

Living Upside Down 5

FOUR SESSIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

The Plygain Tradition
– a gift from Wales

RESOURCES REQUIRED:

- A safe, welcoming space to meet.
- Refreshments to keep the spirits up.
- Someone prepared to lead each session (you could take it in turns).
- At least one Bible but preferably a number of different translations.
- A willingness to share openly and honestly.

Setting up a small group for the first time?


The Methodist Church believes that meeting in small groups is a great way to support each other on our individual journeys of faith. We believe no one should have to travel alone. However, we are aware that forming a small group for the first time can be a bit daunting. To offer you some suggestions we have produced three short films under the title *Journeying Together* to help you think through the 'How and Why of Small Groups.' You can either send for a free DVD by emailing help@meetpraylove.co.uk or download from the MeetPrayLove website www.meetpraylove.co.uk ('Starting a Group').

We believe that, with support, anyone can form and lead a small group in an engaging and fruitful way. And we are convinced that what comes out of your discussions will be life changing.

We hope you find the following four sessions helpful – let us know how they go by providing feedback on the website. On the website you'll find:

- More free materials for small group discussion
- Opportunity to link your groups to other MeetPrayLove groups
- Opportunities to share your ideas with other groups

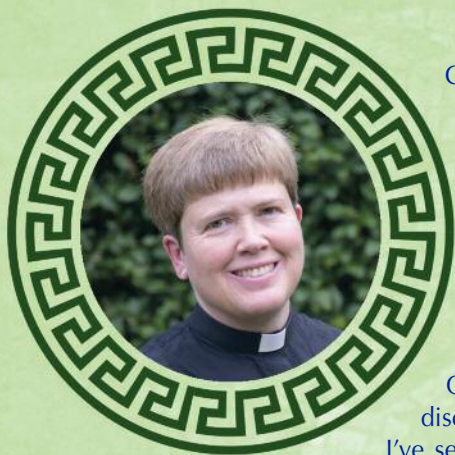
Members of the Methodist Church in Scotland are exploring the idea of MeetPrayLove as a starting point for small groups. Groups come in all sizes and shapes, from established Bible study groups connected with formal churches to pairs or threesomes who meet in a coffee shop to talk through issues of faith. All are welcome.



Sally Robertson

help@meetpraylove.co.uk
www.meetpraylove.co.uk





Greetings from Wales to friends everywhere. We are delighted to have this opportunity to reflect on the tradition of the plygain, familiar to us in Wales but less so around the world and across the rest of the United Kingdom.

One of the joys of my life has been to discover the Welsh language and culture as I've served in Wales. In my first appointment here, our circuit included Capel Sion, Lloc, with its tradition of the plygain, and I would get up at 4am on Christmas morning in order to be present. Although I grew to love this special Welsh act of worship, I'm not a morning person, and I would find myself Living Upside Down for the rest of Christmas Day!

However, I can honestly say that the early morning rising was well worth it. With the plygain, Advent drew to a close and Christmas began, and the wonder of the baby born in the night became very real as the darkness dispelled and the light of dawn gradually grew. I hope that, wherever you live, you may find much in the tradition to which you can relate. Those who instituted it knew about Advent anticipation, and about the earth-shattering incarnation that turns not only Christmas Day but the whole of life upside down. With joy, may you rediscover this for yourself as you use these studies.

We look forward to hearing how the plygain is made relevant and helpful for you. Some ideas for this can be found on page 16.

Revd Dr Jennie Hurd
Chair, Synod Cymru of the Methodist Church

Introducing Living upside down... the plygain tradition

These four Bible studies invite you reflect upon carols from a very Welsh Christmas tradition, the plygain. This is a service of prayer and carol singing that takes place before sunrise on Christmas Morning. The name itself is related to the Latin word for cock crow, *pulli canto* (literally, cock song).

Its roots lie in the Christmas Eve midnight mass of medieval Roman Catholicism. That service was abolished during the reformation and in Wales was replaced by a communion service later in the morning, which was followed by the singing of carols – in the vernacular rather than the Latin of the old Mass.

By the end of the 18th century this had developed into the modern form of plygain – a service that may have echoes in other traditions in the part of the world where you live.

The plygain started sometime between three and five o'clock in the morning and could last for anything up to five hours. It took place in churches brightly lit by candles, with each person present often bringing their own. In a time when services were rarely held in the dark, the brilliance of this illumination often made a lasting impression on those taking part. Symbolically, it recognised the significance of Christ coming as the Light of the World.

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/Boris15



A sermon was rare (or short) and, following prayers, the male members of each family present were expected to take turns in singing an unaccompanied carol, often in three or four part harmony. There was no programme prepared for this and each family simply came forward in turn, sang and returned to their places. Being a church service, applause was discouraged. With an average of eight to fourteen families present, each taking one or often two turns, the service would contain up to thirty carols. Every carol would be in Welsh and every carol different. It was a matter of honour not to sing one that had been sung before. In some places, this led to families writing their own carols, with the words handed down between generations and jealously

guarded. The carols were often named after the farm or family who wrote them or by the name of the folk tune to which they were sung.

These carols are worth exploring for their poetry and their diversity. While some focus on the Christmas story, they are much more likely to deal with the wider theme of salvation: the way in which God has saved us from ourselves through the birth, life and death of Jesus. Imagery associated with Christ's atonement on the cross (the sense that he was making amends for our human sins) is common. In addition, calls for repentance and godly living are included and references to Old Testament prophecies abound. The carols were usually heavily rooted in scripture and, while often expressing thanksgiving and joy, they had an educational as well as a celebratory and devotional role. Longer carols even manage to deal with the whole of the biblical-Christian story, from the story of Adam and Eve to a celebration of the joys of heaven.

The four carols chosen for these studies take us on a journey that reflects the advent theme of waiting. They explore the nature of who and what we are waiting for; God's incarnation in the form of the baby Jesus; and the response we need to give when the waiting is finally over. (The details of each carol are included on page 15 of this booklet.)

Today, the plygain survives in a number of places across Wales but particularly in mid Wales, along the Montgomeryshire-Shropshire border. The Welsh Methodist Chapel in Sion Lloc is well known for this service and is sometimes known as "Capel y Plygain" – although, nowadays, the service starts at six o'clock, women and children join in the singing and the service tends to be rather shorter.

Other traditions grew up around the plygain as people waited for the service. Records show families rising at two in the morning and singing and dancing to the harp until the plygain, or gathering at certain farmhouses to make cyflaith (toffee). A recipe for this treat is included on page 15 to make and share in your group.

Capel y Plygain – Sion Methodist Chapel, Lloc



How to use the study outlines

1. Take some time to read the carol out loud. You may also wish to read the suggested Bible passage, perhaps reading out different translations if you have more than one version of the Bible available. There will also be another opportunity to read the passage later, as part of the study. (If you are undertaking these studies on your own, still take time to do this and make sure you read out loud so you 'hear' the poetry and story.)
2. Now read the carol again to yourself and note down anything that strikes you as significant, and highlight any words or phrases that intrigue or inspire you.
3. Now read the comments in the study material (including the Bible passage) and share your immediate reactions with each other. If you have read any other commentary on the Bible passage share anything you have learned.
4. Discuss your responses to the questions asked in each study.
5. Read the carol again and reflect quietly on what you will take away.
6. Share with each other what you are going to do as a result of studying each carol and Bible passage and pray for one another.



Modern day plygain singing

Study 1: Who are we waiting for?

“Ar gyfer heddiw'r bore” (“Today, this very morning”)

“Ar gyfer heddiw'r bore” is said to be the oldest plygain carol still extant with music. It is rich in imagery, using biblical references that focus on Jesus' coming as the fulfilment of Old Testament promises and visions. In between the frequent reminders of Jesus' human vulnerability as a baby are the contrasting and thought-provoking images of the incarnate God.

*Today, this very morning
as a child, as a child,
is born the branch of Jesse,
as a child;
the mighty one of Bozrah,
who gave the law on Sinai,
who made the peace at Calv'ry,
is a child, is a child,
and sucks the breast of Mary,
as a child.*

*Ezekiel's living waters,
on her knee, Mary's knee,
see Daniel's true Messiah,
on her knee;
Isaiah's child of wisdom,
the hope to Adam given,
the Alpha and Omega
on her knee, Mary's knee,
is found in Bethl'hem's manger,
on her knee.*

*Haste, sinner, now to meet him,
as you are, as you are,
as refuge sure, now greet him
as you are;
the well of life now opened
will cleanse and make the broken
like Salmon's snows unbroken*,
therefore come, as you are
to him whose grace is spoken,
as you are.*

*John Piper Annunciation Window, SS Peter
and Paul Church, Abington, Northampton
Photo © Stephen Adams*



(*Salmon's snows are referred to in Psalm 68:14, where the writer is referring to a mountain right at the heart of Israel, Mount Zalmon.)

Like Matthew's gospel, this carol refers to Jesus' genealogy, speaking of Jesus as the new branch in the Jesse family tree as described by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 11:1-5). A series of Old Testament images portray Jesus as mighty (Isaiah 63:1), a law-giver (Exodus 34) and a sacrifice for atonement (Isaiah 53:4-5), images that would have been familiar to the Jews as they awaited the promised Messiah.

The second verse contains profound theological images from the scriptures used to describe the baby Jesus: God's living water (Ezekiel 47:12); a true Messiah or anointed leader (Daniel 9:25-26); the child who has come to rule with wisdom (Isaiah 9:6-7); the promised hope given when God spoke to the serpent in Eden (Genesis 3:15); and the "Alpha and Omega", or "first and last" (e.g. Isaiah 44:6 and Revelation 1:17).

The third verse is a call to respond to the person revealed in these images.

Read: Matthew 1: 18-25

This reading is a straight forward account of Jesus' birth. It simply states what happened as the events surrounding the virgin birth unfold, but also touches on many of the themes alluded to in the carol. Matthew deliberately attempted to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah that they had been awaiting. Through genealogy, the meaning of the name Jesus ("Saviour"), and the idea of a virgin birth, Matthew emphatically states that Jesus' coming is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. In particular, he offers an explanation of the special name given to Jesus, "Emmanuel" ("God with us"), as predicted by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14).

As we look forward to celebrating Christmas, these images compel us to consider who we are waiting for during Advent and to meet the incarnate God for ourselves.

Questions for discussion:

1. Which of the different images for Jesus has a significant meaning for you and why? What images would you use to describe Jesus to others?
2. How do the descriptions of the incarnate God in this carol help our understanding of "Emmanuel" – "God with us" – during Advent? How can we make it known in our community that God is with us?
3. What do Joseph's responses to the events in the reading teach us about living upside down?

Study 2: The wonder of incarnation

“Rhyfedd, rhyfedd gan angylion” (“Wondrous, wondrous to the angels”)

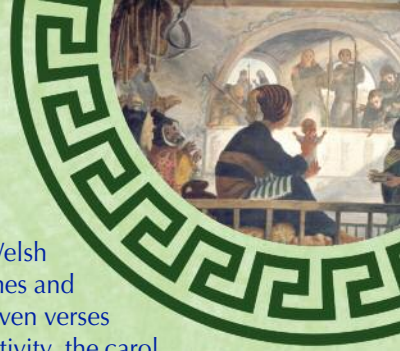
This carol is the longest poem written by the famous Welsh hymn writer Ann Griffiths, and encapsulates all the themes and paradoxes in Ann Griffiths’ works. Two of the original seven verses are included here. Although these verses focus on the Nativity, the carol covers the whole spectrum of salvation, from the incarnation to the crucifixion, the resurrection and life in Christ.

*Wondrous, wondrous to the angels,
wondrous to the saints of old;
that the God who made and rules us
and the whole creation holds,
now lies swaddled in a manger,
born into our world of care,
yet a shining host in glory
bring him worship, bring him prayer.*

*Thousand, thousand thanks, and endless,
all my life shall sing the praise
of my God who for my worship
wondrous powers in manger lays.
Here in tempted human nature,
here – like weakest of our race,
here as helpless human infant,
here is God in power and grace.*

The wonder of the incarnation is that, in our darkest hour, God is with us: not just walking along beside us or carrying us, as some have said, but as one of us, born into “our world of care”, weak, helpless and subject to temptation. This is why the angels described by the gospel writer Luke sang “glory to God”: because God lovingly involves himself in human life, to know our nature from the inside out, so that we might live upside down.

The paradox is that God, who is creator and ruler of the universe and big enough to hold all creation in his hand, is present in the tiny, helpless baby small enough to sleep in a feeding trough. And the power and grace of God is revealed not despite the powerlessness of the infant, but through it.



*Nativity painting
by Henry Bird,
Charwelton
Chapel,
Northamptonshire
Photo © Stephen
Adams*



Read: Luke 2: 8-19

The responses to the incarnation in Ann Griffiths' carol are wonder, praise and thanks. We sing of wonder, because God becoming human is a mystery – the more you look into it, the more upside down it becomes: a great big God in a little tiny baby; the creator and ruler of the universe helpless and bound up in rags. In Jesus, God shows us that the way to abundant life is through humility. Jesus did not grasp at greatness, but took on the role of the weakest and the servant.

The second response is praise with thanksgiving: the angels rejoiced at the gift, and so can we. Our lives can be lives of gratitude because we are loved and known by God.

Advent was traditionally a time of fasting in preparation for Christmas. As in Lent, Advent fasting is designed to focus our minds on the great mystery of God's loving action in the world through Jesus. We prepare to be astonished again to discover that God longs for us to live life upside down: putting others before ourselves and casting aside all our worries and anxieties simply to enjoy God's goodness poured out for us. Greatness revealed in a poor, shabby shelter; love revealed in sacrifice.

Questions for discussion:

1. How can you use this Advent to prepare yourself for the wonder that "as helpless human infant, here is God in power and grace"?
2. The carol speaks of the "thousand, thousand thanks" that we give to God for the gift of Jesus to us. What part does gratitude play in your life?
3. The carol speaks of a world of care, of temptation, of human weakness. What can you do this Advent to bring hope to those who are struggling?

Photo © Owen Nelson



Study 3: Our response to the incarnation

“O deued pob Cristion” (“Come all Christians”)

This carol was first recorded in Jane Ellis’s collection of hymns, carols and elegies. It is in essence a sermon put to music in which we are called to praise Jesus, receive his grace and serve him. The melody “O Deued Pob Cristion” was collected by Ruth Lewis in 1910. In some form or another, this tune (also known as “Olwen”) has found its way into numerous hymn books and carol collections and has become one of the most frequently sung and best loved of all Welsh carols.

*Come all Christians, singing, our glad praises bringing
in thanks for the gift of God’s love;
with hearts full of yearning to Bethlehem turning,
we worship with angels above.*

*The Lord of Creation has given each nation
salvation from sorrow and sin;
through Jesus so Holy, now cradled so lowly,
for God found no room at the inn.*

*Kneel down to the Child there, and Mary so mild there,
for Godhead by this Babe is borne;
so evil forsaking, and grace humbly taking,
proclaim we our Saviour this morn.*

*That Saviour so holy in stable so lowly
his peace to all nations will give.*

*All strife he will banish, all hatred will vanish
when by the Lord’s teachings we live.*

*Come, sister and brother, let’s dwell with each other
in peace in God’s kingdom of love,
and sing out the story of him, who in glory,
awaits us in heaven above.*

*Kneel down to the Child there, and Mary
so mild there,
for Godhead by this Babe is borne;
so evil forsaking, and grace humbly taking,
proclaim we our Saviour this morn.*

*Plygain, Llanfihangel-
yng-Ngwynfa Church,
circa 1974
Photo © Tegwyn
Roberts*



There is always a danger when we celebrate Christmas that we will let the story finish on Christmas morning. The baby is in the manger, the shepherds have worshipped, the angels have sung. It's Christmas, let's eat!

The incarnation – the moment when God's kingdom and way of being enters our world through the birth of Jesus – inspires our praise and worship, but it also does far more than that. There is much yet to be fulfilled: our delivery from sorrow and sin and our giving up of evil ways, and the reception of God's gift of grace by each of us. It is through our actions that peace will come to the world's countries and nations. Strife will be banished when we live by Jesus' teaching: when we dwell together in peace, we will bring in the kingdom of God.

This is hard work that requires turning away from selfishness and reaching out to others. As the 16th century Spanish nun Saint Teresa of Avila reminded us, ours are the eyes through which God looks compassionately on this world, and ours are the bodies that need to act to bring peace. It's a theme reflected in words of the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah:

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Read: Isaiah 2: 1-5

The establishment of the kingdom of God is dependent both on the incarnation and on our response to it. God's involvement in the world of human suffering and sin turns our ways of living upside down: it becomes for us the pattern and the inspiration for our own ethical commitment in the world, in whatever realm: individual, social, economic, or political. Our response to God's saving grace is only just beginning on Christmas morning – and it is not over yet.

Questions for discussion:

1. How do you cope with receiving extravagant gifts? Does it create problems for you?
2. In a world of constant, contradictory information, how do we decide what is an ethical action?
3. The Christian Aid climate justice campaign One Million Ways encourages us to act now to change the world. Explore this or another campaign of your choice and think together about what you can do to bring peace in the world.

Study 4: God's incarnation is for all

"Rhown foliant o'r mwyaſ" ("Give praise for the story")

The original title of this carol was "Gwahoddiad i foli Crist", which offers in Welsh "an invitation to worship Christ". Only four of the original twelve verses are now usually sung.

*Give praise for the story
of God in all glory
who gave us, through Mary,
Christ Jesus his Son;
to take on our being,
our debt for wrongdoing,
and offer to us his salvation.*

*As Man Jesus suffered,
as God Jesus conquered,
as Saviour he purchased
our souls from death's sting;
he paid for our error,
restored us to favour,
to bring to an end all our vexing.*

*He made us mere mortals,
God's sons and his daughters,
eternal dwellers
of heaven above;
to live in his presence
in glorious brilliance,
to praise the Redeemer for his love.*

*Invite all the needy,
the hurt and the poorly,
the weak and the lonely
to feast and to sing;
Praise be to the Saviour
who brings us God's favour
to worship with joy everlasting.*

*Caernarfon from the
Menai Straits © 2014
Thinkstock UK, a division
of Getty Images*

*Houses in Welsh valley ©
2014 Thinkstock UK, a
division of Getty Images*



Read: Romans 8: 31-39

Both Rhys Prichard's carol and St Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, speak passionately of God's love for us shown through the life, death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ. It is a love from which nothing can separate us. Yet both raise a question that has often caused division in the past between Christian groups including, in Wales, Wesleyan Methodists (now integrated into the Methodist Church in Britain) and the Calvinistic Methodists (now the Presbyterian Church of Wales). Put simply, the question was: Who does Christ save? Or, in other words: Who will make it to heaven and who hasn't a chance?

St Paul talks of God's "chosen" people or, in some translations, "the elect" (Romans 8: 33). What is unclear is whether this is a specific group of people or everyone. Does God choose to love just some for all time, or everybody? For those who followed the theological teaching of John Calvin, an influential 16th century French theologian and pastor, the answer was that God's plan was for only some people to live with God for all of eternity; they were "predestined" for salvation. By implication, others must therefore be predestined for damnation, a life eternally separated from the love of God – or, in other words, "hell". Whether this "horrible decree" was actually taught by Calvin in this way is open to question but it was certainly preached like this by many of his later followers, the Calvinists.

The Calvinistic view of predestination was widespread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but utterly rejected by John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist Church. Instead they taught that God's saving love is for all because of the universal availability of grace. John Wesley, particularly, emphasised the importance of what he called "prevenient grace" – God's grace which is at work in us even before we know it. It's this grace that sets the wheels in motion for us to respond to God's love. Wesley would have said that it awakens us to our sinful condition and so allows us to respond in faith to the gospel. This is summed up in the traditional Methodist teaching: "All need to be saved, all may be saved, all may know themselves saved, all may be saved to the uttermost."

While written a century before Wesley, echoes of that Methodist teaching are found in verse 4, where the invitation to the feast is for "all the needy", recognising that we are all in need of God's love. The feast means both the physical Christmas meal and the heavenly banquet, prepared for all humankind. But perhaps today it could also mean sharing together plygain toffee.

Questions for discussion:

1. Share in the group your own story of “prevenient Grace”. How did you come to know the need for God’s love?
2. Discuss how the idea of “salvation for all” operates in a multi-faith society. Is the only way to God through Christ?
3. The feast in the carol is both physical and internal. Discuss what you can do as a group to invite others, particularly the poor and the needy, “to feast and to sing”.

The carols

Study 1: “Ar gyfer heddiw'r bore” (“Today, this very morning”)

Eos lâl (Dafydd Hughes, 1794-1862)

Tr. Tom Owen & David Fox, Seasons of Glory, Cytûn

Tune: Ar gyfer heddiw'r bore

Study 2: “Rhyfedd, rhyfedd gan angylion” (“Wondrous, wondrous to the angels”)

Ann Griffiths (1776-1805)

Tr. David Fox, Seasons of Glory, Cytûn

Tune: Penderyn

Study 3: “O deued pob Cristion” (“Come all Christians”)

Jane Ellis (1779-1841)

Tr. verse 1 A. G. Prys-Jones, Caneuon Cenedlaethol Cymru: The National Songs of Wales ed. E. T. Davies, Sydney Northcote and A. G. Prys-Jones, (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1959), verse 2 Jonathan Jones, Five Welsh Carols ed. Louis Halsey (Faber Music Ltd).
Tune: O deued pob Cristion / Olwen

Study 4: “Rhown foliant o'r mwyaif” (“Give praise for the story”)

Rhys Prichard (1579-1644)

Tr. Delyth Wyn Davies

Tune: Gŵyl

Cyflaith (Toffee)

This is a traditional Welsh recipe from Montgomeryshire and involves pulling the toffee while still hot. Alternatively leave to warm and cut into squares.

3lb soft brown sugar

8oz salted butter (+ a little more for greasing)

juice of one lemon

4 fluid ounces of boiling water

Place the sugar and boiling water in a large steel pan and place over a low heat. Stir constantly until the sugar is melted (about 20 minutes). Remove the pan from the heat and stir the lemon juice and butter into the sugar. Boil briskly for another 15 minutes without stirring.

To check if the toffee is done, drop a small amount from a teaspoon into a jug of water. If it hardens at once the toffee is ready. Pour the mixture into a large, flat, greased baking tin. While still hot, rub some butter on your fingers and “pull” the toffee into strands. Cut the strands into pieces.

The plygain is a gift from Wales. If you live elsewhere you might wish to think about how you can adapt this Welsh tradition to your own situation and local traditions. If you'd like to hold your own plygain, you may wish to consider these questions:

Where could you hold your plygain?

At what time would you hold your plygain?

What songs or music could you use? (Perhaps you can draw from your own tradition e.g. Gaelic; Doric; Shetlandic; Old Scots; Old English etc.)

Who could you invite?

What hospitality might you offer? (The traditional Welsh toffee or perhaps a tradition from your area e.g. Scottish tablet; Eccles cakes; Bath buns...)

Find out more about the plygain online e.g. at www.museumwales.ac.uk

Download this booklet for **FREE** or order more copies at www.meetpraylove.co.uk; www.synodcymru.org.uk; or www.methodistwales.org.uk.

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