

Celebrating heritage

Jo Williams presents a range of ideas for exploring your local cloud of witnesses

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Hebrews 12.1

Introduction

The Hebrews passages set for the beginning of August are rich in imagery of the forerunners of our faith. Stories of Abraham, Moses, the judges and the prophets; stories to reassure, inspire and challenge; and it is precisely for that reason that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews calls them to mind. He effectively says to us: 'Look at all those who have carried this faith before you. Through all their struggles with life they did not grow disheartened or give up. They were faithful to God and God was faithful to them.' These are words of encouragement and blessing. We share this same heritage of faith. The stories of the prophets and the patriarchs are for us too but they are not the only stories of our faith. During 2,000 years of Christian history, millions of people have kept the faith, preserved it and delivered it afresh to the next generation. When we remember the 'great cloud of witnesses' we should add their number to the throng. When was the last time you celebrated the faith heritage of your congregation – the stories of those who have passed on the faith through history and into our generation?

Here is a range of ideas for celebrating the people who make up the cloud of witnesses in your church. These can be used as part of your worship during August or as a longer-term project.

Celebrate!

The Mossi people of Burkina Faso have a beautiful tradition of whispering the entire list of a child's ancestors to them as a lullaby when they are born. It is a wonderful thing to celebrate who you are and how you came to be. This is what the writer of the Hebrews intends for us. Enjoy the celebration!

Cloudy church

Create a cloud of witness display. Take photos of all the members of your congregation. Print or write out Hebrews 12.1 and display the photos around it. Include members who are children and any that cannot often attend. (Be sure to seek permission before displaying photographs as these count as personal data for the purposes of the Data Protection Act.)

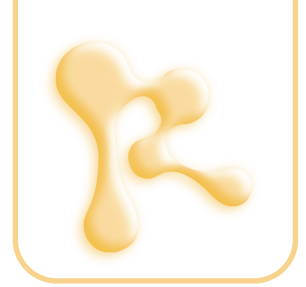
Think about the ways in which your church is and has been a cloud of witness to your local community.

- Research the history of your church.
- How old is it?
- Who founded it?
- What activities has it been involved in over the course of its history?

If your church has a list of benefactors, this can be a good place to start.

Appeal for old photos connected to the church. Even relatively young churches usually have a photographic history of their life together. Put up a display. Involve your local schools or community groups or make this part of a holiday activity week. Schools are often delighted to take part in local history projects and children are fascinated by 'the way we used to live'. Use children's drawing and writing in your display. Helping the young to understand why the church is here and who we are is a crucial part of passing on the baton of faith to the next generation. It has been said that it takes only two generations to de-Christianise a nation (*Unfinished Business* – see *Resources*). Celebrating heritage is a great way to open up the church to the future whilst honouring the past.





Changemakers

Throughout the centuries Christians have been involved in social and political change. Education for the poor, the hospice movement, and the abolition of the slave trade were all initiatives led and fuelled by churches and Christians. Are there people in the history of your church who have achieved great things? People who have worked tirelessly and selflessly for others? People who have worked in education or healthcare? Who are the people in your current congregation whose lives mirror Christ's love for others and hold up an example to us all? You could invite them to speak about their work.

How has your church engaged in the life of your community? Through education, childcare and health and social care, churches have helped to structure the community life of this country. Write a play about your local area and the ways in which your church has been involved in community life. Make it into a musical! Invite local school children or an amateur dramatics group to perform it.

Ordinary extraordinary

Celebrate the ordinary! When we think of saints we think of those people whose lives and faith were extraordinary, but we are all called to be part of the community of faith and to the great commission to share the gospel through our words and actions. Celebrate the countless faithful Christians who have lived out and passed on the gospel. When one church in East London did this, they discovered that many people had extraordinary stories of hope and faith in the ordinariness of life to share.

Some church traditions regularly offer opportunities for people to share their testimony and speak about what God has done in their life. If your church is not of this tradition, why not consider asking members of the congregation to speak or prepare a talk on their faith journey.

Great words

Publish a book! Invite all members of your congregation to share their stories of faith. Whether in a few paragraphs or a few pages, when we share our faith stories we learn to value the journeys of others and gain sustenance for our own journey.

Where did your church come from? Many churches were originally planted by established congregations in their area, others by churches from abroad. Who are the people who in faith started a new church in this place? Remember, even young churches have a history to celebrate.

Journey in time

Organise a pilgrimage to your local cathedral or abbey. Many of these will be able to organise tours or special services for you and some have extra facilities for children and educational groups. Thank God for the Christian communities in your area. You could also focus on the history of the Church in England by paying a visit to Canterbury Cathedral.

Much of what we take for granted in modern church life we owe to the witness of our faith ancestors. Consider the lives of Bede, Wycliffe, Caxton and Tyndale whose dedication in bringing the Bible to the ordinary people in a language they could read transformed Christianity. We have much to celebrate and much to be grateful for. It is right that we should remember who we are and where we come from. I'm reminded of the Disney film, *The Lion King*, when Simba, mistakenly believing he is responsible for his father's death, is living almost as an outlaw. He had forgotten himself and who he must be when he has a vision of his father saying, 'Remember who you are.' Identity is a powerful thing.



Resources

Film

The Lion King, Walt Disney Home Video, DVD, 2003, U rating. See chapter 19.

Books

Consultative Group on Ministry among Children (CGMC), *Unfinished Business*, CTBI Publications, undated, ISBN 0851692354.

Websites

www.cgmcontheweb.com/publications.htm.

www.dayone.co.uk/ad/book1.htm has an on-line book about how Christians have influenced social thought and action in Britain, from St Columba to Lord Denning. The Local Heritage Initiative, www.lhi.or.uk, is a useful resource for local projects.

www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/Mossi.html.

www.williamtyndale.com includes a history of the English Bible.