

Celebrating 25 years of ministry by Revd Simon Helme at Dursley Tabernacle

18th January 2026

Sermon

25 years ago, 13th January 2001 I was inducted into this pastorate – then the Tab, Quarry and Sharpness (always sounds painful being inducted, like a torture procedure – or you could put a positive spin on it and compare it to heat and electricity being inducted - I guess it depends on what happens next!).

In our house that day reminds us more about the insensitivity of my brother. God rest his soul. He had come down for the induction with my mother and three other relatives. They were staying in a Travelodge near Stonehouse. That Saturday evening after the service they had got a taxi and gone into Stonehouse to have a drink. Ten pints later and the worse for wear my brother loses track of time and rings Debbie and I up at 11pm saying they can't get a taxi home could we come out and pick them up. I've had a drink but Debbie 36 weeks pregnant hasn't. There is a bit of a standoff (a euphemism as you can imagine!) eventually she agrees to go and get him. She can hardly get her baby bump under the steering wheel of the car. I go with her to help (her parents are staying with us so they look after Jo and Libby) To make matters worse we can't get them all in the car so we have to make two trips. Its 1.30am before we get home and I have to get up and lead my first service here at the Tab. Eventful.

It's been eventful ever since.

I didn't think it would be. When I first came to look round and be interviewed it seemed a daunting prospect, taking on three churches, all quite elderly and formal (this was the day when the gentlemen came to church in their Sunday best, suit and tie), and this place I just thought there's a lot of buildings. I am going to be sucked into perpetual fundraising to keep the roof from falling in. But we moved because, to be honest, Debbie was pregnant and we needed some help; we needed to be closer to grandparents and in the narrow time span between finding out she was pregnant, finding a new church, giving three months' notice at my present church in Warrington and moving, beggars couldn't be choosy. I thought give it three or four years and we will move on.

25 years later you still can't get rid of me. It's been a privilege in that time to preside over important personal days for many of you, from baptisms to weddings to funerals. I have done over 100 funerals of church members alone – most of the church I inherited sadly are no longer with us. But I have been reminded time and time again of the hope we have in the resurrection of Jesus.

I remember one woman who told me about when her father was lying in hospital at the end of his life. Her brother was with him by his bedside reading his bible. She had gone

home for a rest. The doorbell rang and as she looked out of the window, she saw two men in suits carrying bibles. She thought I don't want to talk to Jehovah's Witnesses (not that they said they were – they could have been angels?) so she asked them to go. But they said to her they had a special bible verse for her from the book of Psalms. That God was a father to the fatherless (Psalm 68).

At the very same moment her brother was reading the same verse in hospital at the same time their father breathed his last. It was a great comfort to her in coping with her grief. God holds on to us and is ever present in all walks of life. People may come and go but God is ever present.

I could spend all day sharing with you stories of pastoral encounters, people and events. Some sad some strange and some hilarious.

There was a funeral I did of a mechanic and inventor who insisted he was cremated in his work overalls. As I came out of the crematorium his friends were laughing. I said what's the joke lads. They said did I know that his overalls were fire proof?

Then there was another funeral where the daughter wanted to read a poem about her deceased father. She said it reflected his sense of humour. It was all about his willy and how in his old age it didn't function as it once did. I thought this is inappropriate at a funeral but she insisted that people would appreciate it and it was his sense of humour.

Come the point in the funeral I say the daughter is now going to read a poem in memory of her father and she starts to blub and says she can't do it. I turn to the brother who likewise starts to blub and shakes his head, stands up and gives me the poem to read. I read the willy poem. All dignity is shredded. The things you do in ministry.

I could go on but I want to tell the story of the journey we went on together as a church these last 25 years.

In those first couple of years I initiated a few things that would set the template for the next 25 years.

The first thing I did was to start a prayer meeting on Tuesday morning. It's still going and it was more than poignant to celebrate my 25th anniversary on Tuesday by starting it at the prayer meeting.

I said we need to pray for growth and revival. Only God can bring growth. We need to ask God for purpose and provision – who will join me in prayer for that? Four older ladies turned up. Joan Kingham, Peggy Tresise, Eileen Denning and Lilian King. Never underestimate the power of old ladies. They said to me we don't have the energy to run stuff (although Joan had more energy than people half her age) but we can pray. I said

that is vital. Pray for God to be at work. Bang on the door of heaven and remind the almighty we are still here and want things to happen.

The life of the church has been covered in prayer since then. We have brought requests after request and can testify to God's faithfulness and mystery. Because not all those prayers have been answered as we would have liked. Like any request you can answer by saying yes, no, not yet. But I do know that if you don't ask you don't get. If you don't seek you may not find a way forward. If you don't knock the door isn't opened.

Faith is not so much an intellectual exercise – 'I can't believe this', 'this offends my rational self' - as if we are all rational beings (yeah sure!) ... as much as trust, even when it doesn't seem logical. Dietrich Bonhoeffer the great German theologian who opposed Hitler in the War and paid with his life, said that the purpose of theology, that is the rational thinking about God, is to keep the mystery of God a mystery.

We explored the healing ministry. We had some members who had received healing and shared with us, and we worked through some of those difficult issues over whether God heals today and how and what about those who don't get answers to their prayers. We developed a prayer team that offered prayer for people on Sunday mornings and at other times as requested. There has been some remarkable ministry.

I remember one woman who had been diagnosed with life threatening cancer asking us to pray for us. We set aside a special time one evening and about half a dozen people gathered round her in church and we shared communion and spent time being open to God and what the Holy Spirit wanted to say and do. I was given a picture from Indiana Jones of all things- sounds bizarre but stay with me. If you have seen the film The Raiders of the Lost Ark remember when he falls down a large cavern, it's all dark but in the little light he has he senses the floor is moving and wriggling. He lights a torch and finds that the floor is full of snakes. But he uses the flame of the torch to push back the snakes and escape. I sensed the Lord was saying as we pray for the fire of the Holy Spirit to be poured into your life the light of God will push back this deadly disease. A few weeks later when she went for a check-up the tumours had disappeared and she was cancer free.

On another occasion a mother came to us distressed that her son was not sleeping at night and that he had seen apparitions of dark figures in his bedroom and he didn't feel safe. A few of us prayed and sensed some evil involvement. The word Trespass was given to us in prayer. When we went round to the house to pray in each room and bring God's presence and blessing there the mother confessed that she had a friend who was

a witch and had given her some crystals a few weeks ago. She took them out and destroyed them there and then. As we went to the boy's bedroom on the door was a sign. 'Danger No trespasses allowed, or you will die'. We prayed with the boy, and he tells the dark figures to go away and that he only wants Jesus here. He puts up a cross on his door and takes down the trespass sign. In the weeks that follow the boy is sleeping fine and said he no longer hears 'whispering in the house'.

There is power in the name of Jesus. Jesus is Lord. He is the boss. Don't mess with other stuff. Go to the one who saves.

I could go on – but just to say, we are not a social club. It's great to come and meet people and do stuff for the community and be inspired and be made to reflect on life and what it is all about. But being a Christian is first and foremost a relationship with Jesus. It should blow your socks off. It's a spiritual thing. Its life's greatest adventure - it goes to the height and depth of life below the surface of life's routines and pleasures. It is mystery and awe and wonder. Are you up for it? Are you in or not. Do you want to keep on the surface of life or willing to peek below into the depths? Prayer is the oxygen of faith – how you relate to God.

So, the second thing I did in my first year was to hold an Alpha Course. I had been doing them at my previous church in Warrington and despite some reservations about its style and content I have found it to be a positive and useful tool to allow people to start to consider the life of faith in Christ. It provides a positive input that leads to discussion, where people can bring their questions and doubts and experiences, good or bad, but you have something to work with and a direction forward.

It also contains some wonderful stories and testimonies that inspire and hopefully makes you want to say – 'I want some of that in my life'.

Most importantly for this church it was a way to help people articulate their faith. Some commented to me that they had been coming to the church for sixty years and no one had sat them down and said what do you believe and how would you tell others about your faith.

It is always important to be running such enquirers courses and offering to the community a chance to explore for themselves what the Christian faith offers. They ain't going to know unless someone tells them. Evangelism is so often a dirty word in the church – we don't want to impose our faith, or bible bash or any other excuse we can find for not sharing our faith. The consequence is that churches grow old and die. No one comes to faith. Your children drift off into the great secular society.

What most churches need is people – but people don't come to church these days out of convention – because it's what everyone does to be respectable – as maybe they did

a couple of generations ago. They are only going to go to church out of conviction. Like in the gospels where people turn away from Jesus and wander off for an easier life, but some people stay with him and he asks them why they are following him – they reply – ‘because you have the words of eternal life...’

The Holy Spirit is at work – nudging people, opening their eyes, drawing them out of curiosity to find out more. The gospel reading for today has Jesus walking past two would be disciples and they ask where he is staying. Jesus says ‘Come and see’ – they come and see and continue following him for the rest of their lives.

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter^[6]).

You get a new identity, a new purpose, a new calling when you find Jesus. Or rather when Jesus finds you. It’s the greatest adventure.

We need to set our churches up not to apologise for that but to promote that and to offer that invitation and challenge to the world – obviously in a sensitive and non oppressive way - but sharing our faith in word and deed is what we are about.

I remember a young woman getting in touch with me. She was about to set up a holistic therapy but for some reasons she decided to google what the bible had to say about that. She was disturbed to find that the Bible is very critical about practices that don’t trust God. She wanted to know more and so she came on a Alpha Course. She engaged deeply with the sessions. Looking at who Jesus was and what he did and how to know him, how to pray, read your bible, find guidance and healing and she had a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit.

She came to faith and then wanted to be baptised. We had just invested in the inflatable birthing pool in which to do full immersion baptism. We had learnt from the first baptism not to fill it too full because of the physics of displacement – our first baptism had a bit of a tsunami on the front row. Any way the baptism was in the middle of winter and despite putting an urn full of hot water in the pool the water was really cold.

Now, she was a bit of a rough diamond and had had quite a life up to that point and she saw baptism as a chance to make a clean start and for God to wash away all the demons of the past. But as she got into this pool of cold water she said ‘Fuck’. The congregation gasped hearing such an expletive in church.

I said when we come to Christ justification happens immediately, but sanctification takes time. God loves us and we realise that love when the light goes on and we come to faith, but it takes time for that knowledge of love and acceptance to change our lives.

We have had many more wonderful testimonies of faith shared over the years and developing the open mike, encouraging new members to give their stories, has only made talking about faith ordinary and encouraging for us all. We have good news to share.

The third thing that happen in that first year was that I started a youth group. There were hardly any young people connected to the Tab when I arrived. Yet I knew this church had a long history of working with children and young people – we set up one of the first ever Sunday Schools back in 1770 - folk in the church 25 years ago would get all nostalgic about how the Sunday School was important. But the reality that I inherited was that children and young people were not engaging in church.

I asked the grandparents to put me in touch with their grandchildren. I got David John to help me as another adult and we started something that gave young people a chance to get together have fun and explore faith. It was the start of a sea change. As soon as we had a viable youth work we found the church became more attractive to families as parents, even though they had small children, would aspire to them going to the youth group when they got older. There is nothing like parental angst about their children and how they are going to turn out and the company they get and the influences they will be exposed to, to make the case for them to consider what the church could offer.

Funky Friday helped families have fun together, summer bible holiday clubs, Church weekends, church holidays, youth camps, youth trips, teams of young people going off to do mission work in Nicaragua and encountering the desperate needs of the world's poor, have all given valuable life experiences and challenges to the young people who have crossed our path. Long may it continue.

Youth work is so important, and it was magnificent that we managed to change the old Parsonage where I used to live into the Vibe Youth Centre. Youth Work plays such a vital part in helping young people work through important developmental issues and their identities and values. It's been a responsibility and a hassle looking after the Vibe, but I also hope we can see the bigger picture that it makes a difference to the town.

As we attracted more people we were able to consider doing more as a church. We already had the wonderful Open-Door Club that had won a community award a few years before I turned up. How could we put faith into action. I remember John Heslop, then on the eldership, getting quite irate when people were saying charity should begin at home and we needed to look after our own needs first. He said if Dursley Tabernacle was to close tomorrow would the people of Dursley miss us? It helped to shape our Mission statement 18 years ago ... 'making a difference'.

When I first became Convenor of Churches Together, something I have done four times since I've been here, we did bible studies on peace making. From those bible studies we asked the question 'so what?' What is the Lord telling us... From that discernment the

Child Contact Centre was set up, to offer a neutral venue for separating parents who had a difficult relationship, to keep in touch with their children. That work continues today.

The next time I was convenor was after the financial crash of 2008 and we were concerned at those who had lost jobs and the impact of the recession. Foodbanks had just started in some parts of the country. I got approached by Will Mansell and Brian Oosthuysen from Rodborough Tabernacle to consider whether we could work together to start a Foodbank in the Stroud area. I said is this just about collecting tins of beans to give away. They reassured me that it was much more. This was fighting poverty and the causes of poverty. Work which sadly still goes on today but which the churches have had a high-profile role and a political role. It was great to work together with other churches on those projects – very powerful when churches work together in unity.

I haven't been shy of getting involved in politics because I do believe our faith is not private but has outworkings – how we want the world to be. But I well know people have different opinions and so if you have a pop at political issues be prepared for people to have a pop back.

We have campaigned against the closure of Dursley Training Unit for adults with learning disabilities, supported numerous Christian Aid campaigns from Making Poverty History to Climate Change to the plight of the Palestinians, to lobbying our MP on Fairtrade and Assisted Dying. How does our faith make a difference? We may come to different answers but the question is there to make us think through how we act as followers of Jesus.

This church has continued to step forward to make a difference. From Connect At working with young people on the autism spectrum, to Communita offering a space for carers and those they care for to find friendship and a good afternoon out, to the Food Hub helping those who are struggling in our community and creating community.

All of that has involved sacrifice. My final point. It takes the sacrifice of time and energy to run all those things, a commitment to the cause and to the people. I have merely encouraged and stood on the touchline cheering you all on. You do great things. You are fantastic.

There have been challenges. In the early days I wondered whether the church would be up for the fight. Often the acid test of people's good intentions is whether they back it with their own money. Talk is cheap. Actions and especially people's hard-earned cash is the acid test.

A couple of years into my ministry here I realised that if the church had a future not only did we need to attend to growing the church in numbers and making the average age

younger, we also needed money and the need to upgrade our old and inaccessible buildings. The first test was making this access project – converting the Parsonage Garage into a reception room allowing an access ramp into church. Malcom Harris and Ken Fullard did a great job in applying for grants but we were still £30K short. Would we cancel the plan because we didn't have the money or would we ask the church membership to give the difference. There was only 90 members back in 2002 most of whom were retired and on a pension. Would they really put their money where their mouth was?

We have spent over a million pounds, when adjusted for inflation, on these buildings over the last 25 years. God's provision has been miraculous in that we have always got what we needed, not necessarily what we wanted, but what we needed after committing to pray and discernment. Faith is like a muscle, as we have exercised it as a church we have grown stronger and more confident in God's provision, not giving in to fear and worry, 'will we have enough?' – but trust – if God calls, God provides...

I do believe God honours sacrifice. There often is no gain without pain, no glory with sacrifice. Do you really mean it – does this really matter – show the sacrifice. Count the cost. As Jesus said, those who want to save their lives will lose them but those who lose their lives for me will save them.

I remember we had spent about £100k refurbishing this church for the Bicentenary, taking the pews out and purchasing these lovely chairs – chosen because they had the widest seats with the deepest cushions – feel the quality. Within a year a suggestion came to start a family café - using the greater flexibility of the sanctuary to have a café where parents could come and meet others and bring their babies and toddlers. Would we risk these precious expensive new chairs for babies and toddlers crawling over them with their sticky hands and smelly nappies?

I remember the church meeting to decide on the proposal. One of our older members stood up and said, 'when I was a mother, we didn't bring babies and toddlers to church because they couldn't behave and it was an embarrassment. We waited until they were at school and had learnt some discipline.'

I thought oh oh here we go...

She continued... 'I think that was wrong. I would rather have noisy and messy children in church than no children at all. We should start this family café.'

And it continues to this day.

Sacrifices have been made, not just in time and energy and money but also in personal beliefs and preferences. We have had difficult issues during my time. Deciding to take out the pews, taking the stage away, debates about music, contemporary music drums

guitars electric keyboards, and organ music, differences of opinion on same sex marriage. It's been painful for those who felt church meeting didn't agree with them. It called for sacrifices to be made for the sake of unity and a broad tolerant love, that says well it may not bless me, but it is blessing others, and I may be wrong, but perhaps love is the bigger picture, not who's right or wrong.

Prayer, sharing faith, putting faith in action and making sacrifices – all things that I and we have done in the last 25 years of following Jesus together in this place. May the love of God continue to seep into us and ooze through us and provide refreshment and hope for those in our community.

Our Mission Statement:

Inspired by Jesus, walking his way of radical love, making a difference to our world.