

Staying Alive - into the Future

O God, you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***'I've been in church leadership for nearly 50 years.
This is the most interesting, exciting and important moment in all that time.'***
Bob Jackson, Everyone Welcome to the Future

1. Where are we?

I think we are still in the '**response phase**' – emergency reaction [Simon Barrington]. High speed reactive working. Characterised by energy and eventually by exhaustion and the risk of burnout. But moving to a '**recovery phase**' over the next year. Characterised by trauma, grief, anxiety, many mental health issues, lack of confidence about the "normal"! 2021 onwards will be **reconstruction**: a re-imagined future – but what will really have changed?

So it is **still early to be thinking about the future** because we are still reacting and much is unclear (e.g. financial impact; what level of drop out from church attendance will happen; will have new people joining us). But we need to make a start.

In recovery, 80% of life goes back to as it was before, 20% is radically different – and the 20% that changes was already ready to change.

So what was already changing ? "Digital Church"?

2. What are we seeing socially?

a. Anxiety

There is no clarity about when "this" will end. We do not know what the "new normal" will be like or what will be viable. All planning is provisional. There is fear of further spikes with all that might bring. We do not yet know what level of economic and therefore social dislocation will follow the lockdown. At the most profound level, the security of our way of life has been undermined. I detect in myself, colleagues and congregation the most sustained anxiety I have seen since the 1980s in the North East. *Church Times* survey – 38% more anxious. 271,000,000 results of my search for 'Anxiety in Covid'...

What is the role of the Church at a time of profound anxiety?

b. Loss of trust in the government.

Whatever the final review will reveal, there is a widespread loss of confidence that the government has handled this well, or with integrity: the "Cummings Factor". There has been some reaction in terms of "they may be stupid but we will be sensible" but also some

irresponsible reaction (social disorder). What will be the medium term consequence of a loss of confidence in national government? The NHS has gone up in national esteem.
Will the CofE be caught up in this loss of trust or can we locate ourselves in a more positive place?

c. Neighbourliness.

Whilst this will vary according to social location, there is a widespread perception that neighbourliness has been enhanced. 61% feel they have been more neighbourly.

Will this be sustained? Is the Church part of this phenomenon? Can we encourage and participate?

3. What have we experienced in the Church?

a. Going virtual.

The discovery that many of us can have a much more effective presence in the virtual world than we ever imagined, and that we can do some things better in the virtual world, has been a revelation. Whilst there is some proper critique of the on-line church, the overwhelming sense is one of positive achievement and outreach.

What are the long-term points of learning from going virtual?

b. Going invisible.

Many of us have also felt that we have become invisible. Our church buildings are closed, our bells are silenced and we are not in our usual public role. Will this mark a large step on the road of secularization and the marginalisation of the Church? There is realistic anxiety that some of our congregations will not be able to re-form and that some of our buildings will close permanently. Or will there be a popular rush back to visible church? Early indications are mixed. Only 51% thought it right to close the church buildings and 67% think buildings are central to the Church's witness.

Will the CofE be stronger or weaker after COVID 19?

c. Going uncomfortable.

"We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm but in different boats." Lockdown and COVID 19 have exposed fissures of injustice in our society: ethnic, class, regional. "Low status" jobs have been revealed as essential but under-valued. Most profoundly, the whole economic basis on which our society is built – "make it, sell it, consume it" – has been revealed as inadequate and even harmful. Consumption feels like a stupid way to try to regenerate society

Will society react with a deep reaction against capitalist consumerism? Will there be a decisive move towards a "Green Economy"? Do we remember the prophetic words of our young people at Waymark on the Saturday afternoon?

4. Possible futures?

- a. **Profound cultural change** – a shift from late modern consumerist capitalism to a more ecologically sustainable economic and social system. **Or back to the "same old, same old..."**

- b. **Economic and social instability at a level not seen the 1980s.** Mass unemployment. Increased criminality. Social disorder. Failure of some social institutions. **Or will there be a rapid “bounce-back” ?**
- c. **Accelerated decline of the local parish church** to be replaced by both larger gathered churches and also more informal local Christian communities? Or will the renewal of the local and the face-to-face community and the sense that “small is beautiful” lead to **a revival in our local (parish) churches?** [My personal experience has been that people have
 - i. used local virtual services as much as if not more than the “national” ones...
 - ii. loved being “back in their church”.]

NB it is likely that we are about to face a serious financial crisis in the Church.

- d. **Revival.** That the levels of dis-ease and anxiety will provoke spiritual hunger which will lead to a rediscovery of the Christian Faith and a renewal of the Church. There is *some* evidence of increased levels of prayer in wider society and certainly of increased “attendance” at virtual services. **Or will the Church become more invisible?**

5. Some ponderings...

- a. The Church *must* throw its weight into **greening** itself and society. This the voice of the Spirit now. How do we do this?
- b. We *must not* lose the **advances of going virtual**: on-line worship and mission, simplicity of institutional life, heightened spirituality. Can we help more of our churches become genuinely “hybrid”? How will our big churches sustain a physical and a virtual life?
- c. **Laity or bust.** If we cannot free the clergy to be “spiritual leaders” by sharing the workload of running the institutions of the Church then we have a limited future.
- d. Can we be a **nimbler and simpler Church** ? Fewer meetings. Less regulation. Smarter about our buildings. Naturally evangelistic and missional. More “local”. More authentic.

6. God.

What have we learned of God during this pandemic? How do we pray now?

Some gleanings from Tom Wright *God and the Pandemic* 2020.

- a. Lament
- b. What sort of in-charge-ness does God have?
- c. God works through human beings
- d. God’s people are participants in God’s providence

'The Book of Job rattles the cages of our easy-going piety. It reminds us that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth – more pains and puzzles in heaven and earth – than are dreamed of in our philosophy. Even our 'Christian' philosophy.' NT Wright *God and the Pandemic*

'Paul...is saying that God is working *with* people, doing what he wants to do in the world, not all by himself, but through human agency.'

NT Wright *God and the Pandemic*

'Paul...is offering a Jesus-shaped picture of a suffering, redeeming providence, in which God's people are themselves not simply spectators, not simply beneficiaries, but active participants.'

NT Wright *God and the Pandemic*

If God is working through us then...

- How do we evaluate what is happening and where we are going?
- How do we do share our faith now?
- How will we lament/give thanks/remember in the next 6 months?

7. In the immediate

- Self-care** [CPAS surveys reveal that the "word of the month" in May was "excited; in June it was "exhausted" and in July it was "overwhelmed". In June 64% of clergy had taken no leave since lockdown and 17% had tried and failed...
- Lament.** Our first priority? So *much* sadness in so many ways. How do we respond?
- Thanksgiving** – how and when do we celebrate deliverance from COVID 19?
- Memorial services.** Will there be a surge of demand for memorial services? Can we compete? Can we cope with the demand?
- Schools and young people.** I detect some serious mental health issues amongst children and young people. How might we respond?
- Evangelism now...** what might this look like authentically?

To do in the next fortnight

- Priorities for the next 2 months?**
- Priorities for the next 12 months?**

Useful resources

- 5 things to know about Lament by +Tom.
<https://www.ntwrightonline.org/five-things-to-know-about-lament/>
- St Luke's Healthcare: see especially 'Making a start on long-term recovery from a crisis' and 'CPVID 19, crisis fatigue and you'.
<https://www.stlukesforclergy.org.uk/st-lukes-virtual-wellbeing-programme/>

***May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13***

ABB with thanks to CPAS and James Lawrence

<https://www.cpas.org.uk/events-and-programmes/leadership-in-lockdown/#.XwsrHihKiUk>