

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

We are all thinking about what happens next.

It may be, what happens in the next month? Will restrictions be finally lifted on July 19? Why are infection rates so very high in some parts of the country and will that delay lifting yet again?

Or maybe we are asking, what happens beyond that, when we look around and see the devastating impact of these past 16 months, when we take stock, when we begin to see and feel what has happened to us all. What happens next?

We are deeply feeling creatures, and so when something dramatic or life changing happens, coming to terms with it takes a long time. A very long time.

And that is what is going on now. We have been through the most extraordinary experience together, an experience of a world turned upside down, of loss, grief and bereavement on so many levels, over the last 16 months, and it is not over yet.

The key question is, “how do we heal?”

How do we heal our communities? How do we heal ourselves? And as we have learned through this time of the inequalities in our society, how to help everyone to heal?

We have recognised that we are globally in the same storm, but we are certainly not in the same boat. Some pass by in their luxury yachts while others are grasping at a plank to stay afloat, and others started in a seaworthy boat but the storm has been too great, and they too are clutching at what is left.

How do we heal? Healing is always about hope. Where there is healing there is hope. We have seen this throughout the pandemic with the focus on and gratitude for health care workers and the NHS – the work they have done and do has brought hope into our uncertainty and anxiety.

So how do we heal? This question was asked by Nick Hulme, chief executive of Ipswich and Colchester Hospitals at a gathering of health care professionals a few months ago.

And the question clearly touched a nerve because it started a remarkable county-wide process to explore the answers.

The Suffolk and North-East Essex Integrated Care System took the lead to start a conversation across the region, engaging with an enormous variety of people, all questioning how we will move forward again as we reach a new stage in this pandemic.

This process was drawn to a focal point on June 16 at a “Learning Summit”, presenting the reflections of countless conversations across the county, as well as showing the winning entries for a competition of home-made films on the question, “How do we heal?”

I had the privilege of chairing and introducing the event, which a couple of hundred people joined as participants on-line, while many others watched on YouTube.

For all of us taking part, it was an incredibly moving and powerful event. It was about healing, but because it was about healing, it was also about hope.

Words like compassion, courage, care, listening, kind, wove through the whole occasion, and through each element.

One person spoke about how we can help older and more vulnerable people re-engage with society, and how the well-being of all needs to be at the heart of all we do.

Others spoke about our needs, for meaning and purpose, and to be heard, with people making time to listen – a frequent theme of the conference – because listening is the key to the healing we all need.

And we heard the warning that it is only as we begin to emerge that we will recognize how deeply we have been impacted, what a strain this time has been. And that is the point at which we need to be able to ask for help.

We talked about individuals healing, and communities, and organisations. One speaker believed that in the health and care world we had seen the “death of the policy of competition,” to be replaced by much stronger collaboration and cooperation across agencies, public bodies and voluntary organisations, including our churches, committed to the healing of individuals and communities.

And we heard about those communities and individuals who have experienced pain and isolation through this time, including minority ethnic communities, people with mental illness, and those in deepest poverty, including rough sleepers.

The theme of course was that no one should be left behind, and that healing was for everyone, including across the divisions in our communities and wider society.

And over and over again we heard, pay attention to, listen to, each other as individuals, look at and treat each of us as a person, not a condition or a state.

The film that won the prize for the best message proclaimed, “Be kind, be courteous, be helpful.”

That summed it up, and there was not a word spoken or an image or film shown that did not convey that fundamental reality that we are all precious, and, as I would want to proclaim, all children of God.