalgar Road

Southport

PR8 2HF

Tel: 0151 306 5134

Mobile: 07543 108494

E-mail: Neil.Stubbens@Methodist.org.uk

17 December 2020

To members of and regular worshippers at Maghull Methodist Church (by email or post to each household)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ

As what so many are calling this ‘extraordinary year’ draws to a close and we continue our journey through Advent to Christmas, I pray that you may know the hope, peace, joy, and love that come from God.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ who is, St Matthew declared, Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’ People’s last words are often thought to be particularly significant: the biographies I have of John Wesley record that his last word was ‘Farewell’ but that during his last night he repeated several times, ‘The best of all is God is with us.’ The President and Vice-President of the Conference, The Revd Richard Teal and Mrs Carolyn Lawrence, chose those words as the theme for their year of office (June 2020 – June 2021). They chose it long before anyone had heard of COVID-19; how significant it is proving to be! The ways in which we’re able to celebrate Christmas this year are very different; at the heart of it all, however, is the same truth and the same cause for celebration: God is with us. This year, the Methodist Church’s Christmas Campaign is focussed on this and makes it clear that we believe that the ‘us’ includes everyone. This is crucial because the pandemic has highlighted many inequalities in our society and wider world: I have just read that UNICEF has launched a domestic emergency response in the UK for the first time in its 70-year history to help feed children hit by the COVID-19 crisis and we have known for months now how Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities are disproportionately affected by the virus.

That God is with us in Jesus Christ is one of the ways in which Christians proclaim that God loves the world and is present and active in it; another is that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. I’ve already referred to John Wesley’s last spoken words; his last written words may well have been a letter to the young William Wilberforce, urging him on his mission to end the slave trade. This reminds me that, as well as the global pandemic, this year has been marked by a much higher profile for the global campaign affirming that black lives matter. The Methodist Church has endorsed the call of Black Lives Matter for radical action in addressing the causes of racial justice. For some years now, we have declared that racism is a denial of the gospel; nevertheless, we have not yet eradicated the problem from our Church. Some of you will have read the articles about this in the summer edition of *the connexion* and they make painful reading. One of my responses has been to read John Howard Griffin’s book *Black Like Me*: originally published in 1961, it was re-issued last year with a foreword by Bernardine Evaristo. It, too, makes painful reading. Our responses to the realities of people’s lives, both across the world and across the street, are part of our response to the good news we celebrate at Christmas.

We also have reason to celebrate the good news that a number of vaccines for the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 have been and are being developed and that some people, including some of you perhaps, have already received a first dose. We rejoice in this incredible development, pray that the distribution of these vaccines around the world goes well, and thank God for everyone involved in humanity's response to COVID-19, including those key workers who continue to face increased risk for the sake of others.

On that note of thanksgiving, I'd like to express gratitude to a number of people in our own community. During this extraordinary year, various people have developed existing or taken up new roles among us and for us. I think, for example, of our pastoral visitors and the members of our COVID-19 Group; thank you to you all.

Thank you, also, for your care and prayers for me and my family following the death of my father on 23 November. Having conducted a number of funerals since March, with the varying restrictions involved, last week I was a member of a congregation of mourners. I'll be grateful if you would continue to hold us in your prayers and to remember Luke Smith and his family as they mourn the death of his father.

My father's death meant that I missed all but the last of the meetings of the Advent Study Group with our friends at St George's URC on the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. In whatever way we have chosen, let us continue preparing our hearts to receive again the good news of the birth of our Saviour, the one who brings God's hope, peace, joy, and love to the world.

On Christmas Day, I was due to conduct worship and preach at Maghull. Given that we have decided not to open yet for worship, with the help of our friends at Old Roan, we are now having a joint on-line service at 10:30 using Zoom. The Meeting ID is 817 3182 6106 and the Passcode is 943081; it can be accessed using the internet or by phone on 0203 481 5240; please join the meeting as soon after 10:15 as possible. If you have any questions about how to 'attend', please get in touch with me.

A blessed Christmas to you all.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Neil A Stubbens". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a long, thin horizontal line that extends to the right.

Neil A Stubbens