



MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



The Covid-effect

what we've learned
and what we can still learn...

Q&A: JUNIOR DOCTOR

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Coronavirus: the global Christian response

This issue of *Mission Catalyst* is all about life post Covid-19. But BMS World Mission isn't just talking about the Coronavirus – we're responding too.

Food for the hungry

BMS supporters have provided emergency food relief in **Peru, Uganda, Albania, Turkey, Lebanon, Tunisia, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal** and **Bangladesh**.

Counselling for those on Covid-wards

We've enabled frontline workers, Coronavirus patients and affected families to receive counselling in **Afghanistan**, preventing at least three suicides, and stopping hundreds more people panicking and spreading the virus.

PPE for frontline workers

Medical staff in **Chad, Nepal** and **Afghanistan** have access to Personal Protective Equipment. They can treat patients safely on the frontline of the Coronavirus pandemic, thanks to gifts to the BMS Coronavirus appeal.

These are just some of the ways that BMS has been able to respond to the needs of those left most at-risk because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The crisis isn't over. **YOU** can help us do even more.

Give now.

Visit www.bmsworldmission.org/coronavirusappeal
or call 01235 517641.

HAVE WE LEARNED ANYTHING?



EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED. BUT HAS IT CHANGED ENOUGH?

Suffering and death are the true universal human experiences, and Covid-19 has unified the world in one thing: pain.

Sentences like this may be why my career as a greeting-card writer and motivational speaker never took off. But I think the sentiment is, at least, partially true. The Coronavirus has, in a way, brought the world together. Many of us have, for the first time, experienced something of the reality of life for swathes of humanity – and we have not liked it. The question is whether we will ignore the lesson once it has passed or do something about a situation that was intolerable for us and persists for countless others. What, if anything, will we learn?

For the wealthy world, Covid-19 has been like a terrorist attack on a large scale in a western city. It has shocked us with truths that are commonplace in other countries, other contexts. We have experienced as aberration what is depressingly regular in contexts where we have outsourced most of our cheap labour, our environmental consequences and our wars. We have tasted what it feels like to have our world shaken like others' are regularly shaken.

We have been forced into unwilling solidarity with the poor and the global disenfranchised and we have occupied ourselves with political point scoring and largely meaningless gestures rather than asking how we might learn something from these new experiences, and how we might re-order the world not only to make them less likely for us in future but less ubiquitous for people who

experience them daily.

So this issue of *Catalyst* is an opportunity to reflect. What have we been taught, and what can we still learn?

Have we realised yet that the flexibility we thought impossible in work and the dispersed inclusivity we thought anathema in church are not just possible but useful? Have we noticed that the 'magic money tree' that only seems to have fruit enough to shake loose in times of war can be shaken at other times, too? If mortgages can all be paused and government can help to prop up everyone on furlough in a pandemic, why must we quibble in ordinary times over every morsel offered to a struggling family, a refugee, to any person who is not a major bank?

There are lessons.

Have we, in the loss and pain and grief that has come from the incomprehensible enormity of the Covid death rate, abandoned any theology of God's sovereignty? Did we really need this disaster to make us consider the problem of pain as real? And should we be so quick to jump to a view that denounces all theologies of hope and God's sovereign goodness when our sisters and brothers around the World Church, so much better acquainted with daily suffering, still espouse a God who is all good, almighty to save, all the time?

Have we thought about a future more connected by technology, about a health service for humanity and not for profit, about how we must learn to lament and the ways in which our leaders, our media and our own selfishness have failed us? Have we

seen the consequences yet of failing to listen to scientific experts? Have we seen the evil of ignoring and hiding the disparity in our own supposedly equal societies – the way in which black and ethnic minority communities, as well as the working class and unemployed have suffered more than the rest of us? Has a jolt like this given any of us pause to consider how very fragile our society and systems are? Our supply chains have unsustainably tight margins, our businesses seem woefully unprepared for change in working practice and those of us who don't own houses are terrifyingly close to being homeless. And in all of this, the worst effects are being felt and will be suffered in places that historically wealthy nations have drained and abused. In our own most marginalised communities.

All of these things were true before Coronavirus took our societies in its jaws and shook us. And the way in which we've been brought together has been fleeting. If we choose to, we can go back to business as usual (but digital), normal (but with two meters' distance – or was that one?). Or we can take this opportunity, this space for pause and broken breath, and ask God: "What could we do differently?"

I hope this issue stimulates you to think and dream and act.

Jonathan Langley
Editor
Mission Catalyst

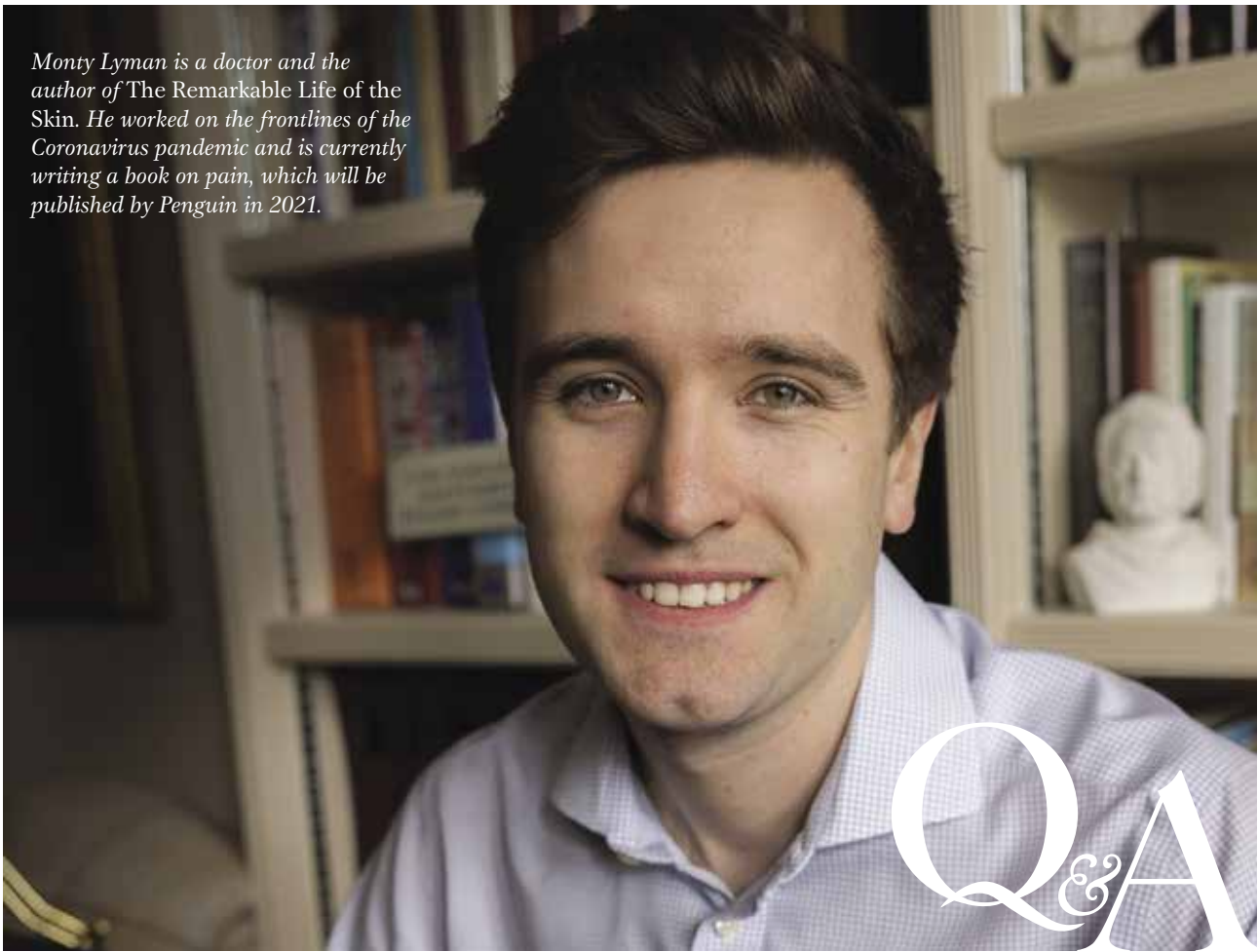


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Visit www.bmscatalystlive.com to find out more and book your ticket.

Monty Lyman is a doctor and the author of *The Remarkable Life of the Skin*. He worked on the frontlines of the Coronavirus pandemic and is currently writing a book on pain, which will be published by Penguin in 2021.



Q&A

MONTY LYMAN

LIFE ON A COVID WARD, AND WHAT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC TAUGHT US ABOUT OUR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM.

You've written a book about the skin. We've all been told that we need to wash our hands more because of Coronavirus, and my hands are in not a good state from all the hand sanitiser. Is our skin ever going to recover?

Thankfully, our skin is incredibly tough and resilient, and our whole top layer of skin, the epidermis, replaces itself every 30 days. So, I think even if we continue fairly regular hand washing practices, it won't affect them in the long term. But I highly recommend moisturisers, cheap moisturisers are shown to be just as effective as the really expensive ones that you get in shops.

We're spending billions on new treatments and vaccines for Covid-19,

which is great, but actually the most powerful anti-viral for these kinds of coronaviruses is just soap and water. Essentially the individual soap particles completely destroy the outer membrane of the Coronavirus, so it's probably the most effective weapon we've got.

It's really interesting, in hospital a lot of the doctors are saying that cases of norovirus and other infectious diseases have dropped massively and it's almost certainly because of increased hand washing.

What was it like working on the Covid wards, knowing you were at risk of catching the virus?

To begin with it was scary. It was scary

when we saw that our senior consultants, including some professors who seem to know everything, had never seen this disease before. When the influx started, we were in A&E all looking at patients coming into the wards, and we were looking at CT scans of people's chests and seeing something that we'd never seen before – damage across the whole lungs, really severe pneumonia that we'd only see rarely, and almost every patient coming in had the same thing.

It was also scary that it's a disease that we didn't have any treatments for. We had oxygen, but that wasn't necessarily effective, and we just didn't know whether a patient was going to get better or deteriorate and require ICU. Probably the

hardest bit about it as well was the fact that patients' relatives weren't able to come into the ward at all.

But actually, on the positive side, there was a lot of camaraderie. It's easy to moan in the NHS but, when the Coronavirus crisis kicked off, we increased our intensive care unit capacity massively, we repurposed whole wards, we got retired doctors and medical students in as incoming junior doctors – it was really impressive what we managed to do as well. So, it was equally terrifying yet exhilarating.

Are there images that will stay with you from having worked in that environment?

I think one of the hardest things was I was assessing an 80-year-old man who started on oxygen on my ward and had moderate Covid symptoms. He'd just come off a Zoom call with his family and he asked me whether he'd be able to see his children and grandchildren again. And I couldn't tell him whether he would or he wouldn't, I had no idea. And it was humbling.

I think on a big scale, we feel in western society anyway that we've defeated a lot of disease, especially a lot of infectious diseases, and we're on our way to overcoming cancer and ensuring we live long, healthy lives, but actually this disease has exposed that that's not the case at all.

Chances are we're going to have more pandemics in the future. What does our health system need to look like in order to continue to cope and perhaps better cope with pandemics like this?

We need a cohesive strategy with investment, cross-party. We need more long-term investment, it's very easy for governments of all shapes and sizes to think about the short-term in terms of investing in a pandemic response. Our issue was that we just thought about influenza, we hadn't thought about coronaviruses, even though the warning signs were there with SARS and MERS and other outbreaks of the past. So we need, with all of healthcare, to have a long-term, big picture view and we need to invest in preparing for another pandemic, because it will come.

I think this is also a big opportunity to look at inequalities in healthcare across society. People from Black and Asian minority ethnic groups and low-income groups have been more adversely affected and we need to look into reasons, we need to have a full investigation as to why this

happened and have a large public health discussion about inequalities in healthcare as well.

Within your ward and within the NHS, what did people think about the clap for carers?

It was mixed. People were positive about it, but there were also those who were saying we should have more support, and that energy should have been put more into things like PPE and investing in frontline workers. But it's complex. Personally, I don't have an easy answer because actually the PPE issue in our hospital was ok.

It's been great to see public appreciation for what we're doing because we were put at risk. I know fellow staff members who went to ICU, I know members of staff who died. I got Covid myself and was out for a couple of weeks and it's good to see that recognised. I think maybe this could be linked in with having a more coherent plan in terms of PPE

“ I was assessing an 80-year-old man... and he asked me whether he'd be able to see his children and grandchildren again. And I couldn't tell him... I had no idea ”

and maybe the country needs to have a more streamlined way of stockpiling and distributing protective equipment around the country. So we do need to be better prepared for it and could have been better prepared for it. But credit to the hospital managers who managed to deal with the national PPE shortage pretty well.

You're now writing a book on pain. Has this pandemic informed your thinking about pain?

The main symptoms of Covid-19 don't necessarily involve pain or chronic pain. My book is dedicated to people with long-term health conditions, things like chronic pain and also people with long-term psychiatric illness or long-term cardiovascular illness. And a lot of these people need face-to-face services, and they have suffered massively in the last three months.

Chronic pain is the most burdensome chronic disease in the western world, in Britain it costs more than diabetes and cancer costs combined, and people know very little about it. I think it's the most

neglected large public health issue in the developed world, and people with conditions like these have suffered due to the pandemic, but not directly because of the disease.

One of the functions of pain is to protect you, right? And society has been experiencing the pain of loss through this pandemic. Is that pain teaching us anything or warning us of something?

Yeah, I think you can make a comparison. So in a similar way that acute pain is not a sensation – it's a system of protection, it tells our brain that something is wrong and we need to do something about it – I think in a society that doesn't talk about suffering, that doesn't talk about death and, in Britain at least, in a society that doesn't think about our elderly or those who are lonely, this crisis has acutely exposed those issues. I think this crisis in a way should be a painful stimulus to all aspects of our society, telling us to protect those who are

most vulnerable, whether it's the elderly, the lonely, the poor, or those who are physically more vulnerable. So, I like that a lot. I think if we go too much into it, it might become quite complex... but I think that's really good.

In terms of that, if this is a stimulus telling us that we need to protect these people, what do we need to change in the future about how our society is structured?

Yeah, that's a big question and I don't know if I have all the answers. I think in terms of the NHS we're a lot better than a lot of other countries when it comes to healthcare provision, in that it's not private. I think that we need to identify, look after and love those who are most vulnerable and lonely, particularly the elderly. I think there needs to be a revolution in social care as well as the NHS, there needs to be a national social care service for those who are in nursing homes. That's a big thing that this has exposed.



Dianna Langley

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NORMAL WASN'T THAT GREAT TO START WITH

The future of work is now

WHAT THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND ITS CONSEQUENCES SHOULD TEACH US ABOUT WORK.

On a single day in April this year, Microsoft reported 200 million meeting participants on their Teams platform. Earlier that month, Zoom reported 300 million. The total population of the United Kingdom is 65 million.

For those of us who knew the catchphrases associated with 'the future of work' (*highly distributed digital job markets, networked supply chains, virtual conferencing yadda yadda data driven decision making, blah blah machine learning, etc etc Artificial Intelligence*) the effects of Covid-19 have been doubly shocking.

Most of us thought the future was far away.

And then the pandemic happened, and we scrambled to keep people in jobs, keep companies (and charities) afloat, keep as much of our work going as possible, even as the (physical) floor fell out from under us. And the Future of work felt very much like the Now of work, and normal was no longer our comfortable baseline. All choice for our pace to move into digital workspaces was taken from us.

So, like the very adaptable people we are, we jumped into Microsoft Teams,

Zoomed our way through every type of social and work gathering, and tried to carry on collaborating to get tasks done as best we could, all whilst petting dogs, shoeing cats, ordering better broadband/laptops/screens/desks and being full-time educators to all our offspring simultaneously.

Workplaces that had never even considered homeworking frantically pushed to open digital doors. People

“ *Workplaces that had never even considered homeworking frantically pushed to open digital doors* ”

who had previously been actively against allowing staff to work from home converted to being Teams champions for their organisations. Others found themselves skilling up to create good online gatherings to replace face-to-face conferences and asynchronous information sharing to replace meetings.

Now, of course, it looks like we're

heading out of our severe lockdowns. And yes, we are oh so tired of Zooming all the time and keeping those myriad digital notifications at bay, so we can be forgiven for being keen to go back to 'normal'.

But here's the thing: normal wasn't great to start with. When it came to work and the humanity of our work, and places we worked together, 'normal' was increasingly found lacking. Countless studies racked up how biased our workplaces were, how our working hours disadvantaged carers, and on the flipside how hours-worked often counted far more than our quality of work. The smartest among us never loved how our meetings

perpetuated unhelpful stereotypes, and how tedious repetitive tasks swamped our more enjoyable creative problem solving. We worried about how mothers couldn't catch up to their peers on the leadership ladder, and how fathers missed bath times and dance recitals, and even when those gender roles were reversed it still seemed like we couldn't get it right. We felt the cry



The world of work has changed

Many people will take their cue from some of the most successful businesses on the planet. Google has begun to rotate employees on site for a few days each week while ensuring facilities remain at only ten per cent occupancy. Facebook told its staff to work remotely for the remainder of the year, and in some instances, permanently. Whilst Twitter took the biggest stance and announced that virtually all its employees will now work from home permanently.

of creation, even as we strapped ourselves into our cars, stepped onto train platforms and presented our passports in the name of business travel. That's what normal looked like.

And regardless of whether you recognise these fallings-short in your own workplace, that 'normal' is never coming back. Not just because of the virus and its effects (although those will remain for some time), but because what people now expect from work has changed. We have hard-won knowledge that it is possible for many of us to work successfully from home at least part of the time, without those soul-destroying commutes. We have seen first-hand how fathers have enjoyed bike rides with their kids while it is still light outside. We have seen that very many of those carbon-guzzling conferences and flights were not in fact mission-critical to getting stuff done, and we had indeed confused need with want as the young activists had told us.

But we've also seen how lonely we get without our colleagues; how much we miss the synchronicity of the chance encounter at the watercooler that leads to cross-silo ideas springing to life. We talk about how we long for the coffee moment where we can interact casually without a work question or a justifying transaction that 'allows' us to request time in someone's digital diary of video calls. We saw how easy and detrimental it is to be always-on when you're never more than one room away from your work space, and how purposeful you have to be to lead and

“ We felt the cry of creation, even as we strapped ourselves into our cars, stepped onto train platforms and presented our passports in the name of business travel. That's what normal looked like ”

maintain a work-community when you're not physically co-located.

How many of us struggled with either the long socially awkward silences in normally buzzing all-staff meetings, or the frustration when Kevin forgot to mute his microphone, and Janet never seems to come online and oh she left her Skype status on Away and hasn't been getting notifications about this urgent problem?

It is getting better, more seamless, more fluid, more 'natural' to be together in these multi-person online spaces (unlike your email program, which is a personal space you run in your own unique way). But we are learning about the need for people to be shown the digital ropes about what it takes to work here. We expect to put time aside to orientate our newcomers to our places of work physically, to explain how to get tea and coffee, how to find the bathroom, where we all sit for lunch. And we should not be surprised that people need the same level of orientation to our digital workspaces too... not just how the technology works, but how WE work inside this technology. What WE think

about using slang or emojis in our typing; video cameras on or off, animated gifs yes or no; do you jump in with an opinion on a Zoom call, or wait for them to call down the list of participants...

Creating these mixed physical and virtual workspaces (and inevitably the related flexibility on core hours), requires retooling our work culture, our personal work and managerial styles and, in some cases, HR policy. It requires most of all changing what we consider as normal. It may be tempting think it's not worth the effort. That would be a mistake. That would be failing to learn the lessons of lockdown.

The forced flexibility that was injected into our normal 'rules' of working (both implicit and explicit) kept our organisations afloat in crisis. But the world becomes more complex to predict, and the times of upheaval and danger are not over. What we learn (or fail to learn) from lockdown about what work can and should look like will determine the future (or lack thereof) for most, if not all, of our organisations.

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Lamenting Coronavirus

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC FORCED PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD TO FACE THE BRUTALITY OF PAIN AND SUFFERING – MANY FOR THE FIRST TIME. WHAT HAS BEING UNABLE TO HUG OUR LOVED ONES OR SIT AT THE BEDSIDE OF DYING FRIENDS TAUGHT US ABOUT LAMENT?

The first time the invisible power of grief struck me was when I was six years old, having just received the news of my grandfather's death. I was apart from the safety of home and family, with little understanding of death, whilst his passing was tidily dealt with in a hospital miles away. What have you learnt by the age of six on how to grieve? I quietly tucked myself between a drawn curtain and a window running with condensation against the cold winter air outside. And sobbed. I never told the grown-ups.

Years later, I worked in a mission hospital in Zambia. When the first death occurred since my arrival, the relatives of the deceased threw themselves onto the floor, wailing in anguish and sharing their loss with all who could hear. I was shocked. I tried to tidy up the dramatic scene in front of me and bring some screens around the bed as I had been taught. 'Give space and dignity for the bereaved'. Keep it hidden. Remain calm.

How could we be ready as a nation and a Church for the harsh loss of life, livelihoods, freedoms, choices and identity that the Covid-19 pandemic would wreak? What preparation might have been

“ Wisdom, experience and resilience lay behind the doors of those shielded ”

overlooked in our spiritual resilience, our theology of suffering and risk, and our ability to respond as faith-filled believers?

We were not ready. Few of us had wrestled with these questions before and they were not always the ones who had a voice. Wisdom, experience and resilience lay behind the doors of those shielded due to age, disability, long-term illness and life-limiting conditions. These members of our community continue to model a faith, hope and perseverance that many of us don't understand, perhaps until now.

Let's be really honest. Covid-19 has made us feel out of control and question if God is in control. And to make matters worse, we couldn't necessarily 'buy' health and protection as the lie of consumerism says. Matthew Vaughan suggests that we have been blinded by other influences such as humanism, even as Christians, whereby we believe we can create the perfect world and that progress is achieved

by us. We no longer primarily serve God but our own desires.

We have come to believe that if we insure against loss, immunise ourselves against pain, ignore the broken and throw it away, then we will be alright. That is not the gospel of the suffering servant but the 'health and safety gospel'.

As a Church, we have to face Covid-19 on our knees. We need to look to Scripture once again and see the biblical narrative whereby God remains sovereign in a world full of folly, confusion, sin and man-made crisis. Whereby the rich and powerful abuse the vulnerability of the weak and Christ came to save us all. Suffering can draw us to himself. Our persecuted brothers and sisters will tell us that. And they remind us that the Church can grow in these times of crisis. Not all, but many. And there is testimony to that time and time again in this season.

So, what of our response? We can learn



Rogier van der Weyden – Pietà, 1441

from the lives of Job and his comforters who did so well to support him for seven days. They were silent. Then they spoke with so many words! They spent chapters asking the questions of what and why Job was suffering until God himself spoke (Job 38: 8-10) and reminded them of his power, authority and character.

How many Psalms do we know or sing as choruses? They will probably be ones of great rejoicing! But in the uncertainty of an invisible virus, Psalms of lament help give voice to the pain that we feel. Do we still hide from others or put a screen around the pain, as I did in Zambia as a nurse? Let us do that no longer. Cry out. Admit your despair and your sense of hopelessness and helplessness. For Christ himself did that on the cross. ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ A third of the Psalms are laments, and yet they are so often brushed over. Let us use the Psalms and Lamentations to help us journey through this season as God’s people.

Let us remember the tenderness of love in pain and suffering. The gentle touch, even with a gloved hand, of a carer, or some baked goods left on a neighbour’s

doorstep. As Jesus suffered on the cross, he did not forget his mum. And I write ‘mum’ intentionally. The young girl who suffered judgement as a pregnant teenager, about whom it was prophesied that ‘a sword would pierce your heart also’, now stood below her son’s nail-torn feet on a rubbish heap watching him die. She expected to be condemned as ‘rubbish’ herself as a mother of an executed criminal and Jesus knew that. As he struggled for breath, he gave her another son, “Woman, here is your son.” Is there a way that our suffering and pain can be transformative for others as we continue to love?

How do we mourn as we look back over these months where we could not attend memorials, leave flowers or visit the sick and dying?

If you are bereaved, intentionally make space for your grieving. Remember that not all of us will be grieving a person. Loss of livelihood or hopes and dreams affect us deeply. Consider what you have lost and give yourself time to tell God how hard that is. Give yourself the time and space as Jesus did when he went up the mountain on hearing the news that his cousin, John,

had died. One of my closest friends died of cancer during the lockdown and missing her is not a reality whilst I cannot see her empty chair or cuddle her heartbroken children. Don’t let a pattern of loss emerge that buries reality. Ask God to step in and help you feel and grow through the pain.

Don’t place your own pain or stories of bereavement onto others who grieve. We each have our own journey through lament and pain, and we are better to speak less and just be. Provide food, be practical and make sure you keep in touch. And as the months pass, keep talking about that person or part of life that changed so radically as a result of Covid-19. Listening is the greatest gift as a journey mate through pain.

Finally, share your suffering with your neighbours so that they meet Jesus in you. That might sound strange, but when God’s people are honest in their pain but still cling on to hope and faith – that is the greatest bridge to the gospel. People come to Jesus when they need meaning in their chaos. Acknowledging suffering and sharing lament is the best missional response the UK Church has to give to our communities and nation right now.

Rev Canon Peter Challen

Enabler of the Christian Council for Monetary Justice and the London Global Open Table, and networking widely on inclusive justice. Former Senior Chaplain of the South London Industrial Mission.

The economy after Covid-19

An opportunity to birth an alternative eco-conscious community.

ENVISIONING AN ECONOMY THAT TAKES THE COMMANDMENT TO 'LOVE GOD AND LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR' SERIOUSLY.



any are awakening to the knowledge that a community is a safe place. By protecting and nurturing the dignity

of its members the community is sustained, even when challenged by the bewildering threats of external forces. Working together in faith, we can build on this realisation that new life, hope, and dignity can now be fashioned for both our individual and our corporate selves, in the heightened sense of one symbiotic planet, earth.

The Covid-19 crisis contains a brief window of opportunity for system change that is premised on community and the serving only of the common good. This must be on many different scales. Change must occur in each of the inter-locking intimate, corporate and global aspects of our enlarging new planetary sensibilities.

We must look for marks of community such as are known in the spread and consequences of early Christianity itself, as people perceived the 'basilica' as a realm subject to the rule of a universal Christ in everyday incarnations. Yes, in our daily actions as we live our lives 'in Christ'. A contemporary community-minded

people will recognise this key to working together.

All that's needed is a global willingness to share rather than to possess. Are we examples in expanding that togetherness?

Now let's face the two prime eco-words, **ecology and economy**. The first is the planetary context for the second. Eco-ology has been ignored with increasing indifference for some centuries now. Eco-onomy has raced on in human arrogance as an exponential path into many forms of exploitation.

This divergence must be challenged on two parallel, interlocking paths. One is of our personal habits related to consumerism and individual autonomy, 'living more simply, that others may simply live'. The other is examining the premises on which contemporary and globally dominant economic practice is founded, the assumption of 'money making money' and the right to 'the theft of the Commons'. That is a critical contradiction of the premise that 'money is a measure of exchange' [eg Aristotle] and that God is embarrassed by possession. Love is a gift. Our genuine economy must express that.

So, the decelerating of the Covid-19 pandemic offers us all, in a concerted effort at relearning and of new applications, the opportunity to accelerate our acceptance that we are:

ECONOMISTS ONE AND ALL

Start at home, where we each are part-home-holders; house-keepers to some degree. Then, by covenantal planetary tenancy, we are earth- or eco-orderlies, stewards or jobbing economists.

Still at home, playing our part, but now in context of an earthly habitat, upon which we all depend for sustenance, we act as the future's generators of eternal life, imbued with our nurturing of God's endless creativity.

Once we each accept our house-keeping stewardship in the context of new outreaches in community, we can begin to imagine the vital part Christian insights must play in the remodelling of the structure of our integrated societal-political-economy. Those prophetic insights are challenging as much to ourselves as to all others we would hope to persuade. The best advocacy being our own example; that is in a form of servant leadership.

Our contribution may be small, but by each bold example enlarged contribution flows through our community. Our actions, our questions,

our votes, our sheer informed enthusiasm, spreads, just as we receive more inspiration from each other. Our community itself can become a jobbing theologian, a jobbing economist. Even a jobbing polymath curiously trying to see how all the great specialists' studies contribute to our growing understanding of an emergent realised 'kin[g]dom of God', a realm of mutually honouring communities serving the common good as an

integrated part of the ever evolving symbiotic planet earth.

We all have a tendency to sideline the past as impertinent to the present, only to rediscover how central it is in understanding the driving forces of our world and harnessing them again to the natural forces of nature as indigenous peoples did. With no other man-made economy to distract them. That is true of the core message of all the great faith traditions indigenous

in origin. Loving God and loving every neighbour through every act and word.

At this stage we will all, in our different levels of participation, need to get behind the really tough challenges to the old political economy. Some of the most challenging of which are touched upon in the following poetic summary of the work of a humble voluntary association, the Christian Council for Monetary Justice.

LET WISDOM OF ANCIENT DAYS DETERMINE MONEY MAKING

Justice would be, oh, so simple,
though it may take eight creative 'days'
if citizens would vote
for transformation, step by step,
of the monetary system;
that steeps us all in exponential debt.

First, redeem
credit by renewing the requirement
of investment collateral,
for all that's lent, that is,
return to 100% money.

Second, create
a public service banking system,
the crown in action for its people,
issuing money free of debt into the economy,
stemming compounding interest's
strangulation of us all.

Third, invest
in everyone with citizens' basic income,
the first call on a nation's wealth
being the dignity of a freely contributing
society, gifted not categorised,
into space to work,
every skill engaged in just wealth creation.

Fourth, multiply:
currencies that generate economic activities,
social trading of human skill and spirit,
at many levels,
building in the process
local trust, partnership
and community.

Fifth, explore
the ancient wisdom of secular and religious
traditions,
almost everywhere,
that 'money making money' is prostitution
of Aristotle's great economic notion,
'money is the means of exchange
not the mother of interest';
usury must end.

Sixth, revisit
fiscal polices and apply eco-, uni
and land-value- taxes too,
as keys to the sustainability,
of a vast population thriving on the earth
and the intrinsic value
of nature's sustained creativity itself.

Seventh, in the interim
apply a tax to the awesome immorality
of currency speculation,
which flourishes in the overweening vanity
of those who prosper
while, even in a new millennial era,
millions die in want and desperate indignity,
all across the face of an abundant planet
plentiful in a true economy.

Eighth, rest
and looking on a just socio-, politico-
eco-nomy of justice and dignity for all,
say, yes, that, that is good.

This poem first appeared in Faith in Business Quarterly, Spring 1999



THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE

FORGET CHILDREN'S PASTORS – DIGITAL PASTORS ARE GOING TO BE THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER EMPLOYEES FOR CHURCHES POST COVID-19.

Many of us wonder about the future of Church, while asking ourselves some questions.

One is about the attraction of an action. We've all stood during a service with an impossibly enthusiastic person exhorting us to 'do the actions' (happily, the next paragraph offers you the chance to 'do some actions'...)

Another is – if music is from here (do the actions, now – hold right arm straight out horizontally) to here (do the same with left arm) how did the Church end up with a musical range that's often as limited as this (hold palms facing each other about three inches apart).

A final one is – why is it that so many church services today are still like the ones I remember going to with my grandparents, born in the days of Queen Vic herself? Well, things are going to have to change. Covid-19 has forced us to look over the parapet, to do church differently.

Surprise, surprise, the much-feared end times (of the Church, not the world) haven't arrived. Technology has proved popular, with all age groups. My 85-year-old aunt has got herself an iPad and mastered Zoom (which she's sure is some kind of magic) to the point where she's happily taking a regular part in her church's life.

The interesting bit is that her health hasn't allowed her to get to church in person for some years. But now, she's fully part of the church, and she's loving it. She's not looking forward to the end of lockdown, because she fears that the church will just revert back to what it did before and she'll be left once again with no way to engage.

And that's the key opportunity, as we look to a post-virus future. We can



learn from what we've needed to do in lockdown, and enable a very different kind of engagement. What's not on the table (at least for churches that want to thrive) is 'going back to normal'. We can't pretend the last months didn't happen, and simply start doing what we were – largely unsuccessfully – doing before.

In one large church in the central belt of Scotland, they're not sure that they'll go ever back to a weekly programme of physical meetings. Their rapidly growing online programme of engagement is reaching new audiences, without losing existing ones. Before the virus they had physical services and one group of people came to them (quite a big group, to be fair). Now, they've gone from having one audience to three. Their original audience is still there, meeting online in various ways – but they now have a second audience of those who were on the fringes of the church, but rarely came. That group is growing, with all kinds of new, unforeseen points of engagement with the church. And they've discovered a third audience – a large diaspora who used to go to the church, has moved elsewhere in the world and is finding new ways to engage with it, to their delight.

I'm also pleased to be able to anticipate the death of the 'we need a children's worker' guilt trip. I've heard so many churches buy in to the misguided lie that 'if we get the children, we'll get the parents'. Even if that were true (which it isn't), we shouldn't be doing it. Instead

of a prevailing sense that we've somehow completely failed in engaging with children and young people, how about a new way forward?

Churches who can afford a youth worker are starting to realise they'd be better seeking an online (or digital) pastor. Someone whose task is not to just replicate the Sunday service online. Instead, they'll aim to open up radical ways to engage with new audiences, of all ages and of all kinds.

Because suddenly all bets are off. Sunday morning services – not necessarily. Having to wait until the mission workers come home to talk to them – why? Having to fight your way across town for a meeting – no need.

Digital engagement will also change the governance of many churches, who are currently stuck because their constitution doesn't enable remote debate and voting. Like the church in vacancy, who can't move forward because their governing instrument doesn't provide for anything other than people voting in a physical room. They can't even change that bit of their constitution because to make the change they all need to vote in a room!

Online isn't everything, though. It can't replicate how we interact with each other physically. An online room doesn't allow us to interpret tiny changes in body language subconsciously, or replace what we glean from the look in someone's eye. But it offers new engagements, for new audiences, for new thinking, for new leadership, for new governance, for a new way of being church.

And my 85-year-old aunt is so looking forward to that, and to great new ways (Isaiah 43: 18-19) of engaging with the church she loves but can't ever physically go to.

Praise God.

THE MEDIA IS GETTING IT WRONG, BUT NOT FOR THE REASONS YOU THINK

THE CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN LEFT MANY OF US WITH EXTRA TIME TO WATCH, READ, AND CRITICISE THE NEWS. JOURNALIST AND MAGAZINE EDITOR SAM HAILES RESPONDS TO PUBLIC CRITIQUE OF HIS CHOSEN PROFESSION.

There are very few topics on which everyone has an opinion. Most people don't hold strong views on League Two football, the electability of the Liberal Democrats or flower arranging. And yet when it comes to 'the media' it seems as if everybody wants to chime in. The problem is that opinions on the media are like noses. Everyone's got one, but they usually have a couple of holes in them.

For example, I'm often told 'the media' are lazy, sensationalist... or worse. But given how 'the media' describes every newspaper from the *Daily Sport* to *The Guardian*, every news channel from Fox News to MSNBC, and every digital outlet from this esteemed publication to my (far less distinguished) Twitter feed, it doesn't seem fair to lump everything together. Is *Desert Island Discs* sensationalist? Were the broadsheet reporters who waded through millions of leaked files in order to break the Panama Papers story really "lazy"?

It has long amused me how most of us wouldn't dare tell plumbers, lawyers or orthodontists how to do their job, and yet when it comes to journalists – those with zero media training always know best. Many shout at their television or moan on social media about how 'the media' are ignoring a subject they care passionately about. In reality, I've found 99 per cent* of accusations that 'the media' are ignoring subject X can be disproved by Googling that subject and discovering the 346,000 web pages which the search returns. We aren't ignoring it. You just

haven't come across the coverage of it yet.

Forgive my defensiveness, but the fact I studied ethics as part of my journalism degree is not (as some have thought) the punch line to a bad joke. Maybe I would say this, but journalists, editors and producers think long and hard about their decisions. We don't always get it right, but most of us are trying. We aren't actually monsters (or, to quote David Icke, lizards). We might make decisions you disagree with, but generally speaking, we are acting in good faith.

Despite all this, the sad reality for journalists like me, is we simply aren't trusted to tell the truth. A recent survey revealed a mere 28 per cent of Brits trust most news most of the time. That is a colossal problem for outlets like ours, which require readers to pay for what we believe is a quality product. If our reporting isn't trusted, potential subscribers definitely won't part with their cash, and I'll be out of a job. Of course, there are far more serious ramifications for an untrusted industry than me being unemployed. But you get the point. Journalism has a big problem.

The first rule of journalism is 'know your audience'. To put it another way: ask the questions that the public wants answers to. And yet during Coronavirus, some reporters seem to have forgotten this most basic instruction. Take the objectively stupid questions during Downing Street's daily press conferences. My personal favourite was the reporter who asked Boris Johnson to "guarantee" to the entire population that no-one would lose their job. That is a completely

unreasonable expectation. No PM could offer such a guarantee.

Some of the questioning from political editors has reminded me of how the Pharisees spoke to Jesus: when the goal of a question wasn't to elicit useful information, but to trip the person up. Jesus wasn't snookered, but the tactic does sometimes work with politicians. The problem – as more and more people are recognising – is that 'Gotcha' journalism doesn't get us anywhere. It would have been far more profitable to have placed science and health reporters in those press conferences. They would have asked more intelligent questions.

My fear is that the young liberal reporters who didn't see Brexit coming are misreading the public mood yet again. For weeks in May, I sat watching the news channel circa 5pm, desperately waiting to find out when I might be able to hug my closest relatives again. A government obsessed with talking about the economy never addressed these 'social' concerns, and the journalists failed in their duty to ask the questions normal, everyday people wanted answers to.

Getting businesses going again is vital. But the average person doesn't care about the FTSE as much as they do their freedom to see their loved ones. In assessing the many and varied criticisms of journalists today, the most serious and pressing accusation is this: we're failing to ask the questions our audience are asking. If that trend continues, no-one will trust us. And when trust disappears, so will our audience. And without an audience, we are nothing.

*This is not a real statistic. Please don't accuse me of peddling fake news.

COVID-19 AND INEQUALITY

We were all at risk, but we weren't all 'in it together'

*RICHES COULDN'T SAVE US FROM CORONAVIRUS, AND YET THE
CRISIS HAS ONLY SERVED TO FURTHER HIGHLIGHT THE HUGE
INEQUALITIES IN OUR WORLD.*

Wash your hands! Keep your distance! These seemingly simple actions have become symbols of the world in which we find ourselves today. These two orders – for that is what they have become – must inevitably be received with disbelief and resentment amongst the millions of people living in shanty towns, shacks and favelas around the outskirts of places like Johannesburg, Nairobi, and Sao Paulo. Water and space are so very limited in these cities that there is no way these orders can be obeyed.

It is hard to imagine that much that good could possibly come from this virus; it has already taken too many lives. It has, however, also highlighted the economic and social disparity between the Global North and Global South, firmly knocking the notion that we are 'in it together' on the head – once and for all. Those who have contracted the virus in the shanty towns of South Africa – where water, space and resources are in such short supply – would protest that we are not 'in it together' at all. Their experience is yet another inequality added to an already unequal world.

The virus is, we have come to learn, no respecter of class, gender or ethnicity. The respiratory tracts of the 9.5 per cent of the world's population that controls 85 per cent of the planet's wealth are in no way protected by their riches. But for the

remaining billions, most of them residing in the Global South and the abandoned cities in North America, there has begun a series of exponentially growing dilemmas made inevitable by the lack of social protections, workers' rights and decent working conditions. For such as these, suffering will continue way beyond the current Covid-19 pandemic.

In the early centuries of the Christian movement, many argued that God was in some sense protected from suffering. Their emphasis was on God's detachment and distance, immune from feelings of pain as we understand them. They saw God as being somehow beyond the

and continues day after day to break God's heart. The cross smashes the caricature of God resting in some kind of 'celestial deck chair' while hungry millions starve to death. If God's full and final self-revelation was made known in Jesus, then emotion and pain cannot be other than an authentic reflection of God's responses to suffering. Mindful that Jesus 'wept' with grief, 'snorted with indignation' and 'wept again for Jerusalem', we have become aware of a God who genuinely weeps with the weeping and laments with all those who lament.

Christ more than embraces the suffering of those who suffer. He fully

“ The cross smashes the caricature of God resting in some kind of 'celestial deck chair' while hungry millions starve to death ”

vulnerability that accompanies emotion, pain and suffering. No doubt they thought they were protecting the sovereign power of God. Their conclusion, however, is not how most of us think about God today.

The story of the crucifixion reminds us that the pain of all those living with extreme loss matters immensely to God –

inhabits the world of their fears and longings, living in complete solidarity with those who suffer. Only the God who is capable of suffering is also the God who is capable of loving, opening himself to the vulnerability that is always involved in love. This, surely, is what Bonhoeffer was expressing when he wrote, some nine



months before his execution: ‘only the suffering God can help’.

It is no wonder that increasing numbers of theologians, Professors Anthony Reddie and Robert Beckford among them, continue to protest against those strands of European theology which maintain a mournful mystique around the cross that is both passive and individualistic. Instead, seeking to relate the cross to the contemporary world and all its social injustice, they have challenged the idea that God is untouched by the agony we have seen in Jesus’ crucifixion – as if God is to be thought untouchable. These professors confidently argue that God is wholly active and fully participatory in the sufferings of others.

So, what comfort do we take from the cross of Christ in a world rocked by Covid-19? The fundamental Christian response has to be that ‘the crucified God’, a title Jürgen Moltmann famously coined more than fifty years ago, participates in the suffering of those who are vulnerable, and shares in their lament.

It was not long ago that the police force and the local population of Lesbos were turning away asylum seekers and immigrants arriving from Turkey. Scenes,

“ We on this side of the shore can begin to understand, albeit only in part, what it feels like to be trapped by an invisible, unpredictable force over which we have no control ”

at that time focused in refugee camps for those escaping poverty and injustice, soon began being played out in Italian, Spanish, and British hospitals – sick people, some lying on the floors, in hospitals lacking the resources to treat them.

Before this global lockdown, the world of fleeing migrants and the world of the privileged rich were separated not only by sea and sand but also by wealth and power. Yet, for now at least, Covid-19 has forced these worlds, once so different, much closer together. As a result, we on this side of the shore can begin to understand, albeit only in part, what it feels like to be trapped by an invisible, unpredictable force over which we have

no control. Among Christians, this should spur us on to engage in the solidarity of lament, in bold and prophetic acts of truth telling, and in public acts of grieving. In so doing, we stand alongside those who cry out to God: ‘Why God are you letting this happen?’

Lament and actions that exhibit true vulnerability are the ways we testify to the height, width and depth of the love we have come to recognise in the cross of the crucified Jesus. In this time of loss, disorientation and pain, Christians from all over the world are called to show their commitment to those who are suffering by embracing the way of the cross and the true spirit of lament that it demands.

This article originally appeared on www.baptist.org.uk

Rev Marg Hardcastle

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IS GOD SOVEREIGN IN CRISES LIKE THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?

GOD IS **NOT** IN CONTROL

WHEN BMS WORLD MISSION LAUNCHED OUR CORONAVIRUS APPEAL EARLIER THIS YEAR, MARG HARDCASTLE DIDN'T THINK WE SHOULD HAVE USED THE PHRASE 'BUT GOD IS IN CONTROL'. HERE'S WHY.

At the time I posted my response, on Facebook, to BMS' statement 'But God is in control' my husband was with his charity in Nepal and the country had just gone into lockdown; a country where there are few resources for critically sick people. He was also there five years ago when the earthquake struck, flattening the mountain village he was in and devastating the whole region. The country was only just recovering. (But God is in control.)

As of today, over 440,000 people have died from Covid-19 across the world, thousands have lost the means to sustain their lives, and mental health problems are sky rocketing. Few people have been untouched by this pandemic, fear of the future is common. (But God is in control.)

Let's not forget the climate crisis which hasn't gone away, though we've alleviated it for a while. The oceans are still full of our discarded plastic, the loss of insects is accelerating, black rhinos and tigers teeter on the brink of extinction, the Amazon rainforest is disappearing faster than ever and concrete is quietly obliterating the breathing earth. (But God is in control.)

You see, I just can't join in saying – 'But God is in control'.

Well, okay, let's say for a moment, that he is. Then I have to ask – tell me why

you say he is good, because to be honest I don't really like the sound of God who lets so much cr*p happen around the world when he could snap his godly fingers and just make it all nice. (I can hear the theological justifications pinging into my inbox.)

And another thing – what is it with this need (for your God) to be 'in control' anyway? It smacks of the political rhetoric being bandied about by certain blonde-haired ego-driven western leaders. I don't like the phrase at all, it's not collaborative, co-operative, open to compromise that enables the common good and flourishing of all.

The Covid-19 pandemic is an extraordinary worldwide example of out-of-control. Clearly, God is not in control on this one. If you've lived into middle adulthood you will have had enough life experiences to conclude that being in control is not something we can achieve, as hard as we strive; our plans for life – having a family, getting that job, enjoying retirement, living in a peaceful home, going on holiday – just don't work out. Can we not accept that being in control isn't an intended way of being?

I'm just going to bring Jesus in for a moment – from what I've read and understood of his life and mission his primary aim wasn't to be in control. (You know the stories, I don't need to support my argument). He knew the consequence

of other people's desire for control though, particularly the religious types, he saw what harm controllers did to those more vulnerable.

If I don't think God is in control, what do I think about God?

Here are some of the things I think she is:

Freedom-loving
Alongside
Weeping
Comforting
Dancing
Life-giving
Releasing
Empowering
Inspiring.

I think she is:

Helping us to hear the blackbirds sing and watch bees collect nectar

Nudging us to appreciate the wonder of the small and nearby

Revealing to us a view of the Himalayas from Kathmandu because the pollution has cleared – "Look! See the beauty!"

Stirring people to compassion
Inspiring creative community action
Sparking moments of grace and mercy
Whispering "Black lives matter"

Sustaining courage in girls who speak out for education and the future of the planet, their voices will be heard again.

You know what I am getting at.

IS GOD SOVEREIGN IN CRISES LIKE THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?

GOD IS IN CONTROL, BUT...

CALEB HUTCHERSON FINDS BOTH SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT UNHELPFUL. HE HAS CHOSEN TO TAKE A THIRD PATH, INSPIRED BY IDA B WELLS.

How do you make sense of suffering and death? What theological ideas inform your imagination of how to respond? In Beirut, Lebanon, where I live and minister, this Coronavirus pandemic, and to be fair, most of the rest of this year, has amplified these nagging questions about human suffering and faith in a good and powerful God. I find myself troubled and unconvinced by the dominant answers I hear.

One familiar answer, expressed both by many Christians and Muslims, proclaims that God directly ordains all that happens in the world. Maybe you've heard it put this way: "but God is in control and everything that happens is for a [divine] reason. We just have to accept and obey God's will."

Among my Christian friends, this sort of theology seems to motivate people to address the suffering and death with apathy wrapped in spiritualised jargon. "We're still meeting as a church because God is in control." Or, "God has given the world in this pandemic a picture of the ugliness of our sin." Or even more pointedly, "God in his sovereignty has sent this Coronavirus as a specific judgement on 'their' immoral and god-less lifestyle."

Followed to its logical end, this kind of theology perpetuates a stoic indifference to human pain, injustice, and oppression. It pleads for the 'wise person' to live in harmony with whatever happens,

as though that was what God wanted. Too often, this kind of theology is used as a tool to justify human sin, whether individual or systemic. I am convinced that the abstracted assurance offered by this response distorts the good news that God enters the story to end human suffering, oppression, and death. It pushes for certainty in faith that leaves no room for doubt.

An alternative response I have also heard proclaims that God is not, in fact, in control. That it is irresponsible to preach hope in the midst of suffering. This theological response rejects any refusal to enter into the pain of the moment with the offer of spiritual clichés. It instead seeks to address human suffering with lament that cries out to God to do something. As my own family has walked through numerous crises living here in Beirut, I have found this response to more tangibly connect faith and real suffering. But I am unconvinced by the philosophical openness that doubts any sense of God's transcendent authority.

More and more, I am persuaded by a third kind of response. This one avoids the philosophical abstraction about the nuances of God's will in relation to human suffering and evil of the previous two. It is a response articulated by Ida B Wells, a black woman who was born enslaved in Mississippi in 1862. You may know Wells as the 'pioneer of the anti-lynching crusade', as W E B Du Bois called her.

Wells risked her own life numerous times fighting the horrific torture and murder of black people at the hands of whites, many of whom claimed to be Christians.

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone recounts how Wells made sense out of the unspeakable suffering of lynching with a theology that believed in a God who was beyond the control of whites, and who also did not will suffering and injustice. With it she rejected the dominant white theology that conjured lynching and black suffering as somehow within God's sovereign will. And she rebuked responses to this evil that allowed for passivity or acceptance. Instead, she fought courageously and hoped in the God who is more powerful than her adversaries, and who specialises in making a way where there is no way.

Ida B Wells, a black woman from Mississippi, teaches me that faith in God's ultimate authority is important in the midst of suffering. But it's not the whole message, or even the distinctively Christian part. God's actions in human history provoked Wells to give herself to end suffering and injustice.

If we fail to prioritise the in-breaking of the reign of God in Christ in history that puts death to death and ends human suffering, God's sovereignty is meaningless. But God has not abandoned us. Rather, God is with us in our suffering and makes us agents in his plan to end it.



Mario Anthony Russo

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3 THINGS THE COVID CRISIS TAUGHT US ABOUT AMERICANS

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC SHOWED AMERICANS HOW MUCH THEY NEED THEIR CHURCHES, AND THE GOSPEL.

Whenver someone uses the term ‘Americans’ my first thought is, which ones? The United States is far from being a culturally united or uniform country. Northern culture is radically different from southern culture. The West coast and East coast mentalities are far from the same. And there are even significant variations on culture in specific regions, such as the South. So, what do we mean when we say ‘Americans’? Obviously, we do not mean every single one of the more than 328 million people living in the United States. However, if we were to take a sampling of Americans from across the USA during the Covid-19 pandemic, we would find many share several common needs.

1. Americans need to trust science

In February of 2020, just two months before the Covid pandemic hit the US, the Pew Research Group released their findings about Americans’ confidence in science. While Americans trusted doctors more than research scientists, their confidence in science and scientists had been growing steadily over the last four years.

That seemed to change once Covid hit. Immediately, people took to social media to complain about the lockdown and distancing measures – claiming it was all ‘unnecessary’. Their arguments were aided by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently changing its recommendation on the use of masks to stop the spread of Covid. It left people in doubt of the competency of scientists to do the job we trust them to do – keep our health and best interests at heart. However,

no serious accusation can be made against the scientific community (despite the conspiracy theories) to the contrary, and Americans need to continue their trend of increasing confidence in science.

2. Americans need their churches

The isolation from fellowship with other believers was something American Christians didn’t like very much. After just a few short weeks of being separated from their church family, they found creative ways to stay in fellowship. From drive-by youth groups to drive-in church services, Americans showed that they need and want their churches. Many churches saw increased ‘virtual’ attendance to their online services, while others held online prayer and small group meetings. Americans needed their faith community and worked hard to keep it.

More than this, however, American neighbourhoods and communities benefited from local churches. Many churches served as food bank distribution centres for people in need. Church members volunteered to grocery shop for the elderly and deliver other essentials. Others conducted ‘well checks’ on their neighbours to make sure no-one went without. In many ways, the American Church found a renewed connection to its community, and in turn, the community reconnected to the Church. The Church showed America why it is needed.

3. Americans need the gospel

Nearly every friend, colleague, acquaintance, or stranger that I talked to in the United States expressed a similar

feeling about the Covid crisis – fear. People were afraid of what was happening, and what *might* happen. Would those who lost their jobs be able to find new ones? Would they be able to feed and protect their families in the meantime? Would they be able to make their mortgage payments? Were they going to lose their constitutional rights? Would the Government exploit this crisis for a power grab? Was the world on the verge of irrevocable damage? Was the crisis just a smokescreen for something more sinister?

How does the gospel address these fears? The main message behind the gospel is the kingship of Jesus. Yet, so many Americans think the gospel means we simply ‘say a prayer’ or ‘walk down the aisle and accept Jesus into our heart.’ It is a ‘one and done’ message that leaves a person *converted* to Christ, but not necessarily *committed* to Christ. But the crucified and resurrected Lord of the universe has conquered sin, death, disease, and destruction. He is the King of Kings who cast out fear, defeated the principalities and powers, and is making the whole world new. These truths are hard to believe in the middle of a crisis, but they are no less true.

For many American Christians, this faith in Jesus preserved them through a difficult time, and will preserve them still. They haven’t lost their faith, rather they have fought hard through the crisis and their faith has flourished. This in itself is a powerful testimony to the broader American culture. Fear, doubts, uncertainty, questions – the gospel addresses these all through the lordship of King Jesus. It is this gospel that will equip Americans to weather the next crisis – whatever may come.

Mark Ord

Director for Mission Training and Hospitality for BMS World Mission.

CORONAVIRUS: A CRISIS NOT AN ENEMY

SHOULD WE BE TROUBLED BY THE WAR-LIKE RHETORIC THAT HAS DEFINED OUR BATTLE AGAINST CORONAVIRUS?

Early on, Covid-19 was defined as an enemy. The size and scale of the attacker shifted. An ‘unexpected and invisible mugger’, that we were gradually and riskily ‘wrestling to the ground’. An invading force to be repelled by a ‘wartime government’. The enemy would be met with Churchillian leadership, plucky and disciplined resistance and a heroic frontline; made up of nurses, doctors and supermarket workers. In no time – 12 weeks to be precise – we would ‘send Coronavirus packing’.

These wartime evocations were effective. The nation was willing to make sacrifices; everyone would play their part – well, almost everyone. We applauded the sacrifice and the service of the NHS and locally many new volunteers worked hard for the common good.

There is, though, something troubling about recourse to enemy talk in dealing with the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. There is the uneasy sense that tub thumping predominated over crisis management and that accountability was trumped by official secrets. Maybe it is because the pandemic followed closely on the heels of Brexit, but you have to wonder if we always need an enemy. Covid-19 has flowed seamlessly into the Black Lives Matter protests, reminding us that modern nation states are built on fault lines of violence. It didn’t take long for political leaders to point out that the protests were hijacked by the enemies of law and order. Enemies abound.

This observation has deep roots in

Christian theology. Augustine, in the 5th Century, saw that the Roman Empire, despite its aim and its claim to build peace, was in fact rooted in violence. He noted that Rome was built on conflict and observed that the empire maintained a sense of unity by identifying enemies, both within and at the borders. The Empire and the Church did not, and could not, aspire to the same thing in their respective quest for peace.

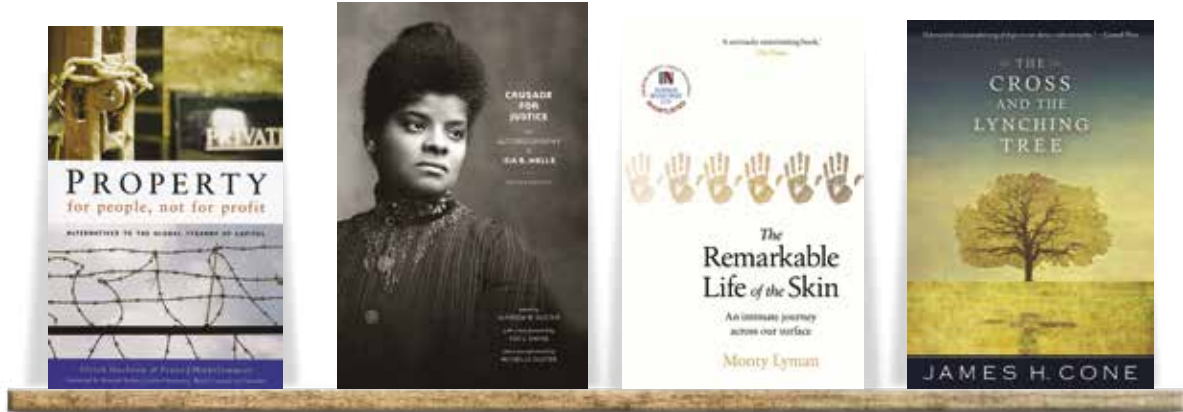
More recently Rene Girard pointed out that unity and peace in society is precariously achieved through the process of scapegoating; whereby a group or a person is singled out as the focus of unwarranted hostility. Modern pluralist and capitalist societies, where diversity and inequality are intertwined and histories of violence are buried barely below the surface, are fraught places. The naming of enemies is still, paradoxically, a necessary component in maintaining the peace. William Kavanaugh points out that in secularised societies, with religion along with other social institutions detailed to deal with such esoteric matters as the common good, it falls to the state to occupy itself with peace in terms of security and order. The state alone can call out enemies and call to arms. In this



sense ‘war is the health of the state’, the only time the nation will pull together for a common cause. Well, war and sport, which as George Orwell reminds us, is just war by other means.

This should be enough to remind Christians that recourse to the talk of enemies – whether metaphorical or more actual – is a perilous thing. It roots us all in a dynamic and history of conflict which easily solidifies into a pragmatic acceptance of violence as the way things are. When that happens the Church often accepts the task of adding a supplement of heavenly peace to the earthy inevitability of violence and how it is managed. However useful, and at times warranted, talk of war and enemies is, it is not the default for our life together. Goodness, not hostility, is at the heart of our origin story and peaceableness is, in Christ, our common future. The Church is called to perform, and witness to, this peace. This may include framing a pandemic as a crisis and not a war.

LIFE POST-COVID



BOOKS

PROPERTY FOR PEOPLE NOT FOR PROFIT

Ulrich Duchrow

Rev Dr Peter Challen recommends this profound study of biblical concern for inclusive justice, that argues that property lies at the heart of an economic system geared to profit maximisation.

CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE: The Autobiography of Ida B Wells

Ida B Wells

Caleb Hutcherson encourages us to look to Ida B Wells' response to suffering as we reflect on the Coronavirus pandemic. As one of the foremost crusaders against black oppression, in this memoir Ida B Wells tells of her private life as well as her public activities

in her fight against attitudes and laws oppressing black people.

GOD ON MUTE

Pete Greig

For more on suffering and lament, Pete Greig steps into the dark side of prayer and emerges with a hard-won message of hope, comfort, and profound biblical insight for all who suffer in silence.

MISSION, RISK AND SUFFERING

Matt Vaughan

A re-evaluation of the place of risk and suffering in Christian discipleship.

THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF THE SKIN

An intimate journey across our surface

Monty Lyman

NHS doctor and author Monty

Lyman explores the skin in this fascinating book. Look out for his next one on pain.

THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE

James H Cone

The cross and the lynching tree are the two most emotionally charged symbols in the history of the African American community. In this powerful work, theologian James H Cone explores these symbols, which represent the worst in human beings and at the same time a thirst for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.

WEB

REIMAGINING CHURCH AND MISSION

Three webinars exploring church and mission post-Coronavirus,

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