

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

An Introduction



The Post-Covid Theology Project

*Questions for churches exploring
the future*

It might seem strange, even a little presumptuous, to set out on a project entitled post-covid theology when many nations around the world, including our own, are still seeing infection rates on the rise, hospitals under pressure and daily deaths are at a troubling level. Nevertheless, we are at a significant point in the pandemic to begin to think about some of the questions that have arisen and what we may need to continue wrestling with as churches.

During the last 18 months of the coronavirus pandemic there has been an explosion of blogs, essays, journal articles, books and other resources produced to help Christians come to terms with such an unforeseen event. There have been comparisons with other pandemics in history; whether the plagues of London in the 15th and 16th century or the Spanish flu in the early 20th. Since we are still in the midst of the pandemic globally it is far too early to see what conclusions history will make about the impact of this pandemic.

Member Churches of Churches Together in England are collaborating in this project to reflect theologically on the changes, challenges and opportunities for English churches arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. Our aim is to provide resources for local churches, parishes and congregations, enabling them to think carefully about the implications for their life, witness and worship. We have in mind local leaders who need to make decisions about pastoral care, patterns of Sunday worship, mission initiatives and the use of their buildings.

This project is not primarily about answers but rooted in, we hope, asking good questions.

How this resource came about

The swift advance of pragmatic responses to the pandemic by churches has led some to wonder what the theological implications of the emerging new normality might be. In order to provide as broad an ecumenical engagement as possible, CTE was asked to facilitate engagement with a range of theological issues affecting churches in the post-pandemic world.

Over a relatively short period of the summer of 2021, we gathered theologians and practitioners from a wide variety of our 51 Member Churches, and asked them what the most important questions were that needed our attention in the post-covid era (the group members are listed at the end of this document). These questions came out of the specific theological sub disciplines of missiology, liturgy, ecclesiology, theological anthropology and spirituality.

Contact

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They therefore help us explore the themes of mission and engagement with wider society; church life and worship; and questions of our humanity and pastoral care.

We began to host a conversation and generated many questions but realised that this really should be an ongoing conversation with a wider group of people.

Reflecting together as churches

The March 2020 national lockdown closed churches for public worship, and very soon, and with increasing professionalism, churches moved worship online. This change to a hybrid pattern of worship seems here to stay, but what are the implications of this for communities that gather for worship? Who gains from this, and who loses? Is hybrid always good, and how do we support those who provide the resources for it? What are its implications for sacramental life, and how do we deepen participation for all, whether online or gathered in a building?

Churches were ready to offer help in their communities and all manner of new opportunities to serve were rapidly envisioned and implemented. Helplines were established, food banks offered delivery services and volunteers to listen on the doorstep (appropriately social-distanced) were recruited. What might be the opportunities now, with mental health concerns rising and some vulnerable families in crisis? What are the theological considerations as we collaborate with others of good will, or other faiths?

The pandemic has vividly exposed our vulnerability and mortality. What does this say about the human condition that had, perhaps, become overshadowed by pride and self-confidence? What inequalities did it reveal, and how might pastoral responses reflect our convictions about the Christian faith? And what does it mean to be a 'digital human'?

Pragmatic answers to some of these challenges are not hard to find, but often lack the theological reflection that helpfully suggests caution or encourages implementation. **The Post-Covid Theology Project aims to provide the space to reflect together, engage in conversations and tell stories.**

At its heart are questions about discernment.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Jesus cried out on the cross. So too, in different ways, have many people felt abandoned, confused and challenged by a pandemic that has crucified and, in many places, still crucifies people across our world. But there have also been times of delight or even of joy – touches of the resurrection. And yet the experience of most has been tinged with the sombre. Like the psalmists, we have called out from the depths. At some level within ourselves there are questions posed to us by our experience, including:

- What might God be saying in or through the pandemic?
- How do we refine our attention to be able to hear what God might be saying?
- What do we learn about God through it?
- How do we respond to God?

We hope that the questions resulting from this project will be both an encouragement and a challenge for churches across our nation, as together we ask: "what are the most important questions that need our attention as churches in the post-covid era?"

Future plans

This project will roll-out areas for consideration over the coming months, with video and written resources, spaces for further conversation and the telling of stories, and perhaps the beginnings of answers to the challenges we as churches face. We hope you'll join that conversation as we learn from one another, and offer to one another our experience of God guiding, challenging or even rebuking us. All so that together we might be the effective body of Christ in this nation, bearing witness to God's saving grace in Christ Jesus.

Towards the end of the year we hope to provide a fuller reflection on questions relating to **mission** and engagement with wider society.

Then in 2022 there will be resources about **church life** and **worship**, followed by others that that explore questions of our **humanity** and **pastoral care**.

All the while fresh challenges emerge, some existing trends are accelerated and the call to be the church in the world remains. We hope that the questions and tentative answers that arise from this work may be seeds of renewal for those who have felt trapped in a particular furrow from which they seek to escape. We hope these questions may be both an encouragement and a challenge to everyone who seeks to share the Christ story in their unique context. And may these questions and the discussions they generate lead to further questioning and collaboration, spurring each of us on as missionary disciples in England today.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE POST COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT AT
cte.org.uk/PostCovidTheology

Group members and themes

Missiology		
Jenny Sinclair	Roman Catholic	CEO, Together for the Common Good
Harvey Kwiyani	Pentecostal	CEO, Global Connections
Will Foulger	Anglican	Director of Mission and Evangelism, Cranmer Hall
Heather Major	Church of Scotland	Glasgow University/Women in Mission
Martin Robinson		Journal of Missional Practice – Engage West Midlands
Gary Gibbs	Elim	National Director of Evangelism and Church Planting
Anastasios Salapatas	Greek Orthodox	Parish Priest - Bristol
Ben Aldous	CTE	Principal Officer for Mission and Evangelism

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Theological Anthropology

Sally Nelson	Baptist	Dean of St Hild, Northern Baptist College
Israel Olofinjana	Baptist	Director of One People Commission, Evangelical Alliance
Ben Fulford	Anglican	Deputy Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Chester University
Carlton Turner	Anglican	Anglican Tutor in Contextual Theology and Mission Studies
Gemma Simmonds	Roman Catholic	Director, Religious Life Institute, University of London
Isabelle Hamley	Anglican	Secretary for Theology and Ecumenical Relations and Theological Adviser to the House of Bishops
Ben Wood	Quaker	

God and Spirituality

David Muir	Pentecostal	Head of Whitelands College, Roehampton University
Trevor Howard	'New Churches'	Executive Vice-Chair of the Board at Churches in Communities International and Director of Ministry
Charlotte Cook	Church of England	Parish Priest, member of the Archbishops' Council
Anne le Bas	Church of England	Parish Priest
Paul Fiddes	Baptist	Oxford University
Carole Irwin	Methodist	Director of Studies, Wesley House
Clare Watkins	Roman Catholic	Roehampton University
Nicola Price-Tebbutt	Methodist	Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee, Methodist Church
Callan Slipper	Church of England	National Ecumenical Officer, C of E

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Liturgy		
Rex Ambler	Quaker	Retired Senior Lecture in Theology, Birmingham University
Jonathan Keyworth	Baptist	Minister, New Road Baptist Church, Oxford
Jonny Baker	Anglican	Director of Mission Education, CMS
Claire Turner	Anglican	Vicar of St Chad's Church, Rubery
Pete Leveson	Baptist	Minister, South Norwood Baptist Church
Racheal Adeboye	RCCG	Lecturer, University of Bedfordshire
Timothy Menezes	Catholic	Dean of St Chad's Cathedral
Neil Stubbens	Methodist	Methodist presbyter, Liverpool North
Oliver Cross	Anglican	Rector of All Saints, Northampton
Paul Goodliff	CTE	General Secretary

Worship		
Richard Bradbury	Ground Level Network	Beverley Community Church
Richard Clutterbuck	Methodist	Research Fellow Wesley House, Cambridge
Andy Goodliff	Baptist	Minister, Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend on Sea
Isabelle Hamley	Church of England	Secretary for Theology and Ecumenical Relations and Theological Adviser to the House of Bishops
Elliot Vanstone	Catholic	Mission Advisor, CBCEW

MORE ABOUT CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND

Churches Together in England is the national ecumenical instrument supporting and encouraging churches from a wide range of traditions to work together in unity.

With churches drawn from the Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Orthodox and Lutheran traditions, as well as Free Churches, Quakers and others, we unite one of the broadest range of churches in the whole of Europe.

FIND OUT MORE: cte.org.uk/about

