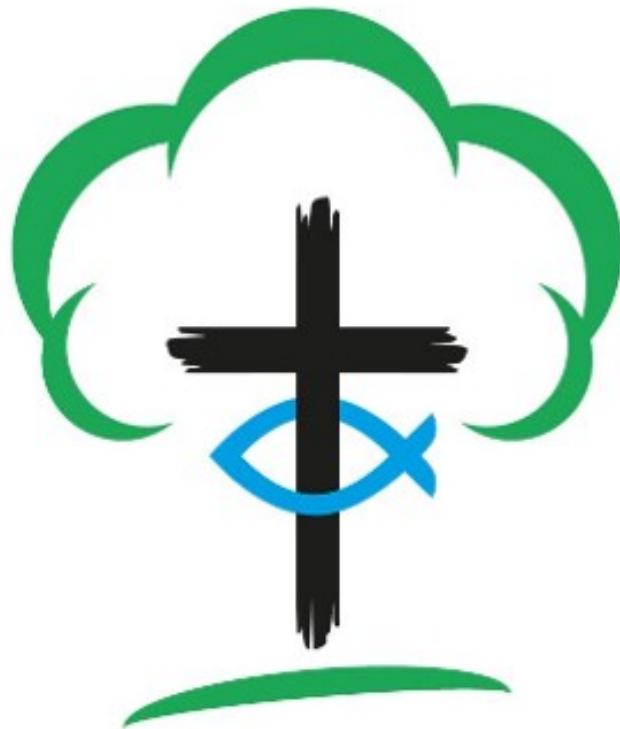


United Voices!



St Albans
**United
Reformed
Church**

The quarterly magazine of St. Albans United Reformed Church

Winter Edition

Issue 10—January 2026

From the Editorial Team:

A very warm welcome to this, the 10th edition of United Voices. As we are now into January, we hope that you all had a good Christmas: good times with family and friends, enjoyable food and drink (not too much!) and gifts. As it's a New Year, we wish our readers a happy, peaceful and healthy 2026.

As ever we thank everyone who sent in the various articles and photos printed in United Voices, making it the very interesting and enjoyable read that it always is.

Now that we are in the season of winter we wondered if anyone is wishing that it would snow? It could be fun playing with snowballs and making snowmen with children and it may make a nice change from all the rain that we have experienced over the past few weeks. On the other hand, the thought of possibly slipping and falling down doesn't paint a very pleasant picture, but we must wait and see what comes along. Meanwhile, please don't forget your activities and photos for the spring edition of United Voices. Until then, happy reading!

Maggie Snyder, Sue Brooks & Gill Elliott

Hot news! We have a new, bespoke, email address: editorunitedvoices@gmail.com

PREACHING WITH A VIEW - ADVANCE NOTICE

As advised at the Church Meetings on 26th October and 16th November, a candidate has accepted an invitation to "Preach with A View" for the Newland /St Albans vacancy on the weekend of 24th and 25th January. There will be an opportunity to meet the candidate socially from **2.30 - 4.30pm on Saturday 24th at Greenwood** . She will preach at Homewood on the morning of **Sunday 25th January**, and that will be followed by a Q & A session lasting 45 minutes. She will then go on to preach and have Q & As in Newland Luton in the afternoon.

The whole process will be overseen by the Interim Moderator, the Rev James Fields, who must be present at both of the Church Meetings at which a vote will be taken. The St Albans URC vote will take place on the evening of **Monday 26th January at 7.30pm at Homewood**. Only members who have heard the candidate preach are eligible to vote and under URC rules, no proxy voting is allowed, so please hold the date in your diary if you want to take part.

Lesley King, Church Secretary

Letter from an Elder

by David Martin

I am writing this in the final weeks of 2025, looking back on 2025 and forward to 2026. It's a reflection on the past and a look to the future. Robert Burns expressed a view on this in the final words of "To a Mouse":

I backward cast my e'e, On prospects drear!

An' forward tho' I canna see, I guess an' fear!

He was finding it hard to make a living as a farmer in the late 18th century. Current times can be depressing for us too. Listening to news of conflicts across the world, lack of progress in combating climate change and the intractable issues our country's politicians are debating – not least the cost-of-living crisis - can all make us feel low.

But we can also consider positive world developments such as recent remarkable advances in medicine. 80% of the world's 1-year-olds today have been vaccinated. In 20 years the number in extreme poverty worldwide has almost halved. Female political participation more than doubled since 2000. Installed renewable energy capacity worldwide grew by 80% since 2010. Life expectancy increased 19 years between 1960 and 2017. While challenges remain, these achievements offer hope and inspiration for further progress.

We can look back on a year of continuing harmony in our congregation, now at the end of our third year of amalgamation. The renewed and refurbished Greenwood site is now a year old – widely admired and - more importantly - increasingly used for the community as well as being restored as the only place of worship in Chiswell Green. We rejoice in the wide range of activities, at both our sites and beyond, as well as in uplifting worship in both Homewood and Greenwood led by our own very capable worship leaders and excellent visiting preachers. Hopes for 2026 include those related to our forthcoming decisions on the future of ministry.

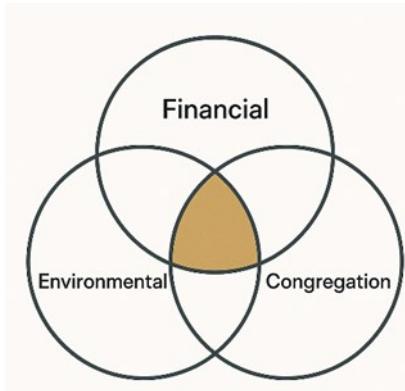
The New Year can often bring a mixed bag of emotions and memories for many of us. While some may have just experienced the best year ever and look forward to an even greater one ahead, others may have come through one deep struggle after another.

At this time of year, we celebrate the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He is called Immanuel – meaning *God with us*. Simply saying "Immanuel" should remind us of just that. He said: *surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* (Matt 28:20). Although events and people around us shift and change, our God never changes. We read in Revelation 22:13 *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.*

So, as we step into the new year, we need not *guess an' fear* but we have Jesus' promise to be with us every step of the journey.

What Does Sustainability Mean to You?

I recently attended a Zoom meeting of the URC Buildings Forum and the question “What does sustainability mean to you?” was posed. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, it can mean different things to different people.



For example, an Elder may respond that keeping our attendance numbers, membership and engagement is critical to sustaining a thriving congregation. Our Treasurer’s first thoughts may be that we need to manage our income and expenditure so that we can sustain our financial viability. Green team members will naturally turn their minds to our carbon footprint and our environmental sustainability.

Sustainability

All these are perfectly valid responses, and it would be hard to prioritise one over another. Do we need to prioritise them though? Are they mutually exclusive? I would argue that they are very much interrelated and complementary.

The Building Forum was attended by 60 Churches across the URC via Zoom and considers building related subjects common to many URC churches across the UK. Speakers at the Building Forum gave an update on the Church Life Review. This is a URC initiative started in 2021 which recognised declining membership, the challenges of regulatory compliance and the management of outdated structures. The Church Life Review has recently completed phase 2 of its work and has made recommendations to General Assembly.

There is not a specific Church Life Review work stream for buildings but many of the areas impact on building management so it is directly relevant to us at St Albans URC’s two sites. The report to General Assembly gave recommendations on:

1. Provision of shared support services
2. Employment of lay workers in local church roles
3. Financial resource sharing
4. Establishment of new URC communities of worship and discipleship.

I'll go into a bit more detail on the first two items and how they potentially assist us at St Albans URC.

Provision of Shared Support services recognises that many Churches need to tackle the same issues and do not necessarily have the expertise required. The proposal is to have a resources portal backed up by a help desk and support for shared services including IT, HR, payroll, accounting and procurement. The Homewood maintenance team have spent many hours researching utility suppliers, i.e. energy, broadband etc and this can be multiplied across the 105 churches in Thames North Synod alone, so it is not hard to see the value of a collective approach. Collective buying is one aspect of this under consideration.

Equally, we have been working on ideas to reduce our carbon footprint and reduce our energy costs (two closely related areas of sustainability!) Greenwood has been very successful in designing sustainability into the rebuild with financial and technical support from Synod. At Homewood we have performed an energy audit, and we propose to follow up with discussions with an architect to tease out the feasible options. We are looking at insulation, heating strategy, solar panels and ventilation. All are interrelated and need to consider our current situation e.g. we fitted a new gas boiler in 2023, and it does not make economic or environmental sense to scrap it while it is completely serviceable. These are complicated issues and the support of the Synod Properties team is highly valued but there are only a couple of people supporting the whole Synod, so most work necessarily falls to the local Church.

Employment of lay workers aims to help in the case of local or Synod employed workers by reducing risk and admin while preserving local agency. Lay worker grants are proposed and would apply to mission support work (e.g. outreach or youth and family work) as opposed to admin or caretaker roles.

So, all in all, it was an interesting forum and, as often is the case, the most beneficial element was talking to folk from other congregations across the country in the breakout groups. It was in one of those groups that the multiple aspects of sustainability emerged and I'd be interested in views from members of our Church on this subject. Please email: stalbansurcgreenteam@outlook.com with your thoughts.

If you would like more information about the Church Life Review go to <https://urc.org.uk/church-life-review-group/>

David Mooney, Homewood Maintenance Team and Green Team member

Wild Goose weekend by Pat Pile

The Wild Goose is the Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit and when the Iona Wild Goose Resource group flew into St Albans for a long weekend in October we were expecting things to happen. We just weren't quite sure what.

Jo, Iain and Jane introduced themselves to about 40 of us in the back hall of Homewood on the Friday evening and we began to sing and get to know each other in conversation. People had come not just from our church but from other churches and groups too.

We talked in small or larger groups, discussing experiences and ideas about church, what it was for us and what it could be. We were challenged to learn new songs and to be the leader as we shared in different acts of worship throughout the evening and the following day.



Saturday's gathering too, which took place on a beautiful autumn day at Greenwood, saw us look forward to the Sunday morning service. Again in groups



we studied three Bible passages, a psalm, a reading from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk and Paul's second epistle to Timothy, all telling of times of suffering. We were encouraged to present these readings in forms which would impart a greater understanding to a congregation in church, using drama, movement and music. The afternoon helped to demonstrate that we all might learn in different ways, through looking and listening, touching and moving. Some of us went off to prepare visual displays, some to write intercessions and some to think more about presentations of the texts. We all joined in learning more songs, "wee songs" as well as longer pieces. We ended the day with a closing act of worship

which saw us leaving full of the ideas we had experienced and planned for the next morning.

Overnight, unbeknown to most of us, the Resource team were working to polish up our efforts of the previous day and the Sunday morning congregation arrived to find the sanctuary transformed. Three areas had been designated to spaces linked to the Bible passages. The service linked our three presentations with hymns, prayers, visual illustrations and opportunities to move and to reflect on the overall theme. Just how do we as Christians respond in tough times?

Everyone will have taken something different away from this inspiring weekend.

"Lose your shyness, find your tongue, tell the world what God has done," was just one of the thoughts that came to me. Brian Wren's words tell of a Spirit in the air; this weekend it was the Wild Goose.

(Photos show elements of the final service – the climax of the weekend.)



Let's meet ... Gill Elliott



For the first few years of my life we lived in South-East London. My father was the organist at Kensington Chapel (now Kensington URC), having been recommended for the job by Eric Routley. I was baptised by my grandfather, the Revd Reg Mansfield, at Chandler's Ford Congregational Church.

In the early 60s we moved to Malvern after my father got a job at what was then RRE (the Royal Radar Establishment). We had a four-storey house with a view of the Malvern Hills, and backing onto Malvern Common, which was idyllic. I could play outside with the boy next door, roaming around the common. At school I was taught about the colour wheel, and that for a picture to look nice, blue and green should not be next to each other. Ever sure of my own opinions, I thought about the green of the hills next to the blue of the sky and decided that was absolute nonsense, and drew my picture with blues and greens.

My father was the organist at Holly Mount Congregational Church, and my sister and I were in the choir. From time-to-time, Peter Cutts would come to visit, and he and my father would play duets he had written for organ and harmonium. He also wrote some music for my father. I was also in a children's choir called "The Young Music Makers" (an Elgar reference!). We sang in the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester, and I remember being a rat in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin".

I passed the 11+ and for a year took the train to Worcester Grammar School for Girls. The second week I was there, I saw a notice for an afterschool choir, and decided I would go. I assumed that the buses that took us from the school to the station would be there again an hour later, and was a bit dismayed when they were not. I rang home with the 2p in my purse belt, but dialled the wrong number! Luckily I got someone who knew my family, who rang my extremely worried mother, and she then arrived to pick me up.

A year later my father relocated to London, so we bought a newbuild house in Farnham. Unfortunately, as often happens, the builders ran late, so we arrived in Farnham with nowhere to live, and checked into a bed-and-breakfast. On the Sunday we went to the local Congregational church, where I told the junior church leader that we had nowhere to live! The Church Secretary and his wife promptly took us in, and we lived with them for the 6 weeks it took for the house to be ready.

At RRE in Malvern, from time to time there would be open days, which were in effect science fairs. I still have a piece of wood with my initials burned in by a very early laser. These inspired me to want to be a scientist. By the time I got to 16 I still had not narrowed down what sort of scientist, and my father suggested computers. In a rare instance of listening to my parents in my teens I decided that would be OK. I left school with one 'A' level, grade E in German, which was less than ideal. However, in February 1979 I started a job with the Ministry of Defence in West Byfleet as a Computer Operator in an era when a computer, rather less powerful than we now

have in our hands, would fill a room the size of the church, and a disc drive looked like a washing machine. On my first day at work, I asked about accommodation nearby. I was told that very morning Mrs Jordan had rung up offering her second bedroom. The occupant of the other bedroom, who worked in the library, would take me there and show me the place the next day. Reader, I married him.

The MoD liked to educate its staff, so I was sent to get an HNC in Computer Science on Day release. This was considerably easier than my 'A' levels, and I followed it with a retake of my 'A' level Maths. When considering what I might study next, I got a powerful feeling that I needed to say "yes" to something. I did not know what. It did not go away until I did say "yes", still unsure of what I was agreeing to. I went on an Enquirer's Weekend run by the URC, and it was clear that it was not a call to ministry then. I left it in the air and focussed on programming computers in Fortran.

We moved to St Albans in 1985 because Peter had got a job at the RAF Museum. We walked into Trinity and immediately felt at home, getting involved with worship-in-the-round, as so many did.

We had been gliding most Saturdays since 1982, and I continued to fly (but no longer solo!) until two weeks before Philip was born in 1988. However, we underestimated the effect of a new baby, so needed to stop for a while. I went back to work part time, but when Fiona came along in 1990 I decided it was time to stop. The childminder I had used for Philip decided to train to be a nurse, so I found myself looking after his children, and from there I became a registered childminder. I did this for 8 years until I decided it was time to return to computers.

I started by going to the University of Hertfordshire to do a degree in computer science. It was very interesting to find myself here as a person in my own right, rather than as a mother, Elder, wife etc. Also I found myself in a minority: I was old (40!), white, female, and shorter than most! In my placement year I joined a local firm as a tester, which was a new experience, and one I took to very readily. Towards the end of my degree my former boss rang me up to say that he had a job opportunity that was about to close, and he wanted me back at my desk on Monday - and my career as a software tester started! I tested software for various companies for 20 years until I retired recently. However, once a tester, always a tester, whether it's a fact, website, a recipe, or a button I have noticed - my first thought is what would happen if I do this?!

At various times I have enjoyed a solo parachute jump for charity, 30 minutes of aerobatics, roller coasters, Go Ape, a jump off the TV tower in Auckland, wing walking and a swing over Alexanderplatz in Berlin from the 40th floor of a hotel. Suggestions welcomed for my next activity!

Having taken services in various churches for many years with no real training at all, one of my retirement goals included a URC preaching course. The Assembly Accredited Lay Preaching course felt like the right thing to do, but the process to get on the course makes it feel more like a discernment process for lay leadership. I wonder if this is what I said "Yes" to all those years ago? What will happen as I do this?! Join me in this journey, if you would.



Let's meet.... ..Anne Goldsmith

I was born and brought up in Sittingbourne, Kent, with my two sisters. My Dad was a secondary RE teacher and my Mum a music teacher. We attended the local Methodist church, and later the Congregational church. My sisters and I sang together, first in local music festivals and later in Folk Clubs and we put on concerts to raise money for charity. I met my husband, Linton (then known as Goldie) when I was 15 when he gate-crashed my end of exams party!



We both went to Wall Hall College of Education, which later became part of the University of Hertfordshire, at the age of 18.

I studied music as my main subject and was fully immersed in the musical life of the college, singing and playing in folk bands, a jazz band and an avant-garde music and drama group who performed in a theatre in Amsterdam. It was a most wonderful and formative time for me.

When I qualified as a teacher I applied for a job as the Reception class teacher at St Adrian's Roman Catholic school in St Albans. I studied for my Bachelor of Education degree over 3 years whilst teaching full time – that was tough! After 9 years of class teaching in Reception and Year 5, and having had our son, David, I resigned my full-time post but went back to St Adrian's to teach class music, the recorder and guitar on a part-time basis where I stayed until my retirement in 2020. I also taught music part-time at St John Fisher school for 20 years. During my career I was chairman of the St. Albans Primary Schools' Music Association, helping to organise concerts at the Alban Arena over 3 nights involving about 1,000 children each year, and organising the Abbey Carol Service for up to 24 local primary schools. I was also a member of St Albans Chamber Choir for many years.

I started attending Homewood Road URC in 1990, when our children, David and Eleanor were aged 5 and 3. I was soon asked to conduct the church Junior Choir which had about 30 members in those days. We would meet each week before the main service to rehearse, and regularly sang in services, local music and drama festivals, and most memorably, Junior Church Festival services. As the number of children attending church declined, the Junior Choir became 'Morning Chorus', a singing group of women and children. By 2019, 'Morning Chorus' declined too, but in 2021 'Homewood Singers' was born, and seems to be going from strength to strength, with a current membership in excess of 30 men and women!

The 'dream team' of Helen G, Pauline, Norma and myself have been organising the Fun Mornings for children during school holidays for several years now, and this has been a joy, though quite tiring!

I became a member of Homewood Road Church in 2005, having tried to resist the commitment of membership for so long, but then became an Elder the year after, and have been ever since. I am grateful to the church, members and friends for practical and spiritual support and love over the years, and am happy to be making new friends now we are an amalgamated church.

Linton and I have 4 wonderful grandchildren, and we enjoy being with them and our amazing children whenever we can. We love spending time with the wider family as well as gardening, eating out, meeting friends, going to the theatre and cinema.

We are truly blessed with the lives we have and are forever grateful.

Homewood Charity Knitters

This year we completed and sent more than 40 scarves to the Separated Child Foundation and a supply of children's clothing to Verso Care.



Below is the reply they sent on their Facebook page:

Huge thanks to Anona and the Homewood

Charity Knitters of St Albans for this gorgeous selection of scarves received last week. It was such a pleasure to be able to include these in the arrival packs we created with @skyscanner, offering warmth and welcome to young refugees.

Being able to give hand made scarves makes a real difference. Thanks again to Homewood and to everyone knitting and crocheting for us this autumn.

The Separated Child Foundation

The Separated Child Foundation offers practical, emotional and social support to separated children and young people in Britain up to the age of 21. It also engages in educational activities that raise awareness of the needs of separated children and encourage positive responses to them.

Anona Morgan

Memory Café at Greenwood



Our Memory Café has been open once a month since May this year – It had a 'soft' opening – advertising mainly through the GP surgery. The activities are organized by two volunteers from the community, Pat and Judith, who previously worked with us to support the Asylum seekers housed at the Noke Hotel. Church members support them in making refreshments and chatting to our visitors. Since September we have been spreading the word more widely and the group is steadily growing. Those living with dementia and their carers are enjoying getting to know us and each other. The Christmas table decoration making that Pat organized for the final session this year was particularly enjoyed.

Greenwood News

by Anna Barrett

In early December Greenwood received a free hedgerow pack from the Hertfordshire County Councils 'Your Trees – Our Future' initiative. A small working party (Fiona Smith, Hilary Tyrrell and Ian and Anna Barrett) gathered one bright Wednesday morning to plant the 30 odd whips, mainly hawthorn with some hazel and field maple mixed in, that made up the pack.

Native hedgerows are one of the UK's most valuable wildlife habitats, and planting species like hazel, field maple and hawthorn brings immediate and long-lasting benefits. Because they are made of native trees and shrubs, hedgerows provide the food, shelter and breeding sites that local wildlife depends on.

Blossom from hawthorn and maple offers nectar for early pollinators, while hazel catkins support insects in late winter. Through the year, berries, nuts and seeds feed birds, small mammals and invertebrates. The dense structure of a mixed hedge creates safe nesting spaces and vital cover from predators.



Hedgerows also act as "green corridors," allowing species such as hedgehogs, voles and insects to move safely between habitats—crucial in a landscape increasingly fragmented by roads and development. Their roots stabilise soil, reduce erosion and help manage water runoff, improving the health of the wider ecosystem. The aim is to increase the length of this hedgerow annually and create other hedgerow sections when practical.

By planting a diverse, locally native hedge, the working party have created a living lifeline, benefitting countless species for decades to come. Next project is some 'dead hedging' to split

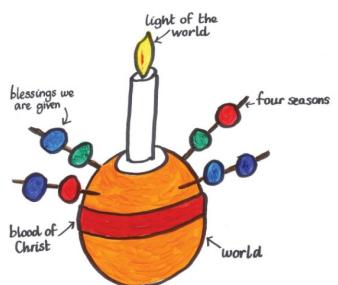
the wildflower meadow from grass area and to provide alternative habitats for wildlife.

At the start of Advent I was privileged again to be invited to lead a Christingle Service for the 1st Chiswell Green Brownies in aid of The Children's Society. I have done this regularly over the last 6 or 7 years, following the example of Maureen Pugh at Bricket Wood. Recently I have lit the candles from the Advent Crown (the hope candle) and, when talking about the significance of the orange, ask the girls what hopes they have for the world. This year's responses were particularly uplifting. I can't list them all here but they included:

- “Peace between Gaza and Israel”
- “That no one will live in poverty”
- “That everyone will have a home to live in”
- “That there will be an end to racism”

At times the future looks pretty bleak – but these feelings expressed by such young people gives a hope for their future, as surely, to have such hopes themselves is a first step to making them a reality.

Anna Barrett



Autumn Fun

Autumn Fun took place on the Thursday morning of October half-term. About 40 children with parents or carers enjoyed a great variety of craft activities such as decorating a biscuit to look like a pumpkin, making a scarecrow head from a paper plate, making a model hedgehog with clay and spaghetti and much, much more.

At the end of the session the children and carers went into church as usual to sing songs and listen to a prayer which they took home (plus a chocolate treat). This is the prayer:

Creator God, we give thanks to you
for the smell of Autumn leaves,
for the bright colours of berries and fruits,
for the brilliance of fireworks
and the blaze of fire,
for toasted marshmallows and jacket potatoes,
Thank you, Lord, for the joys of Autumn.

We praise you, Lord, for the miracle of trees...
how their roots reach deep down into the earth,
keeping them strong and firm as they stretch
upwards to the light.

Help us to be like tall trees,
keep us rooted in your love,
so we can stand strong and steady
in the storms of life.

Amen



More than £80 was raised for the Woodland Trust that morning. Thanks must go to the helpers and organisers for their continued commitment to this church outreach, which is most gratefully received and appreciated by all the children and carers. If you're interested in helping and joining in the fun of future Fun Mornings and haven't yet done so, please contact Helen G, Pauline, Norma or Anne G.

Harvest

Harvest Supper was enjoyed by a good number of church members and friends. A Christian Aid harvest appeal video was shown, and a very successful tombola organised by Jenny and Robert raised money for this appeal. We then had a delicious supper of locally sourced sausages, mash and veg, followed by home-made crumbles and custard. The kitchen helpers did an amazing job which was greatly appreciated by all.

The supper was followed by musical and dramatic entertainment, with John Steele in his usual role as MC. The evening concluded with a full-voiced sing-song.



Autumn Strollers



November Strollers, led by Hilary and Philip, was a very wet but cheerful walk around Ayot St Lawrence, with a well-earned lunch in the warmth of the Brocket Arms.

The October Strollers' walk, led by Pauline and David, was around Wheathampstead. Fudge Lovett (the dog) came along too. Lunch was enjoyed at The Swan.



John Rutter Concert at St Paul's Cathedral

The internationally renowned composer Sir John Rutter has been holding a series of concerts this year to celebrate his 80th birthday. A substantial group of church friends boarded a coach on 5th November and we made our way to St Paul's Cathedral to listen to a concert with Sir John holding the baton for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and London Bach Choir. They performed a couple of Rutter's substantial choral pieces, including a new composition *The Gift of Life*, a celebration of creation and life, as well as a symphony by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It was a privilege and delight to be surrounded by such amazing sounds in such an uplifting environment. Grateful thanks to Ray for organising the trip.



Remembrance Sunday Service

The Remembrance Sunday Service, led by the Worship Group, was one I shall remember for a long time. It was both reflective and informative, explaining the origins of the red, white and purple poppies worn at this time of year; we learnt about the role animals played during the wars, and the origin of the tradition of the *Last Post* and *Reveille* being played. The service was also very personal, with several church members recalling their own memories or those of family members.



The poppy wreath was later taken to the Cenotaph by St Peter's Church.

Knitted poppies made by members, and petals from the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall.



A drawing for Remembrance by our young friend, Duvanette Davies.

Centenarian Celebrations



In October **Olga Hopkins** celebrated her 100th birthday in the church hall with 100 friends and family.

And in December **Fergus Crawford** celebrated his 100th with his family in his own home and at his care home.

Many CONGRATULATIONS to both!



Carols Around the Tree



Our Christmas celebrations commenced with Carols Around the Tree, inside this year because of the rain. The carols were accompanied by piano, guitar, ukulele, flute, recorder, harmonica, cornet and some percussion. John introduced the carols with a quiz question. Mulled wine, mince pies and chat were enjoyed afterwards.



Keeping in touch with Palestine

by Hilary Tyrrell

St Albans URC has continued its involvement with the reality of life in Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank) through several events.

In August the church served as venue for a classical guitar concert by a freshly qualified young musician – Noah Layzell. He delivered the ‘Guitar for Gaza’ concert to a packed audience. The performance was enhanced by Noah’s image being projected so everyone could see him in closeup and admire his fingering and technique. After covering costs a large amount was raised for MAP (Medical Aid for Palestinians).

Speaking of MAP, we have all been helping Nick Brown raise money for the same cause via his Jam, Chutney and Marmalade stalls this year; the proceeds look like reaching £1,000 by Christmas.

In October, several of us heard Nawal, from a village near the West Bank city of Hebron, speak of her lifestyle and the embroidery co-operative she had founded, ‘Women in Hebron’. She had always valued the traditional cross stitch embroidery of Palestine; though it would not sell in her own small village, she realised there were enough tourists in Hebron to make a small shop viable. Now however with the collapse of the tourist trade she was coming to the UK to sell the women’s handiwork. The lunch time meeting at Fleetville drew a wide audience including many from Herts Asian Women’s Association, and the evening meeting was also well supported. Lots of embroidery sales were made. We have met Nawal once before, at Trinity Church just before the Covid shutdown; it was good to hear that her group is continuing under increased difficulties.



On 7 December, Methodist lay preacher Alison Driscoll spoke in our morning service about the charity ABCD, ‘Action around Bethlehem Children with Disability’. The theme for the morning was Hope, and she told of the hope that ABCD brings to West Bank families with disabled children. In the past she had been out on frequent field trips to the clinics in refugee camps – Nur Shams, Jalazone, Aida and Arroub. She told the story of ‘Ayesha’, a toddler with double leg amputation who had been helped to walk with prosthetics and enabled to safely access her house on the steeply inclined alleys of the camp. As an adult, ‘Ayesha’ was now working as a teacher for special needs children. Alison noted the difficult conditions of the last two years (since October 2023) due to the Israeli Army (IDF) attacks on the camps, disrupting their clinics; she herself had not been able to visit. She outlined the ways that ABCD could help – Occupational therapy, Speech therapy, outreach Ophthalmology, Music therapy, Play therapy, a Sensory Room, and provision of wheelchairs; over 3 million children will have been helped when ABCD reaches its 40 year mark in 2026. This might sound like a long catalogue of good works, but Alison’s closing words are important: “It has been a real privilege to work with our Palestinian sisters and brothers ... I’ve learned so much from the Palestinian people – lessons of dignity, humility, hospitality and hope. These disadvantaged families have taught me how, contrary to my assumptions, Grace flows from the Have-nots to the Haves”. Alison was warmly applauded and went on after the service to sell craft items made in Bethlehem and answer more questions about the charity. Thanks to all who bought from the stall or generously donated to ABCD.

A final connection (literally) on the evening of Sunday 7 December was to gather at Homewood to join the online URC congregation 'YourChurch' in their Zoom service with the Evangelical Christian Church in Bethlehem. We were addressed by the pastor and saw film of a visit to the South Hebron Hills reminding us of the difficulties there due to house demolitions carried out by the Israeli authorities. This, combined with the encouragement of illegal settlements and outposts, poses an enormous threat to the traditional rural shepherding and herding communities – as depicted in the film 'No Other Land'.

Hilary Paton asked us to carry this poem about the still, small voice in a strident world.

The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

Yehuda Amichai

Translated from the Hebrew by Stephen Mitchell

Published in *Essential Poems from the Staying Alive Trilogy*

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December Strollers

We are pictured at lunch at the King Harry pub after a splendid five-mile walk around St Albans, led by Ray Fraser, who was well versed with some history we had never heard before. We arrived rather wet but in very good spirits. A splendid outing!



Holiday highlights by Jenny Hill

In June we went to the Peloponnese in Greece to a small village called Koroni. On top of the hill above the village is an ancient monastery run by nuns - a cool retreat with peaceful grounds and stunning views. Craig took some photos of Hoopoes in the grounds.



One day I was lucky to see a turtle eating fish a fisherman threw in for him. I knew some young people were staying in a campsite, who were involved in a Greek charity to help support the turtles by finding any new

nests along the beach at the crack of dawn and marking them, so people are aware not to disturb them. I showed them my pictures of the turtles' location and then sponsored a turtle which is now named Jennifer!



In September we went to the folk festival in Swanage. As well as music, colourful Morris dancers from all over the country parade along the seafront, which ends with them going in the sea to dance. We also had a lovely walk to



the old Harry rocks.

In October we took a last-minute trip to Crete to revisit some places we enjoyed in the past. One of those places was Preveli Monastery - a beautiful working monastery where monks sheltered Allied soldiers during World War 2. Then they helped them escape to Egypt in submarines.



I went into the ancient chapel and asked the monk to pray for Gaza and Palestine, then he looked at me and said 'cross'. We walked to a locked cabinet and he took out an ancient cross. He pointed

to the crystal embedded in the stem. So I touched it and we both stood quietly and prayed. I felt very honoured.

I asked about the cross in their museum. It had been given to Abbot Effraim when he went to Constantinople to seek forgiveness after killing a Turk. The chief priest forgave him and said the cross is for healing. It was carried in the front line of battles, lost and returned in 1823. Then it was taken by the Germans during the War. It didn't leave the island, as the plane was unable to take off. It was put on a second plane but that



too couldn't take off. I wasn't allowed to take a photo, but found a postcard of it. Holidays do hold special unexpected moments - little treasures and gifts from God. I'm sure many of you understand and can think of a few - not necessarily away on holiday, just unexpected treasures that we see in nature, or in others around us.

St Albans URC Preaching Plan 2026

Version

1.2

Date		At Homewood Road morning 10.30 unless otherwise shown.	At Greenwood	At Homewood Road - Evening/ Afternoon 18.30 unless shown	
Jan 2026	4	Martyn Macphee (HC)		X	
	11	Worship Group, led by Gill Elliott	Rev'd Robert Fletcher	X	
	18	David Jonathan Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Candle exchange	Cameron Varley	Service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at 3.30 pm at St Bartholomew's RC Church.	
	25	candidate preaching with a view		X	
Feb	1	Rev'd Simon Carver (HC)	Harry Smith	X	
	8	Worship Group, led by Helen Griffiths	Cathy Williamson	X	
	15	First Sunday in Lent Gill Elliott	Rev'd David Ronco	HC	Sheila Knopp
	22	Stephen De Silva	Rev'd John Churcher	X	
Mar	1	Welsh Service Mike Findley (HC)	Steven Poxon	X	
	8	Worship Group, led by Sheila Knopp	David Burden	X	
	15	Mothering Sunday Homewood Singers	Sheila Knopp	HC	Gill Elliott
	22	Parade Service Geoff Sutton	Rev'd Simon Carver	X	
	29	Palm Sunday The Rev'd Maggie Hindley	joint at Homewood	X	
Apr	2	Maundy Thursday			
	3	Good Friday		Unity At The Cross at St Albans Cathedral, 8pm	
	4	Easter Saturday Meditative Vigil Ray Fraser			
	5	Easter Sunday Gill Elliott (HC)			
	12	Worship Group, led by David Martin	Rev'd John Steele		
	19	Adrian Whalley	Mike Findley	HC	Mike Findley
	26	Mike Bramwell	David Jonathan		

HC = Holy Communion; Gray sections indicate school holidays and half-terms

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Homewood Road site: **Homewood Road, St. Albans, AL1 4BH**

Current Trustee Elders		
Elizabeth Barrett	Helen Griffiths	Lesley King
Gill Elliott	Anne Goldsmith	Sheila Knopp
Ray Fraser	Jenny Hawkins	David Martin
	Mike Findley	Philip Nixon

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