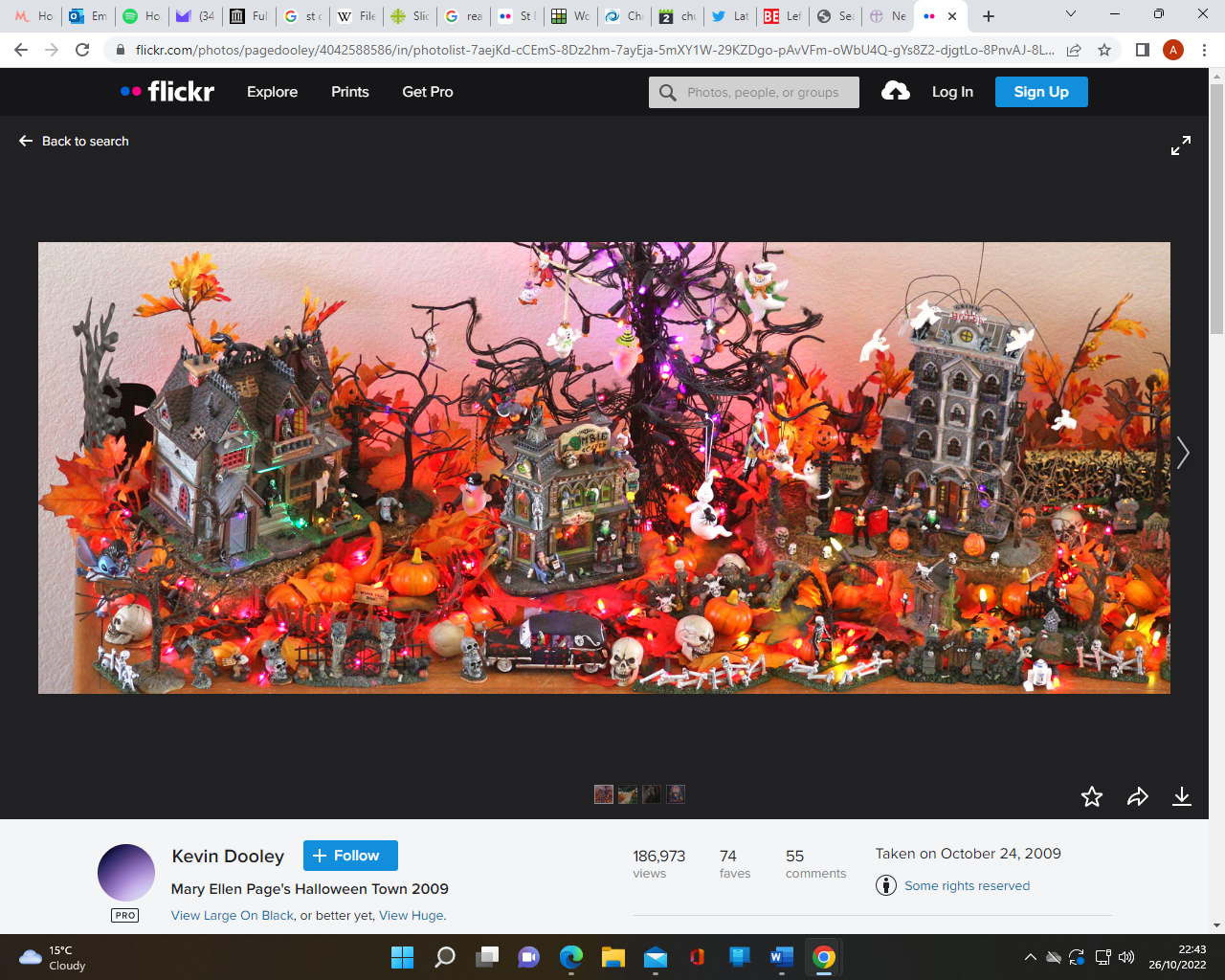
**Halloween**



*Photo: Kevin Dooley/Flickr*

**What is Halloween?**

Halloween (Hallowe’en) is All Hallows Eve which falls on 31st October and refers to the day before All Saints Day (All Hallows, November 1st).

For many years in the northern hemisphere, many different festivals have been associated with gathering in the harvest, preparing for winter, remembering loved ones who have died, and preparing for the time of longer nights and winter cold.

**What happens at Halloween?**

Modern Halloween in the UK probably has a background in these traditions, but today it owes much more to the commercialisation of 31st October in the United States as ‘Happy Halloween’, - a major celebration in which whole neighbourhoods decorate their houses, organise dressing up costumes for children, buy or make sweets, baked goods, or have barbecues and cook outs.

Halloween merchandising is big business. In the UK, expenditure on Hallowe’en products is expended to reach £777 million in 2023. In the USA, spending on Hallowe’en products is expended to be around $10.6 billion in 2022.

In the UK, the commercialisation of Halloween shows shops offering costumes, pumpkins, sweets, cakes and party objects. Shops aim these things at children as their consumers. The pressure to consume Halloween paraphernalia relates to a number of different areas:

* **Dressing up** – typically as something deemed ‘scary’, - witches, vampires, demons, zombies, ghosts, skeletons, serial killers from films etc.
* **Decorating** – carving pumpkins, artificial spider webs, glow in the dark faces or weapons, fake blood, masks etc. Typical colours for the ‘theme’ are orange and black.
* **Trick or Treating** – going from house to house after dark, knocking on doors, asking for sweets or other gifts. (And in some cases rewarding silent houses with ‘tricks’ such as egging).
* **Parties** – Halloween parties can combine all of the above in one location as an organised party or as a base for trick-or-treating. There are various traditional games like apple bobbing that are often played at Halloween.

Some popular shows on TV have Halloween specials or episodes. In the popular American series *Modern Family*, for example, a number of episodes are themed around putting on the scariest and most dramatic scenario in the street.

**Why some Christians are concerned about Halloween**

The evangelist Canon J.John has put together a list of concerns about Hallowe’en (2014) <http://www.mirror.co.uk/opinion/news-opinion/reverend-j-john-six-reasons-2486777> His six reasons for concern are:

*Halloween celebrates evil* – at best it sends mixed messages about the ‘scary’ side of life; at worst it glorifies evil things which we should guard children against.

*Halloween is unhelpful* – we should safeguard children, not tell them to go out in the dark and knock on strange doors.

*Halloween trivialises bad things* – killing, wounding and hurting people are serious matters, yet dressing up as dead, deformed or wounded people makes them seem something to laugh about.

*Halloween is offensive* – able-bodied people dressing up to look disfigured or ugly for a laugh is offensive to people who have suffered serious disfigurements.

*Halloween is getting worse* – it is getting ‘darker’ and ‘nastier’ year on year

*Halloween allows evil a victory* – some earlier traditions included a triumph of good over evil at Halloween, but this element is now missing.

More reflections on these points can be found at: <http://www.canonjjohn.com/blog/2014/10/27/the-tragedy-of-halloween>

**Christian approaches to Halloween**

Some Christians feel strongly that Halloween doesn’t mix with Christian faith and practice and keep their children firmly indoors and away from all that is going on in their neighbourhood. However, it is difficult for children to avoid party invitations, activities in schools, hearing about what other children are going to be doing or to prevent children from seeing all the consumables in shops. Children are going to see, and be attracted by, all the merchandising and celebrations. Some Christians are untroubled by this and think that Halloween is so commercialised, it is basically a bit of harmless fun. Others find Halloween activities unnerving and sinister. What should we do when children ask to become involved in their neighbourhood activities? There are various things to think about:

* What does Halloween look like from the child’s point of view?
* What can be done to minimise the problems Canon J John points out?
* How can we change the way Halloween is going?
* What can churches do?

**What does Halloween look like from the child’s point of view?**

The fun for children includes the anticipation and expectation of a party atmosphere. The best bits are dressing up in a special costume with face paint or disguises, so as to look different, and the chance to act a part. It also includes facing things which are ‘scary’ by becoming them or handling them in a safe way (eg fluffy spiders). Another exciting element for children is the journey around a neighbourhood in the dark and being given delicious presents of sweet things to eat. It is hard to be left out or told no if there is no alternative on offer.

**What can be done to minimise the problems Canon J John points out?**

One of the useful things J John does is to ask us to reflect on what messages we are giving children when they get involved in Halloween activities. It is surely common sense not to encourage children to go out in the dark by themselves and knock on strange doors. And we don’t want to suggest that it is ok to frighten people or damage their property because you don’t get what you want. It is also surely common sense to take steps not to trivialise disfigurement or to glorify pain and suffering. Nor would we want to frighten or distress others or to encourage evil behaviour. Another issue is to be aware of the commercialisation of Halloween and not get sucked into the trap of buying huge amounts of stuff and spending more money than is really affordable just because it’s 31st October.

A more serious reflection asks us to make sure that children are not invited to see evil ideas and behaviour as attractive, glamorous or worthy of further exploration. Further, anyone suggesting that Halloween parties include playing Charlie Charlie, using Ouija boards or other séance-style ‘games’ to contact spirits, should be strongly advised not to get involved with any activities of this kind as they can lead in some cases to serious spiritual and psychological problems. Other people have been seriously frightened by dares around raising spirits, conducting rituals, disturbing churchyards or ghost-hunting. Even some people who have organised a horror film movie night in a home have sometimes found themselves affected by nightmares and a feeling of unease afterwards.

**How can you change the way Halloween is going?**

It is perfectly fine to keep well away from Halloween, but one of the challenges of faith is the way in which we face the challenges of our culture. So as Christians, we can surely also find ways of changing any unhealthy messages of Halloween and give our children new tools to engage with it. These tools can include: transformation, light, and gift-giving.

**Transformation of the things which worry some Christians**

As Canon J John notes, Halloween used to have an important theme of celebrating Jesus’s victory of goodness and love over all that is evil – and we can do that too. One way of doing that is to put an element of transformation into the activities for children. If children enjoy dressing up and having their faces painted, why not find ways to transform ‘spooky’ costumes into ones which are beautiful and expressive of God’s love? After all, this is how much traditional folk and fairy story works, as evil is defeated and goodness triumphs.

You can do this as a creative project with the children, or make it part of the ‘pilgrimage’ in the dark, adding layers of costume or decoration to transform the children as they return home. If children turn up with pretend weapons and fake blood these too can be transformed (transformation sends a stronger message than just replacement).

The Halloween party can also be re-themed into one that looks forward to All Saints Day.

**Using Halloween to establish light in the darkness**

Another important theme is safety and light. J John makes the sensible point that we should not suggest that it is ok to go out in the dark to strange places and knock on strange doors. Children enjoy going out in the dark, but they can only enjoy God’s good darkness if they know they are safe, know they are on a journey which has a particular end and have access to light, such as torches or safety lanterns, in the darkness.

Many children have or will have had, a fear of the dark at some time in their lives, and the Halloween journey around their streets, properly managed, can be a useful way of facing this (this can be organised not just at Halloween but at any time when it is dark). The important message about this is the need to stay safe in dark places (including what to do if you get lost) and to come back to the light, which can be an important feature of the return journey.

**Celebrating darkness as a gift of God**

Some churches offer Halloween activities aimed at enjoying darkness and night-time, perhaps gathering around a fire or lighting candles. Some places where there are Forest churches organise 31st October gatherings of this kind. Find a Forest Church here <https://www.facebook.com/groups/forestchurch/>

**Changing trick-or-treating to gift-giving**

Finally, you can subvert the trick-or-treating element of Halloween by getting rid of the ‘trick’ element and giving gifts instead of just expecting to receive them. It is worth pre-arranging with people you know in your neighbourhood when you will arrive with children and get the children to spend time making small gifts or baking cakes. Turning Halloween into a gift-giving event takes away from the expectation of getting something for nothing and helps children think about the pleasure of visiting people with gifts. <https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/trick-or-treat>

**Talking to children about Halloween topics**

Halloween can raise all kinds of questions about things Christians might be uneasy about or simply not know much about, when children ask for information or advice. How do we talk about why things are scary and what frightens us? How do we approach the subject of evil or spirits, ghosts or demons? What do we say about tricks, masks and disguises? And do we need to be worried about children learning to ‘demonise’ people who look different or act differently in their daily lives?

BRF has some resources for all these questions here: <https://www.brf.org.uk/halloween-wisdom-for-parents/>

**What if someone is scared by something they have done or shared at Halloween?**

If you know someone who has been affected by something they have participated in at Halloween which has upset, confused or disturbed them, encourage them to talk to any of their local clergy who can help.

**What churches can do**

There are already some projects and events which churches put on as alternatives to ‘scary’ Halloween. For example Scripture Union has suggestions on how to run a Light Party. <https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/light-parties>

World Vision has a Pumpkin Heroes activity for young children here <https://www.worldvision.org.uk/church-partners/pumpkin-heroes/>

For even more Christian resources, this link pulls more ideas for children and young people here:

<https://www.stewardship.org.uk/blogs/christian-alternative-halloween-resources>

And further ideas from:

<http://www.going4growth.com/growth_through_the_year/saints_and_special_days/halloween>

<https://www.cpo.org.uk/halloween-resources>

**Who else celebrates 31st October?**

People following the Pagan pathways usually celebrate 31st October as Samhain, one of their major festivals, based around harvest and remembering the dead and times of ending as the nights become longer and darker. Pagans can be upset by the Halloween view of ‘witches’ as scary, evil or frightening, and some are concerned that this presentation of ‘witchcraft’ drives hostility and fear towards them. Pagans can be just as bothered about the consumer view of their sacred festival and traditions which are important to them.

**November Season in the Christian Church.**

As Halloween is All Hallows Eve, it points forward to the celebration of All Hallows (all Saints) on 1st November, and remembering people who have died on All Souls (2nd November). In many churches, the month of November is an important time for remembrance of those who have died, including those who have died in war on Remembrance Day.

Resources for churches for November season are available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/deeper-god-mission-theology> under ‘Reconciliation’.