

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Missiology Group



Three real life reflections on mission and covid

Reaching out to the local neighbourhood through WhatsApp

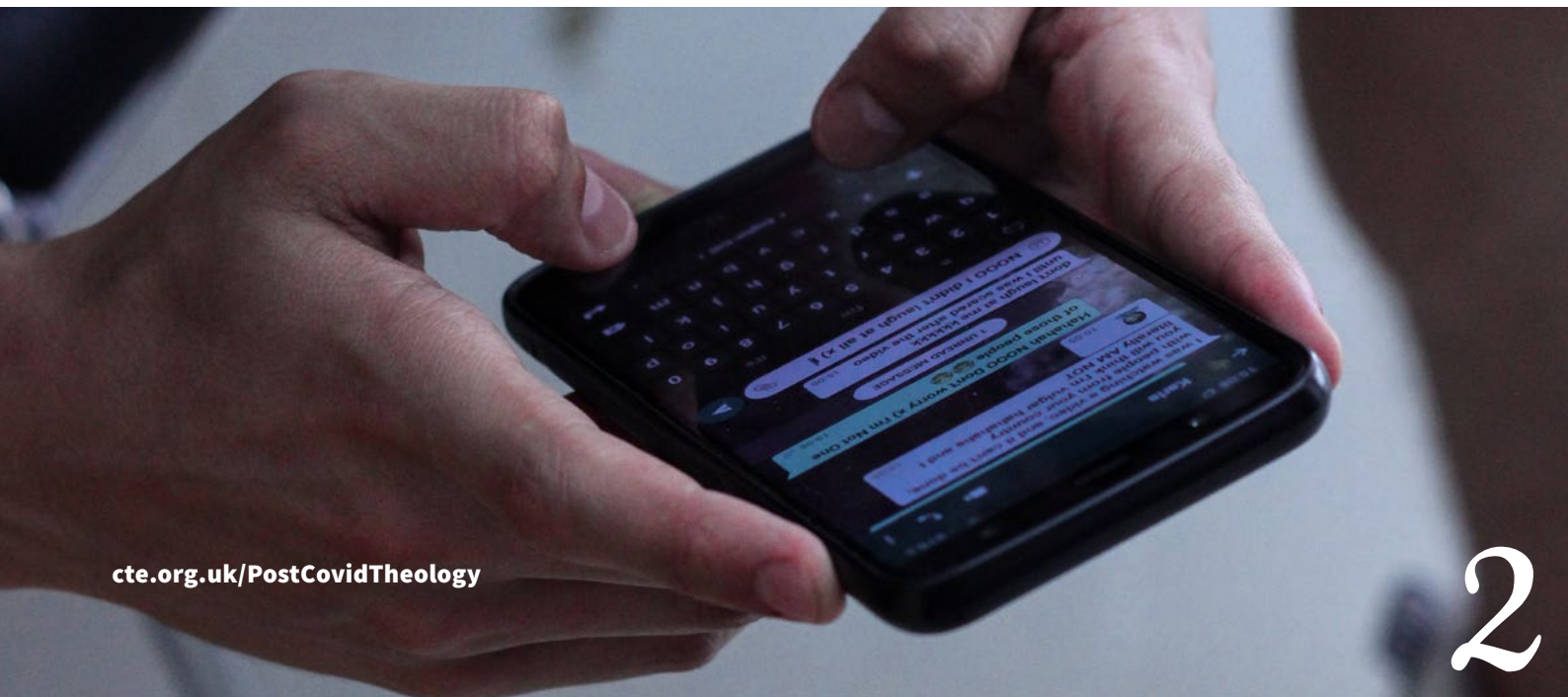
As part of our Post-Covid Theology Project Dionne Gravesande from Christian Aid asked the question **Do we as the church need to rethink our understanding of hospitality?**

She offered the following story

Around April 2020, and during the early days of the Covid19 lockdown I was inspired by a colleague's story of reaching out to her local neighbourhood through WhatsApp. I decided to do likewise after I received a note through my letterbox from a neighbour, who happens to be a leader of a local Parachurch. Between us we set up a neighbourhood WhatsApp group to check in and communicate with each other. Through this mechanism we found out the needs of people who lived five or six doors away, whether they were self-isolating, needed shopping or a someone to talk too. We provided practical support to our neighbours, and as the requests came in, the number of volunteers grew too. Over a period of four weeks the WhatsApp group grew from 12 people on one road to over 80 names covering four roads. In this space it felt like 'giving' became the new norm.

The group is still active today, 17 months later, and what strikes me is over that time multiple friendships have been formed. Together we have established a community relationship, or maybe I should say we re-established a relationship, that goes deeper than a 'wave' or 'hello'. As the town has emerged from lockdown during the summer our group met up at a local park for afternoon tea. It was a lovely intergenerational event to which we all contributed. I was able to say thank you face-to-face to so many people who offered help and support during the lockdown months. I remember a young couple brought their bluetooth speaker and loaded their inspirational playlist, the songs included Bill Withers' *Lovely Day* and Leeland's *Way Maker*; what a moment that was. I live in Northampton town, within a five-minute walk of two churches, yet this local event was the first time many people in the neighbourhood had engaged with the life of those churches.

It caused me to think, maybe the church needs to get out into the park a bit more...



Who are you listening to?

Regional Officer for North East Churches Acting Together, Joanne Thorns, felt that too often the church has not been good at listening because we think we have all the answers.

She asked how can we be better at listening?

I grew up in the North East of England during the time that many of the major industries in the region, such as ship building and mining, were being closed. There were promises about funding for regeneration of communities and what was needed. Over the years people and agencies have come in under different initiatives to 'fix' the problems. Some stayed for a short amount of time until the funding ran out and then left with little lasting change. No one stopped to ask the local people what they wanted, what types of jobs and training would work for them, what would help them find new employment or access appropriate training. The funders thought they knew best.

In my experience the church has been quite good at responding to perceived need. They may well apply for funding and set up a separate charity or CIC (Community Interest Company) to address an issue. However, I often find myself asking them the question "who are you listening to?" I ask who is on their board, who is influencing how the project is shaped and fundamentally what the objective is? Is that objective just to continue delivering a project or is it to change the structures and empower the local community?

In my experience, I often see a project running, let us say a Foodbank for instance, where there is support from many at a distance. The fact that the church is doing its bit is seen as a feather in its cap. But is it all about making the church and its members feel good? Often a project is set up in response to a 'mission drive' where the church is being encouraged to do something, sometimes anything, to increase its outreach and mission.

Conversations are often about people trying to fix the 'poor people' who can't manage. There is an element of the 'white saviour' or at least the 'middle class, Christian' saviour model that says 'you need fixing and we know how to fix you, you need to change how you live to be like us.' This is a model of 'doing to.'

The church should consider how it might get better at listening. In many of Jesus' encounters he begins with 'what is it you want?' or he observes and listens.

Churches need to listen and find out why things are the way they are; find out why people are struggling, discover what gifts and skills lie in the community. The church needs to unearth the wonderful things about the community and the cultural and spiritual gifts it offers. That listening, building confidence, encouraging people to find a voice is hard work. In the process often things emerge that surprise us. And maybe we need to be willing to change ourselves in response to their ideas and insights.

Learning to be more sacrificial

How do we move from protecting our institutions to sharing resources sacrificially? How do we make a move from grasping to open-handedness?

Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations at the United Reformed Church, Rev Philip Brooks, reflects

In his encounter with the rich young man (Luke 19: 16-29), Jesus gives the clear command ‘to sell your possessions and give to the poor.’ It might sound odd to apply this teaching to local churches, who may rather see themselves more as having fallen on hard times, particularly after weathering the storms of a global pandemic. Yet, as a church catholic we are incredibly wealthy in terms of the numbers of buildings at our disposal, even though many of them may only be populated by very small numbers.

I was fortunate to travel to Cumbria recently with the Roman Catholic/United Reformed Church Dialogue Group. We met with Church of England, Methodist, Catholic, URC and Baptist Church Leaders from the region, who spoke inspiringly of the way this ecumenical county has managed to genuinely share its resources sacrificially. That may have been in the way ministry is deployed ecumenically or, in some cases, where local churches have made the courageous decision to leave their spiritual homes behind, relinquishing much loved church buildings. Instead of retreating into the protection of their institutions, the denominations have worked creatively to circumvent ecclesiological frameworks, which too often are used as excuses for not working together in other parts of the country.

As we listened to these stories of open-handed ecumenism, we glimpsed the promise of churches working missionally to bring life in all its fullness, through their meaningful engagement with local communities. It left us with the thought of what would be possible, if more of our churches would adopt the same approach? After Jesus’ command to relinquish their possessions, comes this promise, ‘everyone who has left houses or family or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life’. Emerging from the Covid-world of the last eighteen months, may we all look to that promise and in so doing, learn to be more sacrificial.