

A photograph of three women standing in front of a stone building at night. The woman on the left is wearing a pink robe and clapping. The woman in the middle is wearing a patterned robe and clapping. The woman on the right is wearing a blue jacket and clapping. A warm light emanates from a doorway behind them, and a lantern-style light fixture is visible on the wall.

Editorial



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At the beginning of the Coronavirus crisis in early March, the prospect of lockdown seemed to bring out our most selfish sides. Supermarket shelves were emptying fast; xenophobia was rising and so was stress and anxiety. People were attending large gatherings and packing out pubs and restaurants during the weekend before lockdown began. There was a tangible sense of fear in the air and a worry that it would encourage self-centred behaviour, aided by the myopic lifestyle of being at home and keeping to ourselves.

However, we did not know that this would only precede a nationwide wave of community spirit. The point that is common to all of the articles in this issue of *The Bible in Transmission* is that we as a society are sharing, now more than ever, a sense of solidarity. This is manifesting in claps for key workers, in communities created on social media to support one another, in volunteers shopping for the elderly and, of course, in each person's willingness to sacrifice their civil freedoms for the good of others. Billboards across London are displaying the message, 'Be kind. Let's look out for one another.' According to the Office of National Statistics, over 8 in 10 adults (81 per cent) say they think people are doing more to help others since the Covid-19 pandemic began. There is more positivity about the future, too. Forty-nine per cent of adults in Britain believe that we will be more united as a nation after we recover from lockdown, compared to 22 per cent of adults who believed this before the pandemic.¹ This indicates that the collective effort we are making to help one another has bought new hope. Contrary to what

may be suggested by the idea of 'social distancing', we have not withdrawn from each other to focus only on our own needs. We are very much 'in this together'; recognising our dependence on each other for protection and our responsibility to protect others.

What does this response reveal about us as human beings? When in crisis we are pushed to choose our true priorities. John F Kennedy once said that the Chinese word for 'crisis' is composed of two elements which mean 'danger' and 'opportunity'.² Although this is based on a misunderstanding,² it has yielded a new way of thinking about crisis and our response to it; crises present us with an opportunity to show who we really are. When pushed, we lay aside the political opinions and presumptions which divide us, because these are not our true priorities. We show compassion to the vulnerable, empathy with those who have been affected, and a sense of solidarity that transcends social boundaries and reveals a deep regard for human life. This is interesting from a theological perspective because we see in it a reflection of the God who also shows solidarity to the vulnerable; who called the slaves in the land of Egypt 'my' people; who blessed the poor with the promise of his home, the Kingdom of Heaven; who said that whatever was done for the least of people was done for him.

It is because of the conscious recognition of a God who cares for us that the Church has taken the opportunity to respond with outreach in the midst of this crisis. In his article, Dave Landrum discusses

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1. 'Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain', Office of National Statistics; www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/12june2020

2. See 'How a misunderstanding about Chinese characters has led many astray', an essay by Victor H Mair, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. Available at <http://www.pinyin.info/chinese/crisis.html>

3. Paul S Williams, *Exiles on Mission: How Christians Can Thrive in a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids/London: Brazos/SPCK, 2020).

how the Church is responding with deliveries of food and medicines, shelter, phone calling ministries and much more. Perhaps this could be part of the reason why there is evidence, as Dave also explores, that people in general are more open to conversations about God and willing to explore church during this time. Historically, the Church's willingness to stretch out a hand to those crying out for help has helped it grow. It could also be because the fear invoked by a crisis exposes the deeper need for a greater plan and power to be in place. Digital church services, online prayer groups and Zoom meetings also make church more accessible to those who are just beginning to explore faith, as well as supporting regular church members during this time. Dave notes that many churches are coping well despite the closure of their buildings – they are adapting by digitising their content and still 'meeting' in each other's homes digitally, a response which may be going back to a format more in line with the Church's roots. However, Dave also explores how the Church might respond to the predicted economic crisis through a focus on employment provision and supporting local business.

Peter Heslam explores the challenges faced by business with the closure of places to work, shop, learn, socialise, travel and enjoy leisure. Peter notes that social isolation has become a way to 'engage in a communal struggle' rather than an expression of individual self-sufficiency. He states that business are fundamentally 'other-oriented', co-operative enterprises and that those most in touch with their purpose are the most successful during the pandemic. They are the ones most engaged with their customers and their changing needs. This drive to meet needs – fundamentally, to serve – is driving three Industrial Revolutions. These are the digital technology revolution, which includes the boom of web-based business such as Zoom; the revolution of local digital production through technologies such as 3D printing, and, Peter hopes, a decarbonising green revolution, aided by the replacement of mass manufacturing and carbon-consuming habits with digital and local alternatives.

This can be read in dialogue with Chris Sunderland's point that deep and lasting culture change is needed to protect the Earth beyond the lockdown. Chris is concerned with environmental issues and makes the point that although much of our response to the crisis has had a positive effect on our environment, this will be short-lived unless we change our view of our relationship to the Earth. For Chris, the collective feeling of dread brought about by the pandemic should catalyse a restructure in our thinking about how we can care for others through caring for our environment. This is grounded in an understanding of ourselves as 'part of the Earth's life', and the Earth as God's precious creation, a creation that is a continuing process beyond the initial act at the beginning.

Creation is a deeply human response to pain and crisis, which we do as part of our reflection of our

creator God. We create to express to others and for the benefit of others. Fleur Dorrell explores the artistic response to the Covid-19 pandemic. She tackles the myth that art is an inaccessible luxury only for the elite, pointing to the democratisation of art apparent during the crisis, such as painting rainbows for the NHS. This, too, is a response that reflects God, because, whether consciously or unconsciously, people are utilising a symbol that invokes God's promise and protection against total destruction. Just as the biblical rainbow in the sky was and is for everyone, so the artistic expression of solidarity with the NHS and social care is for everyone, from children to the elderly to the disabled. Art speaks to people of all walks of life, and so, Fleur points out, art is a means of connecting and caring for others.

The importance of art as a therapy used in hospitals and care homes, due in part to its ability to fend off loneliness, is discussed by Fleur and perhaps resonates with the concluding remarks of Philippa Malcolm in her article on medical ethical issues. A person's relational health is also a factor in whether they will survive illness, as well as physical health. The truth of this drives us to reach out and provide social interaction to the self-isolating in whatever way we can, as much as we are driven to feed them, because of our shared sense of the 'high value of human life', as Philippa puts it. This in turn drives us to evaluate the ethics of the way medical care is being distributed. Philippa explores the ethical dilemmas faced by many medical staff today due to the shortage of resources.

Finally, Paul Williams discusses the opportunity for a new mission field after lockdown has ended. Paul makes the point that lockdown has revealed the flaws in the metanarratives that influence post-Christian society – science and the courses of action based on science are not always clear, and the world of business and economics is not always stable. He argues that there is a sense we are tired of cynicism; we hunger for 'the real', which is expressed in the appreciation of relationships and life, as well as gratitude for the NHS and key workers. Paul has recently written *Exiles on Mission*,³ in which he discusses the sense of alienation of Christianity from culture, but even in this he points to the hope that we can be ambassadors for the culture of Christ. Perhaps to the people who are feeling alienated from their old lifestyles as a result of lockdown, Christians can relate and be ambassadors of Christ in the midst of it.

The Covid-19 crisis has affected every aspect of society and has made people re-evaluate what is truly important to them. However, we must keep in mind that though the crisis has been terrible, it has paved the way for a fresh opportunity. It is up to the Church to foster the sense of togetherness and care for one other which has been so powerful throughout lockdown, and in doing so point towards God.