



Alive

By Esther Parker

It's a good sign when 700 women are prepared to give up their Saturday morning to be fed from the Word of God; even more encouraging when you add in those who couldn't get a ticket because numbers in the hall had to be restricted due to renovation work.

The title for the conference on 9th September 2017 in Assembly Buildings was *Alive*, a reminder that before we can *Grow and bear fruit* (the PW theme for 2017-18) we must be alive in Christ and that those who have been made alive in Christ must live in and through Him. Our Bible teacher for both sessions was Cindy Bennett Brown, a lecturer at Belfast Bible College with a God-given ability to very clearly present the message of the Word of God out of the storehouse of all her academic ability and knowledge with very practical application to our lives. At the beginning of the conference Cindy was interviewed by Pauline Kennedy, Women's Ministry and PW Development Officer, and we heard something of Cindy's life journey from the USA to Northern Ireland via Europe and Canada.

In the course of Cindy's talks, we would begin with the big picture, then narrow the focus and then widen the perspective again. Our study was focused on the book of Ephesians, giving us plenty of scope for deeper, personal study, taking off from the launching pad of the morning's teaching.

We began by looking at part of Ephesians 1 and the long list of spiritual blessings richly lavished by God upon His people, which will one day culminate in the uniting of all things in Christ to the praise of His glory. Cindy suggested that God's blessings are like the murmuration of starlings that happens daily above the bridge at Belfast's Central Station, a marvel of creation ignored by the vast majority of the people passing by. Sometimes one starling might break away and make its presence known by swooping close to someone's head, just like we might take note of a particular blessing in our own lives, but we often fail to see the big picture of the *murmuration* of God's blessings.

To help us see the big picture, Cindy's objective was to shift our thinking about being alive in Christ from the purely personal (the narrow perspective) to the communal (the wider perspective), because Christians need each other in order to grow to maturity.

In the first session, we considered the paradox that life in Christ is *both* cosmic *and* intimate. This life is cosmic; we are alive in the heavenly realms with Christ as well as in our own locality where we need to intentionally live out of the spiritual wealth that is ours in Christ. We live in cosmic time - we were chosen before time, we possess redemption in the present, and in the future all things will be brought together under Christ. We have a cosmic Christ - His dominion over all things is the objective of God's entire project. Everything is cosmic - all things will be united in Him to restore, not just our fractured lives, but everything (the cosmos). God's plan is for the entire created order, not just for us.

The focus narrowed as we thought about our life in Christ that is intimate. We have life because of God's personal action: we were chosen by God, predestined, marked with the Holy Spirit. Paul prays (1:15-23) that the Ephesians would know God, know the hope to which they had been called and know the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe. What we know and believe determines how we act; we need to know the Father more and more deeply through His Word and live in His power.

In the second session, we looked at the paradox that life in Christ is a gift *and* must be worked out in communal obedience. At creation, God established the stage on which to exhibit His love. Christ's life - including His death and resurrection - is the pivot on which all of God's plan turns. Through Christ, God continues to create His church, and His people are to actively engage in the work God is doing.

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We receive the gift of life in Christ and then we work it out within the church as we respond to Christ's work in us by obeying Him together. Everything we do in life, as individuals and as the body of Christ, should be for the display of God's glory - and that includes women's ministry.

This life in Christ is a gift. We were spiritually dead in sin, now we are alive in Christ and near to God, rather than separated from Him by a wall of division. We have been saved by grace, but we must work out our salvation in the present as we grow and bear fruit (Ephesians 2:9,10), and live in anticipation of the completion of our salvation when we will see Jesus face to face and when all things will be well.

However, this life is also communal obedience. We cannot have Christ without the church. We are fellow citizens (2:19). The church is a community with Jesus as the head and we need to live together according to His teaching. Our life needs to balance with the salvation we have received, to be worthy of it (see Ephesians 4). We need habits of holiness, which require effort, and we need grace which is given to us for growing up into the full measure of the fulness of Christ.

The reconciled community that the church should be is the means by which the world sees the Gospel and is drawn in to hear the Word. So, let's pray for each other and encourage one another on to maturity and unity in Christ.

We can encourage others by noting a job well done, so we express our appreciation to: Karen Campbell and the musicians, who led us in times of praise and reflection; the caterers for the very welcome tea, coffee and scones; the volunteers who helped in practical ways on the day; the staff who organised so much beforehand and ensured that all the details were attended to so that those present could focus on being taught from God's Word and on worshipping Him in a safe and beautiful environment.

Let's also encourage our church communities. Pauline Kennedy challenged us to *Start the Conversation* about women's ministry in our congregations, not just *what* it is but *why* we do it in whatever form it takes. We all had plenty to say about that when we were given the opportunity to have a quick chat with our neighbours! Encourage your minister, elders, PW Group and others to watch the short, thought-provoking DVD produced by the Women's Strategy and Coordination Committee. All PCI ministers and PW Secretaries have been sent a copy.

Above all, let's remember the big picture from Ephesians as Cindy explained it, "God's big plan for the universe, that comes to me in an intimate invitation that I receive as God makes me His child, to send me out into community in the church, for the purpose of the world, that they might see Christ."

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