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CLERGY in the Church of England might have been surprised to receive a letter from the Archbishop of York and me earlier this year. In it, we invited them and their communities to take as a focus, between Ascension and Pentecost, prayers “for a renewal of their expectancy and the overflowing of Christ in their lives together, so that people right across the country see who Jesus is and are drawn to faith in him”.

This was, no doubt, received with groans of scepticism by some. It may have even found its way into a few vicarage recycling bins. On the one hand, it might seem too obvious: “Archbishops would ask for people to pray, wouldn’t they?” And perhaps a bit presumptuous: “Don’t they know how busy I am already?”

Then the time of prayer — called Thy Kingdom Come — arrived. Messages began pouring in from churches around the country that were making time to pray for the witness of the Church and fresh confidence to share their faith. It was not just from one particular tradition or area — every tradition and expression of church was represented.

Many churches hosted whole weeks of 24/7 prayer, some for the first time, and many in partnership with others in their deanery. Some held prayer days, half-nights of prayer, or novenas of prayer. The “beacon” events in cathedrals were packed, and there is no telling how many individuals played their part with prayer at home. We estimate that more than 100,000 Christians joined in about 3000 events and services during those ten days.

Many parishes reported lasting change as a result. The assistant minister of St John’s Hoxton in London diocese, Jono Tyrrell, told how it had “created a spiritual hunger for ‘more’... It has brought an increased sense of ‘togetherness’, as people feel closer to one another. It has filtered down through all areas of church life, and the sense of the presence of God when we gather continues to grow.”

St Aidan’s, Gravesend, in the diocese of Rochester, opened its doors from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. during Thy Kingdom Come, allowing anyone to come in to pray or sit in silence. It presented the opportunity for numerous conversations with people who rarely came through its doors, and led the Vicar, the Revd Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy, and the PCC to think seriously about how the building can be opened to the community in the longer term.

This spontaneous desire to join was not limited to the Church of England. The Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales encouraged churches to pray. Churches in the United States, Bermuda, and Israel — to name a few — heard the call, and joined in.

I AM certain that this enthusiastic response did not spring from a sudden respect for archiepiscopal authority. Dr Sentamu and I may have invited churches to pray, but this call responded to the creativity in many parishes, the deep desire to pray, and the hunger to see lives transformed by the love of Christ. These so easily get smothered under the inevitable busyness of life.

So it was emphatically not a top-down, centralised initiative. Instead, it demonstrated that when God calls people to pray — and to engage their friends, neighbours, family, and communities with the good news of Jesus Christ — there are hundreds of ways of responding.

Christians of every tradition, in whatever context, share many things in common. At the core of Thy Kingdom Come is one of the most important: a reliance on God to send the Holy Spirit to empower us as witnesses to the good news.

In Acts 1.8, shortly before his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples that they “will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”. Jesus links being a witness and the empowering work of the Spirit. We cannot be witnesses on our own.

When I spoke with Cardinal Vincent Nichols recently, he said that those days of prayer at Pentecost had had far deeper resonance in his own life and prayer than ever before. There was a real sense of new growth, he said. For me, it seemed to be a fresh sign of the Lord saying to us: “The Spirit is given to you to carry on and do the work.”

WE ALL know that it is only the Spirit that leads people to Christ. It is not something that we are able to instigate or make happen. It is only God who can heal people’s incapacity to perceive his love, and also to make cold hearts warm. That is why prayer must always be the first action of evangelism and witness — because we are utterly reliant on God for its fruition.

The transformation of lives by the love of God in Christ does not have its inception with a conversation, or a course, or a guest service (as valuable as these things are). It starts with followers of Jesus Christ getting on their knees before God and praying: “Come, Holy Spirit.” This is one of the earliest prayers of the Church, and not the preserve of one particular tradition. Liturgies around the Church have been praying for the renewing work of the Spirit for centuries.

There is nothing new here — but, rather, something essential. The period between the Ascension and Pentecost is all about waiting and praying. It was so for the first disciples, and, although we live after Pentecost, we must pray for a renewal of the Spirit again and again.

This praying for the Spirit turns us from looking inwards to looking outwards, because it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who lived his life for others. The Spirit is not given primarily to bless us privately, but so that we can bless the world around us — primarily by witnessing to the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ.

In 2017, the invitation is going out further and wider to pray together in the run-up to Pentecost. Churches across the whole Anglican Communion have been invited. In the mean time, the presidents of Churches Together in England have called on their Churches to take part.

The vision is to join with the whole family of God the Father, in praying for the empowering of God the Holy Spirit, that we may be effective witnesses to God the Son, Jesus Christ. It is one that I joyfully urge you to get involved with. Let’s pray as one: “Come, Holy Spirit.”

