

green christian

the magazine

**A time to mourn,
a time to mend**



Rowan Williams Shaping a richer reality
Radhika Bynon Climate change, covid-19 and racism
Miriam Stoate Church: what's the new normal?

A time to mourn, a time to mend

In March this year, as lockdown started, and an uneasy quiet descended, I received a phone call from a member of Green Christian. "It's so important how we respond to this" he urged, "we just can't let things go back to how they were".

Green Christian was responding. Paul Bodenham was already piloting "Radical Presence", an online discussion group helping people to reflect prayerfully and creatively on the impact of the pandemic, and what it was revealing. The course drew new people to join us, one of whom, Staffan Engstrom, writes enthusiastically about his experience.

My caller's urgent message, echoed by many around the world, is reflected in this issue. This horrible disease is causing suffering, loneliness, poverty and grief. But as Christina Nellist explains, the transmission of Covid-19 to humans is linked both to trade in bushmeat, and also to the destruction of natural habitats to support our unsustainable habits of consumption. It is not a "natural disaster" but yet another indication of our broken relationship with the natural world.

And Radhika Bynon describes how racial injustice, highlighted by the Black Lives Matter protests, is also reflected in who is suffering most, whether from climate change or Covid-19; she calls for a greater diversity amongst decision-makers, and for those who are routinely excluded to be heard.

So as politicians and public health experts struggle to contain the spread

of the virus, and so-called normality continues to unravel, can this time of upheaval offer an opportunity for change for good? Mourning for our mistakes and misguided priorities, can this become a time to mend our understanding of how we could live? Can we collectively begin to imagine a more hopeful future for all the Earth?

Writers in this issue reflect the stark reality of how much hangs in the balance. Rich Gower spells out how the response over the next 18 months, particularly in the values we embrace, and how we act, as individuals, communities and countries, will determine the trajectory of human development over the next decade – a crucial decade in determining whether the rise in global carbon emissions can be rapidly reversed and the worst of climate chaos averted. This is a time for making history, a time for choices, write Katherine Trebeck and Jeremy Williams.

For the pandemic has revealed to us that change is possible.

As flights were grounded, traffic hushed, and life stripped down to essentials, we learnt new ways of living and working. From tree planting on the West coast of Scotland to making videos on the shores of Lake Victoria, included here are stories of how lockdown inspired new ways of being community. As Christians we already speak a language of community and compassion, and perhaps it was in quietly contributing to a mutual aid group, or shopping for your neighbour that you discovered a new meaning of "being Church".

Green Christian is also adapting creatively: we cannot hold our retreat this year but instead are offering an online festival – see GC News pages for more details, and look on the website for unfolding news of speakers and workshops.

Healing for the world is bound up with justice for all people, and all of Creation, so that 'the "polyphony" of all the echoes of the creative Word, is released to be what it can and should be', to borrow Rowan William's wonderful image. An uncertain future lies ahead; for those of us who have a voice, and the power to act, let us use these privileges wisely; silence is not an option. ■



Clare Redfern,
Editor



Some artwork in this issue is from the collection at art.350.org which features artwork that showcases the urgency for solidarity, community, and action, and available to download and share to support a "Just Recovery" at this time.

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Published by Green Christian

Editorial Team:

Clare Redfern (Commissioning Editor)

T: 07906 454771

E: editors@greenchristian.org.uk

Book Review Editor: Tanya Jones

Local Groups Contact: Isobel Murdoch

Submissions

Contributions should ideally be made by e-mail as attached files. Alternatively clear typescript is acceptable when negotiated with the Editors. Accompanying photos and drawings are encouraged. An early email or phone call to the Commissioning Editor, Clare Redfern, to indicate an intention to write is very helpful.

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We affirm our belief in God as Creator of all things and in Jesus Christ as Lord, looking to the Holy Spirit for guidance through the Scriptures, and seeking to hear the Spirit in the challenges of the present time.

Co-Chairs of Green Christian

George Dow (Internal Chair)

E: georgedow@greenchristian.org.uk

Deborah Tomkins (External Chair),

E: deborahatkins@greenchristian.org.uk

greenchristian.org.uk

Treasurer

Eleanor Orr, 35 Kitto Road, London SE14 5TW.

E: treasurer@greenchristian.org.uk

Membership Secretary

Richard Kierton,

Flat 1, 31 St James Terrace,

Buxton SK17 6HS.

E: membership@greenchristian.org.uk

Administrator, Press Office and requests for speakers and resources

Ruth Jarman, GC Admin Officer,

10 Kiln Gardens, Hartley

Wintney, Hants RG27 8RG.

T: 0345 459 8460

E: info@greenchristian.org.uk

Patrons

Rt Rev James Jones,

Fr Sean McDonagh,

Sir Jonathon Porritt,

Prof Sir Ghilleen Prance,

Dr Elaine Storkey.

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Our cover illustration is by Fiona Rich
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Covid-19, wet-markets and animal suffering

Christina Nellist calls for compassionate action

The Covid-19 pandemic was entirely predictable and will undoubtedly be followed by other pandemics in the future. How can I be so sure? Because similar zoonotic diseases – the influenza pandemic of 1918, HIV, Ebola, MERS, SARS, H1N1 Swine flu and H5N1 avian flu – all arose initially from similar situations, either where animals and humans were confined in close contact allowing animal-human spread, or from the ingestion of meat from infected wild animals.

Wet-markets

In many traditional markets across Asia, both wild and domestic animals are kept together in appalling conditions and unnaturally-occurring confined spaces. I have encountered wet-markets in many of the countries where I have lived and worked, although the vast majority are found in China, Vietnam and Cambodia. These countries have few animal protection laws and if they do exist, laws are unlikely to be enforced. Undercover investigations have captured the plight of these animals: for example, see www.animalequality.org.uk/act/ban-wet-markets.



Ferret Badger in Jiangmen Market

Photo Credit: Animals Asia

I urge you to have the courage to view the reality, in order to fully understand what we need to change, or to convince others of the need to engage with the issues involved. This and similar videos make abundantly clear the cramped, unsanitary conditions at wet-markets, which together with the illegal trade in wild animals, make further zoonotic diseases inevitable.

Inconvenient truths

However, we cannot simply point the finger at others; we



Layer hens in Spain.

Photo Credit: J McArthur

must also attend to the log in our own eye before we try to remove the speck in another's (Matthew 7: 3-5). Our own intensive farming systems, by definition, also keep large numbers of animals in relatively small and confined spaces, often caged continually and with s u b s t a n d a r d nutrition. This enables diseases to easily spread and at times jump the

human/non-human animal barrier. An example is variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) caused by feeding cows animal remains. In order to keep infections low, it is common practice for farmers to use and overuse antibiotics, contributing to antibiotic resistant superbugs now found in our societies. Such intensive systems cause immense suffering to animals; besides distress there are dislocations, broken bones, internal injury and death.

Intensive farming

Increasing demand for cheap food from animal products is leading to extensive deforestation for grazing and animal feed-crops. Whilst exacerbating climate change, this also causes significant water, soil and air pollution. As human activity from farming, logging and mining, and human settlement due to rising populations, is encroaching more and more into wild areas, the likelihood of zoonotic infections like Covid-19 jumping the species-barrier into humans rises.¹

It is clear that pastoral/organic farming methods are preferable to intensive practices, though I believe that even these can also cause significant suffering to animals. Besides, they cannot provide enough food for our country



Christ Breaking the Bonds of Animal Suffering

Photo Credit: Aidan Hart Icons

unless radical changes are made in farming, with help given to farmers transitioning from animal to plant-based farming and increased encouragement to the public to significantly reduce their animal food consumption. Writing this during “lock-down”, with radical conditions on activities imposed by governments and largely accepted for the greater good, I am encouraged that a comprehensive rethink and approach to food provision in this country might be formulated and become acceptable in future.

Animal welfare groups

The Animal Interfaith Alliance (AIA), a coalition of faith-based animal advocacy organisations including the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals, Catholic Concern for Animals and Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals have recently sent a letter to the United Nations Environment Secretary asking for the banning of wet-markets and a basic standard of welfare for animals across the globe. It also asks for a worldwide ban on the wildlife trade, a ban on the use of animals in traditional medicine and factory farming, with all farming to be practised to a minimum of RSPCA Assured/Freedom Food standards. It calls for a worldwide ban on the long distance transport of animals and the promotion of plant-based sources of nutrition, which would also promote the health of the world's population.

A role for the Church

The tendency to exploit animals as mere resources for human use has origins in Roman Law where only humans are defined as “persons” and everything else as a “thing” or “object”. Unfortunately Christianity also accepted the ancient Greek tripartite system of souls – Human, Animal, and Vegetable – resulting in the common teaching that only humans have eternal souls. If animals are categorised as soul-less, it should not surprise us that it leads to abuse.

Yet, we can look to our sacred texts and find another, though less prominent tradition, for example in the teachings of St Francis of Assisi, or in the Orthodox tradition, the writings of St Isaac the Syrian. Both call us to care for animals and offer an alternative and more inclusive view of the world.

How can the Christian Church move from the flawed anthropocentric teachings of the past, to a position that incorporates concern for the whole of God's Creation? Two courses that encourage compassion for animals are available online to use with Church groups: *Creature Kind*² created by animal ethicist Professor David Clough, and my own *Creation Care: Christian Responsibility*³ which can be adapted for use by other denominations.

Ultimately, we must, as individuals, examine our consciences and decide if we can continue to consume animal-food sourced from systems that cause immense suffering for animals, and also significantly contribute to climate change.

Speaking truth to power

Governments and institutions have failed to address the suffering of animals within food production systems, and failed to heed the lessons of previous epidemics caused by zoonotic diseases. Had previous lessons been learnt, animal suffering would have been greatly reduced and the current pandemic, which is destroying so many lives, and livelihoods, might have been prevented.

Made in God's image, we are called to care and love as Christ cares for and loves us. This requires us at times to speak truth to power. I believe it is our duty as Christians, to call upon governments and international institutions to do everything in their power to mitigate the risk of future zoonotic pandemics from occurring, and increase the welfare of animals in all forms of food production systems. ■



Dr. Christina Nellist is an Eastern Orthodox theologian specialising in animal suffering and human soteriology. She is a fellow at the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics & co-founder of Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals. Her book *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Animal Suffering* was published by Cambridge Scholars in 2018.

References:

- 1 www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/coronaviruses-are-they-here-stay
- 2 www.becreaturekind.org/
- 3 www.panorthodoxconcernforanimals.org/uncategorized/creation-care-christian-responsibility-course/

Shaping a richer reality?

Rowan Williams reflects



Illustration by Fiona Rich

I was recently asked what the main thing was in the lockdown period that had made me see things in a new light; and after a bit of pondering, I surprised myself by saying that the big discovery for me was that digital communication wasn't as bad as I'd always thought. I still take it for granted that there is something about the three-dimensional, unpredictable, mobile reality of face-to-face contact that is at the heart of our human interaction. But online relation is not just a bad substitute for the "real thing". It's still an example of living in our bodies and communicating through our bodies: we look at real faces, hear real voices – the images and sounds just wouldn't be there if it weren't for people doing ordinary physical things and using their senses to pick up messages.

Despite all the problems, and without regarding digital communication as the answer to everything (it still makes energy demands, after all), we have been shown that our human well-being is not terminally shattered when we start finding out how to work and even worship from home in ways that allow us to step a bit more lightly on the earth. No absolute necessity for long air trips for short meetings or holidays; no need to get the car out to go to church. At the very least, these discoveries leave some good questions hanging in the air.

A couple of things come into focus as we think further about this. One is that digital platforms have given to many people otherwise cut off from "ordinary" interaction a chance to be part of things. There is a surprisingly

"inclusive" side to this experience that seems to allow people who might be unable or deeply reluctant to be physically in some kinds of space, the chance to be involved – hence the startling figures for the numbers who have visited religious sites online in the last few months but who would feel inhibited about stepping through an actual church or synagogue or mosque door. And the result of this is that many have begun to notice more acutely who is routinely ignored or excluded in our society – and (ironically) to see just how much someone cut off from some kinds of communication technology is going to be isolated and disadvantaged.

The other point is that our collective willingness to step back from some sorts of physical contact so as to

protect life and honour the safety of our neighbours is *just as much a physical act of generosity* as the warmest of hugs. We are saying something in and with our bodies; and that something is that we care enough to hold back, to let our bodies be signs of love in the very fact of their absence. The loving course of action is stepping back, accepting that the world works in a way that doesn't always correspond with what makes us feel good; and learning, with a fair amount of pain and sense of loss, that we have to love *intelligently*, using our minds to discern what signs our bodies need to give – in a world that is suddenly more frail than we ever thought.

In this period of trial and confusion, perhaps there are some clues here, pointing us to deepen our humanity. We're learning something about shaping our bodily habits around a reality that is larger, richer, more mysterious than our minds can quite grasp, a reality whose interconnections we don't fully understand or control.

If we are not to do literally lethal damage, we need to "educate" our own bodies afresh. And that has an obvious analogy with the lesson we have still collectively *not* learned about our relation to the environment as a whole. It's going to be quite important, I suspect, for plenty of people to underline the parallels in the weeks and months ahead. We should be asking what a loving and protective set of physical habits would be in the face of the "disease" that afflicts our entire ecosystem on this planet.

This relates, of course, to the actual connections between the pandemic itself and various environmental abuses – like the dramatic reduction of wildlife habitats that makes it so much easier for viral infection to spread from animal to human carriers; or the startling lack

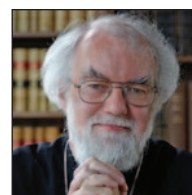
of any systems that effectively monitor casual long-distance travel at times of medical crisis. But the point is a wider one. This pandemic has shown us how thoughtful restraint can be a vehicle of protective love. Can we transfer that discovery to the global ecological sphere as a positive principle to work with?

And can we hold on to the sense that a society that simply doesn't notice most of the time who it is who doesn't have access to various kinds of interactive or deliberative or decision-making spaces is a spectacularly badly-balanced one? If we are hoping and praying for a world in which the entire, interlocking richness of God's Creation, the "polyphony" of all the echoes of the creative Word, is released to be what it can and should be, the proclamation of the Gospel begins in our listening for the silences and the absences – who's not there, who's not free to speak. And this includes not only our fellow human beings but the whole of the life-system of which we are a part – our "neighbourhood", with all the non-human neighbours who make its life possible.

The lockdown experience, then, will have opened some very significant windows on to some new ways of being in the world and "speaking" a new and healing kind of sense through our bodily lives and habits. The sobering truth is that – just like environmental crisis – pandemic disease takes no reckoning of national boundaries or political agendas and reputations; and – just like environmental crisis – it weighs most heavily on those least well resourced and least able to use the levers of social power – underpaid workers in the care and retail worlds, the elderly, BAME people in our country and others, vulnerable and struggling economies.

We have found that we can do more

than we thought we could. And this is potentially the start of a broad rediscovery of a social vision that any Christian would regard as more healthy and defensible, one in which we are daily seeking to grow in attention to the excluded and forgotten and in which we ask the Spirit of communion to show us how our bodies can become signs and sacraments of incarnate love – how they can become true cells of the Body of Christ, in which all live *in* and *for* the life of the neighbour. ■



Rowan Williams was born and grew up in Wales and studied theology in Cambridge and Oxford. He was Bishop of Monmouth and Archbishop of Wales before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002. Since 2012, he has been Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge and Chair of Christian Aid, and is the author of many books on theology, spirituality and contemporary concerns.

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Come back brighter!

Katherine Trebeck and **Jeremy Williams** review the risks and opportunities of a post-viral future

How will art and literature represent our present moment, when it comes to be made? It will have to capture the sense of vertigo that so many of us have felt as the solid certainties of life vanished beneath us. It will consider our slow readjustment to a new normal, and our mourning for the way things were.

But those are stories to tell later. First we have to live it. This is a time for making history. To use a New Testament word, it's a *Kairos* moment – the opportune time. A time for choices. We cannot go back to what we considered normal, but where will we go from here?



Created by Mona Caron
(monacaron.com) art.350.org

The risks

For all the optimism around the possibilities, there's no guarantee that the changes on the other side of coronavirus will be positive. We know what happened at the last financial crisis in 2008: bailouts for industries deemed "too big to fail", paid for by public debt that led to deep cuts to public services and ultimately transferred wealth from the poor to the rich. Bonus culture was uninterrupted even as quantitative easing rinsed market failures away with undeserved billions.

How much have we learned from last time? A string of countries have announced that companies that don't pay their taxes shouldn't expect government support. Poland were first, and many followed, including Denmark, Scotland and Wales. No such announcement from Westminster, despite the obvious fairness of only drawing from public funds if you contribute to them.

Should the GDP-economy continue to slump and job losses rise, budgets may tighten again. As before, this will be pushed onto local authorities to take the difficult decisions. Centrally, some politicians may try again at the "unfinished business" of shrinking the state – that aid budget for example, which certain

factions have been eyeing for some time.

History shows how easily turbulent times can feed extreme politics and scapegoating. Some may take refuge in nationalism. When there isn't so much to go round, some people are going to ask who deserves more, taking a "last to arrive, first to leave" parallel to the approach often taken to redundancies. Life could get harder for minorities, and even tighter at the borders.

A re-evaluation

Let's borrow another New Testament word: apocalypse. It's generally used to denote the end of the world, but in its original meaning it signifies a revelation – the old order falling away and something new being revealed. In that strict sense, Covid-19 has been an apocalypse: it has revealed something hidden to us.

For example, the demands of lockdown, however hard it has been for many, also revealed how ready people are to help each other. Individualist consumer societies can fool people into thinking they don't need each other, and that we are all self-interested economic units out to maximise our individual gain. That lie has been unmasked, as a sense of belonging and solidarity and community blossomed again. It was there all along. We'd just lost our way and forgotten about it.

Another thing that we have rediscovered is that health and wellbeing are more important than economic growth. We knew that all along too, but it had been obscured by the endless talk about the supposed benefits. We'd stumbled into



Greenpeace protest illuminating Westminster

Photo credit: Greenpeace

the social and environmental dead end of GDP growth, and now we see it for the false promise it is.

The sorting of jobs into categories also blew away decades-worth of falsehoods about who has value in society. It turns out that nurses, supermarket cashiers and bin lorry drivers are essential, and bankers, car salespersons and footballers are not (with the possible exception of Marcus Rashford!). Money, we remember, never was a good indicator of real value.

Finally, we can see that our precious economy wasn't working – other than for those who used their wealth to shape it. It would be wrong to say it was broken – that would imply it was malfunctioning, when in fact it was doing exactly what it was supposed to do according to the dictums of those made powerful by the rents they've been able to extract. Dictums such as "take every environmental shortcut and pay the lowest wages you can get away with", in order to deliver greater returns to capital. Supply chains became "just in time", and so did people. Zero hours, worker "flexibility", people as a commodity – an economy now revealed to be inhuman.

The opportunity

What can we do then, armed with these new truths? For a start, we can reconfigure our society and our economy around what matters most. Not growth, the blunt pursuit of more. Now is time to focus on better. A useful first step is to move beyond the calculus of GDP and recalibrate our definitions of success: rewarding work, life-long learning, redistribution of wealth, and the security of a social safety net that everyone can depend on.

Knowing who is essential to the functioning of society, Britain should ensure decent pay and conditions for all its essential workers. The things that make the biggest difference to wellbeing should be priorities for government spending, with a focus on prevention rather than patching things up afterwards.

There is wide agreement that the environment should be a priority too. A survey in 14 countries in April 2020 found that 65% of people agreed with the statement "in the economic recovery after Covid-19, it's important that government action prioritises climate change" (IPSOS). The vision for a Green New Deal pairs environmental and social action so that nobody is left behind, and a greener society also becomes a fairer society – especially for left behind communities and people of colour.

For example, a Green New Deal could focus on community-

owned renewable energy, which would lower carbon emissions while reducing inequality. People would have a stake in the services they depend on, with profits returned to the local community rather than the overstuffed pockets of shareholders.

Decision time

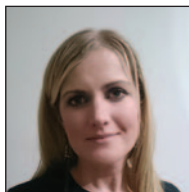
None of these new directions are certain. The government hasn't changed, and the same people who thought it was working before are still in charge. It will take hard work, and campaigns such as Build Back Better are already underway. Tearfund are inviting Churches to consider the role they could play through their Reboot Campaign. Katherine, in her work with the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, is already seeing new choices and new policies being drafted.

As we said in our book, *The Economics of Arrival*, "External events create the most obvious opportunities for change – a financial crisis, an election that brings a new political party to power or the signing of a new international agreement." (Or, we should have added, a global pandemic.) "These 'teachable moments' that show the impossibility of business as usual might not bring change in themselves, but they create moments of opportunity."

Perhaps we have learned something. Perhaps change is in the air, and we can come back brighter on the other side of the virus. ■



Created by David Solnit art.350.org



Katherine Trebeck is Advocacy & Influencing Lead for the Wellbeing Economy Alliance. As policy advisor for Oxfam, she led their work on a "human economy" and developed the Humankind Index. She is Honorary Professor at the University of the West of Scotland and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Strathclyde. Her book *The Economics of Arrival: Ideas for a Grown Up Economy* (co-authored with Jeremy Williams) was published in 2019.



Jeremy Williams is an author, activist and freelance writer specialising in communicating climate change, development, poverty, consumerism and conservation. He is also webeditor of Green Christian's "Joy in Enough" website. His latest book, *Time to Act*, exploring the Christian tradition of non-violent direct action, was published by SPCK this year.

Climate change, like Covid-19, is linked to racism

Radhika Bynon explains

Way back in early April, writer and activist Arundhati Roy, in an article for the *Financial Times* wrote of Coronavirus as having “brought the world to a halt.” She went on to say: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice... our dead rivers and smoky skies... Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”¹

Who could have imagined that one of the outcomes of this pandemic would be global protests about racial injustice, unprecedented not only in scale and spread, but also in the drawing in of large numbers of white people. George Floyd’s harrowing “I can’t breathe” had been uttered in 2014 by Eric Garner, also killed in a police chokehold at the roadside. That death too was caught on a graphic video, and protests ensued. But as with most racial justice protests, the response was largely limited to black-majority cities, with the noticeable absence of white people.

This time, in the midst of a global pandemic, a black man pleading in vain for his life at the hands of nonchalant agents of the state exposed a shared vulnerability and ignited a global response. Big brands from Apple and Netflix, to Lego and even Yorkshire Tea are now keen to display anti-racist



Peter Railand justseeds.org/graphics/

credentials. Books about racism briefly topped the best-seller charts and organisations everywhere including Churches, museums, charities and drama schools seemed to be discussing the issue. Whether this is a fleeting moment or the beginning of the dismantling of institutional racism will depend on whether all those joining this movement persevere with the hard work of holding those in power to account.

For people in the climate movement, for whom 2020 was going to be a big year, this moment has been an opportunity for reflection. Suddenly, Covid-19 threw us into another sort of emergency with

terrible threat to life and the loss of everyday freedoms. Overnight, our sophisticated 21st century lives were stripped down to the bare bones of food, shelter and communication. Those extraordinary early weeks were both frightening and heartening: “global pandemic” was no longer hyperbole and here we were, anxiously watching the news about Italy whilst also delighting in the spawning of thousands of mutual aid groups, and neighbourhood Whatsapp chats created to enable people to shop for strangers and look out for the elderly and the frail.

We were just beginning to grasp that people of colour were dying in greater

numbers from Covid-19 when the atrocious killing of George Floyd shook the world. And the response became the portal which carried so many to greater reflection on the prevalence of racism in our world.

How does the clamour for racial justice connect to the need for action on climate change?

I am a latecomer to environmental campaigning, having spent years grafting on issues of justice and inequality in my work and beyond. So my entry point to climate is the disproportionate impact on poor communities. I want to focus on air pollution and the rapacious exploitation that characterises fossil fuel industries and other conglomerates.

I am motivated to act because I know that unless we do the work to limit global warming to a 1.5°C rise, people whose lives are already very hard will suffer terribly; people in poor communities in the UK and US – as well as in Bangladesh, Haiti, Indonesia and the Pacific Islands.

UK air pollution is particularly acute in deprived inner city communities and it disproportionately affects the very young and the elderly, stunting children's growth, affecting their health, increasing the risk of asthma and even death. So for me, climate change is a justice issue – poor people, largely people of colour are already paying the price for generations of profligate consumption and wilful destruction of the planet's resources.

Covid-19 disproportionately affects people of colour, who experience far higher infection and death rates than white people, with fatalities twice as high among the Bangladeshi community; 90% of doctors who died



Peter Railand justseeds.org/graphics/

came from BAME backgrounds. Public Health England has pointed to entrenched racism as a root cause.²

These untimely deaths are the result of multiple factors to do with access to healthcare and decent housing, working in service roles with greater exposure, the government's "hostile environment" policy, and also that healthcare workers of colour report being pressured into treating patients without appropriate PPE. Taken together, this is a description of systematic racism. In a piece in the *New Statesman* in June, Gary Younge wrote: "These deaths are the collateral damage of British racism – the indirect consequence of decades of exclusion that have corralled black and Asian people into the kind of jobs, housing

and health situations that would make us particularly vulnerable."³

This signals the devastating impact environmental degradation and global warming will have for people of colour. Not because of individual acts of racism, but because of a system of inequality and exclusion which, like the Covid fatalities, work together to disproportionately impact black and brown people. Efforts to tackle climate change must encompass the underlying inequalities and systemic racism that leave people of colour more exposed.

I want to be part of a climate movement that goes beyond lifestyle choices about diet, air travel and "eco-products" to encompass tackling air pollution in urban areas, and supporting investment into under-resourced communities to adapt to or recover from extreme weather.

Furthermore, it is time to recognise that people of colour are rarely at the table when decisions about resources and priorities are made. To effect real change, the climate movement, and the institutions working to reduce global warming, need to listen deeply to, and amplify, diverse voices and perspectives. ■



Radhika Bynon is a specialist in community-led change and social innovation. She has worked on equality and womens' rights issues in the UK and internationally through The Young Foundation, Community Links, Asha Trust and the Global Fund for Women. She is active in Green New Deal UK and Extinction Rebellion Newham and is leading a Radical Presence group in East London.

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Covid-19 disproportionately affects people of colour, who experience far higher infection and death rates than white people

Radical Presence – a personal game changer!

Staffan Engstrom enthuses



Illustration Credit: Ellie Redfern

I was asked to write about my experiences of attending Green Christian's Radical Presence over Zoom. It took me a little while to think how best to sum it up, but perhaps I should say this in introduction: if you are the kind of Christian who likes to have all matters of faith and life laid out neatly with everything tied up and explained in clear black and white terms, then *don't bother with Radical Presence*. It isn't for you!

I must warn you: Radical Presence will take you to profound places, to face difficult issues and it will challenge you in ways that you do not expect.

Covid-19 has been a huge, huge, game-changer for society and for us all. Radical Presence takes you on a journey of exploration into the heart of the crisis, allowing you to explore your life in the context of a very different world... the new normal that everyone keeps mentioning but very few can begin to explain. We are entering a new paradigm where everything is different, and that includes, for me, what it means to be a Christian. Somehow, many of my usual Christian "filters" dropped away, allowing me to see how my faith relates to life – including social justice, the environment and especially climate change – in a new and refreshing way.

The Radical Presence Experience ("Course" feels so wrong) takes an unusual and interesting approach to learning and development; you mostly have to work it out together with your fellow attendees. And it really works! Before each session we were given some thought-provoking reading materials, videos, poems, pictures and articles, including

some perspectives and approaches to chew on. We weren't told what to think about them.

I turned up to the first session expecting the usual lecture on what was right and true, but no, all we got was some introductory context, and then off we virtually went into small groups to discuss the issues around a handful of questions. It was a new experience to be thrown together to debate and discuss matters of great significance with complete strangers, most of whom lived miles away.

Each week it felt like a safe place to speak honestly, but also with the confidence that there was permission to explore deep questions without risk of censure for saying something wrong! We never ran out of things to say. Discussions lasted around an hour and we always wanted more time. We drew our own conclusions, rather than receiving any spoon-feeding, so we felt treated like grown-ups. As a result, I found that the conclusions took a deep root.

I have felt a deeper challenge to my usual life, and life of faith, than I expected. It just isn't enough for Christians to keep going on the same track, effectively ignoring so much of the importance of Creation and the world we live in. The world is more complex than I thought before, more beautiful, much more infused with spirituality, meaning, and connectedness.

I saw for the first time in depth how the consumerist, capitalist and individualist culture of our times is destroying us. I saw that Creation is so much more than natural assets to be used for our individual and collective wealth today at the expense of the future. I saw that it owns us so much more than we own it. I saw how all humans, including those not yet born, should have equal access to its benefits.

I saw that our society and our Churches need radical change. And that that change must start with me. ■



Staffan Engstrom is a Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers and runs a Strategy Consultancy, with a particular focus on supporting organisations in tackling green and climate-focused challenges.

Green shoots and blue skies?

Miriam Stoate reconsiders “being Church”

The tragedy of Covid-19 has, for us all, meant engaging with different types of worship and spiritual reflection – on-line, by email, by phone or between those living nearby. Old and new friends from across the world have met in homes, gardens and when walking – like Jesus, who enjoyed spending time in homes and walking with others. The initial simplicity, slowing down and silence enabled fresh ways of being Church to emerge.

For example, “Roots and Wings” (a young people’s group), which used to meet monthly at Launde Abbey, now meets on-line every fortnight. During the lockdown they have become more theologically reflective, exploring everything from normal and the “new normal”, to how other faiths have reacted to the pandemic – with Muslim and Hindu guests humbling us with their generous giving and dedication to prayer and fasting.

I’ve noticed a new openness to spiritual exploration among secular networks too. I was invited to talk about Christianity and the climate crisis at an Extinction Rebellion online event, with activists from across the UK and beyond. I asked everyone to bring some soil or something living to reflect on, in silence together – a physical way to connect and deeply share with one another, remembering how precious the Earth is and how some people do not even have access to a handful of soil.

The lockdown temporarily released Christians from some of the financial, time and greenhouse gas burdens of

their buildings and too many journeys to too many meetings (though, as a result, Church donations have plummeted). I’ve reflected on how congregations and churchwardens are often elderly and vulnerable; many ordained and lay people are exhausted and burnt out. Is too much energy, time and money being spent on maintaining stones at the expense of nurturing and caring for people made in God’s image?

Even before Covid-19 I was aware that this might be so, as a few years ago, with much sadness and sense of failure, the Methodist Chapel which had been active in our community for over 100 years was closed. However, released from the burden of caring for an old, inefficient building that was sometimes only used for an hour a fortnight, I now had time and energy to help with Fresh Expressions, Taizé services, as a Friend of Launde Abbey, and alternative ways of being with others.

For example, while walking recently, I met a woman who felt so alienated, hurt and excluded by the predominantly masculine language used for God in many prayers and Bible translations that she had left Church. This prompted me to search for alternatives, including the delightful “Inclusive Bible” which is a welcoming and honest translation.

Similarly, older church buildings can feel out-dated and unwelcoming, especially to the disabled and newcomers, while being impossible to heat efficiently and very expensive to maintain. Our parish church includes the tombs of crusaders – which I felt embarrassed by, when



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

welcoming a group of Muslim visitors in the past. In comparison, our village hall is warm and welcoming and people who don’t usually enter the church have been happy and able to attend the annual World Day of Prayer in this community building.

While looking forward to physically meeting and appreciating the sacred peace and stillness found in ancient places of worship, the welcome green shoots arising from the pandemic need nurturing. The climate crisis requires less carbon-intensive travel, more on-line and outside connectivity, while reflecting on which buildings to maintain and retrofit, so the people of the Church can, like Jesus, have time and capacity to love others, ourselves and the beautiful planet which is our shared home. ■



Miriam Stoate is a Pioneer in the Leicester Diocese who encourages people to share silence, be together outside and to live simply and creatively.

Nature Notes in “lockdown”

shared by **Emily Wilkins**, a wildlife ranger on the Hebridean island of Mull



Buessan Bay

Photo credit: Roger Hiley, Loweswatercam

Mid March

Lockdown is announced, things are changing fast and it looks like I won't be leaving the island again for quite a while. I'm undoing all my carefully laid plans, closing up the office, preparing to work from home.

First weekend of lockdown

Sunny weather; the ground is still hard from an overnight frost and for once there is no wind, no tourist traffic – such stillness, like a sacred moment. I'm reluctant to do anything to break the silence.

My daily walks are decorated with the cheery yellows of the first spring flowers: gorse, celandine, daffodil, primrose. Watching butterflies and bees emerging, birdsong swelling, starry nights with a crescent moon.

Our small communities are pulling together to organise delivery of food and medicines to those isolating – we're well used to being proactive and looking out for each other. Leaning out of my window into the pitch black night to join the first Clap for Carers highlights our connectedness; cheers and applause

resound across the bay, bagpipe music floats up through the darkness.

Early April

Yellowhammers singing and the first willow warbler. Soon their song is cascading from every bush. Neighbours are leaving treasures on each other's doorsteps: home baking, toilet roll, fresh fruit from a surprise delivery. Our gin and whisky distilleries have converted to hand sanitizer production. Shopping takes much longer as it's one at a time in the store – but leaves plenty of time to catch up with the news in our carefully-spaced queue.

Second week of April

Ardalanish beach on my daily walk, the



Yellowhammer

Photo credit: garthpeacock.co.uk

sand martins have returned. A couple of days later a newly-arrived wheatear darts across my path with a flash of white. The colour palette develops as violets begin to appear. In the garden a gingery carder bee pollinates my gooseberry bush.

Adapting to the current situation has required some creative thinking: instead of organising community beach-cleans, we're encouraging individual litter-picks along unusually quiet roads; we're sharing resources on social media for outdoor learning during home-schooling and what to look for on your daily walk.

I'm gradually cleaning all the road verges and shoreline within walking distance of my home. Awake early one morning, I decide to tackle the empty village street, but the hungry sheep think the sack I'm carrying means extra food, and I'm soon being followed with an enthusiastic chorus of loud baas echoing around the bay – so much for not drawing attention!

Mid April

One morning there it is, the first cuckoo. I can't get to Iona but friends tell me the corncrakes have arrived. An endangered species – perhaps they'll have greater

breeding success this year with less disturbance.

Staffa on the horizon. Usually this good weather would be perfect for the first overnight camp and dawn seabird survey. People have a protective effect on the puffin colony, our presence reducing attacks by larger predatory birds, so what will happen this year with no human visitors?

Our local community forester needs help planting a large delivery of broadleaf tree saplings, being unable to pay contractors or organise volunteer work-parties. We took collective ownership of the forest five years ago and it's gradually being converted to native species woodland: birch, rowan, hazel, hawthorn, oak, alder, willow, wych elm. I enjoy the simple routine of walking, digging and planting, watching tree pipits parachuting from the forest edge, a species that wasn't recorded during the last wildlife survey four years ago. It reminds me that nature is continually adapting, showing remarkable resilience in the face of change (but how far can we stretch this?). I see sunbathing lizards, wood sorrel, wood anemone and the first pink lousewort flowers.

Early May

Blackcaps and grasshopper warblers are singing. Clear sunny weather continues day after day, peaceful and quiet with little human noise. I'm reminded of a John Muir quote: "This grand show is



Lousewort

Photo credit: Roger Darlington

eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling; vapour is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gloaming, on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls."

At the forest, I walk the nature trail looking for signs of spring, and post photos to my blog so the children can see how it's changing since their school class established it last autumn.

Mid May



Marsh orchid in garden

Photo credit: E. Wilkins

I have been unable to carry out many of the wildlife surveys that would usually keep me busy at this time. Instead I tackle a few citizen science projects in my back garden: creating hoverfly lagoons, moth trapping and learning birdsong from an online course, no doubt entertaining the neighbours as I crawl around the lawn with a magnifying glass.

On my litter-picking walks, the crumpled-rose-like flowers of silverweed and vivid pink thrift bloom along the shoreline, bright yellow marsh marigold in the ditches. It's peak bluebell season at the community forest and it feels good to be planting the native tree canopy that belongs with this ancient woodland indicator.

Work is love in action, the forester reminds me; much easier to believe when I'm here planting trees, than sat with the laptop.



Staffa sunset

Photo credit: E. Wilkins

A break in the weather after weeks of sunshine brings drizzle down to the ground matching the gloomy realisation that life will be different for a long time to come. It's difficult to maintain a sense of purpose with so much of my usual work out of bounds, and devastating news of many colleagues being made redundant.

Whilst protected here from the worst effects of disease, we won't escape the impacts of suffering and loss; our islands are known as a wildlife tourism destination, and many businesses are struggling for survival. In the greyness, the swathes of bluebells seem to glow from within; how can this sight fail to lift the spirits?

Evening walk on dry bogs, which are usually impassable. Cuckoo flying from fencepost to fencepost ahead of me and right outside my front door. A flock of silvery sanderlings passing through, Ardalanish beach – 1km of sand all to myself. Birdsfoot trefoil, milkwort, bugle, first yellow flag iris flower. Wonder how the corncrakes are doing.

Late May

After 10 weeks, lockdown is finally easing. I have planted nearly 3,000 trees, collected 20 sacks of rubbish. What will be my role in the "new normal"? ■



Emily Wilkins lives in Bunessan, Mull and works as a countryside ranger with Mull & Iona Community Trust and the National Trust for Scotland. A longer version of her diary is on the GC website.

Postcard from Uganda

My name is Rosemary Nakasiita and I am 23, pursuing a degree in Business at Makerere University, Kampala. I am the first person in my family to study at University.

Even before Covid-19 arrived, here in Uganda we were already facing huge challenges. In Spring, torrential rains swept across East Africa, causing widespread flooding – Lake Victoria (which Ugandans like to think is the largest freshwater lake in the World) rose to its highest recorded level of 31.42 m and is only slowly receding. In one village, hippos have been seen swimming over to sleep in abandoned houses each night!



Flooding around Lake Victoria

Photo credit: independent.co.uk

Experts say that although climate change is at play, the main driver for the excessive rainfall is climate variability driven by the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD). This year's IOD has been the strongest since 2001 with surface temperature peaking at +2.1°C¹.

The floods have devastated the local economy, with fishing villages and fisheries submerged, local people displaced and roads becoming impassable. Cases of malaria have risen, and household property has been washed away. More recently, cholera and typhoid outbreaks are reported. Following lockdown, the situation worsened; an important source of revenue for fishmongers – exporting freshwater fish to Europe – was put on hold by grounded planes. Though few Covid-19 fatalities have been reported in Uganda, there are reports of violence, even deaths, caused by the security forces enforcing lockdown restrictions; district health and education departments also report a sharp rise in pregnancy, and forced marriage, in girls as young as 12.

Besides all this, we also have a third infestation of desert locusts in the area, reducing much-needed food supplies and threatening farmers' livelihoods.

Most Ugandans have a faith with Roman Catholics making up 39.3% of the population, Anglicans are 32%, Pentecostal believers 11.1% and Muslims 13.7%. Even though religious services have been banned to prevent the spread of the pandemic, Church services are being live-streamed.

Church, and also Muslim leaders, are calling people to turn to God in these trying times; some are having times of fasting, saying "when there's a state of emergency, we also need emergency prayers".

For myself, I've been busy during lockdown; I have created some short videos in Ugandan Sign Language (in collaboration with British Columbia University's Office for Community Engagement), providing a range of information and guidance on Covid-19.

I learnt Sign Language at the Good Samaritan School for the Deaf (GSSD). This was founded by my Grandparents in 1996, because of my elder sister (Nakibira Madrine RIP) who was deaf. Because I grew up around deaf children, I know the many challenges they face.



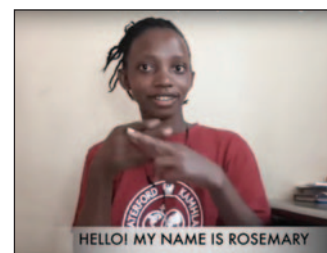
A happy community

Good Samaritan School for the Deaf, Uganda

Being deaf or hard of hearing in Uganda makes accessing opportunities and information very difficult, if not impossible. My experiences led me to create my own "not-for-profit" organization, Infinity Ideas Network (IIN), to assist hard of hearing young people with finding suitable and sustainable employment. Please take a look at my website and videos.

www.infinityideasnwork.org/

Best wishes, from Rosemary! ■



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Creator, you bent the Earth like a bow until it was one, round, shining planet.

At your word the land was drawn into mountains and deserts, forests and plains; the waters were gathered together into rivers, lakes and seas.

Many times, when people crossed these seas from other lands, they broke the circle of your creation by their greed and violence and they shattered the lives of others.

Creator, renew the circle of the earth and turn the hearts of all people to one another; that they and all the earth may live and be drawn toward you through the power of your Son, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit in the circle of the Trinity, forever One.

Amen

(extract from *Prayer to the Four Directions*, adapted and revised, used at the National Cathedral, DC in *A Celebration of Native American Survival Service*, 1992, with permission)

We ask for God's eternal-life-giving to be known in our world in this between-the-moments time, saying: Living God

change the world for good

Bring to life the hope-bearing ideas that lie dormant in this time of formless void; Living God

change the world for good

In our world's global community, in our world's living systems, strengthen ecological resilience; Living God

change the world for good

Among those who are alone, intimate your loving presence; Living God

change the world for good

In our needs and weakness in our provision and supply; Living God

change the world for good

O God, your unstinting providence sustains the world, our societies, our living: Take care for us, and keep us ever mindful that our common weal flows from each other's toil and care.

Amen

(from the Radical Presence *Kairos* liturgy, written by Andii Bowsher, from the daily office at www.ourcommonprayer.org/pandemical-prayer and reproduced with permission – see www.radicalpresence.org.uk for the complete liturgy)

The world rebooted?

What hope for a greener, fairer future, asks **Rich Gower**

In 50 years' time, how will the history books describe the 2020s? This is the question I've found myself reflecting on in recent weeks.

We may know the answer sooner than we think. I suspect that the trajectory for the rest of this decade is likely to be set by how individuals, communities and countries act over the next 18 months. The coronavirus crisis has upended the social contract (society's implicit beliefs about the role of government and others), and where it settles will determine the policies and practices that are prioritised in subsequent years.

What began as a health crisis now touches every area of life. In fact the coronavirus crisis has had (at least) three types of impact:

- **Direct effects** on people's health, jobs and living situations, around the world.
- **A revelatory effect:** it has held up a mirror to society, and revealed some of the problems that were already there, but too often ignored.
- **A "values impact"**, causing us to question what is truly important, and who we want to be as individuals and society.

The way society responds to the third of these, will likely determine the space for responding to the previous two.

Direct effects

As I write this, the global death toll from Covid-19 has just passed half a million, and is rising fast. However, its effects go far beyond direct mortality. Since 1990, the proportion of the world's



Jan Berger Paperhand art.350.org

population living in extreme poverty has more than halved, but 2020 may well be the first year in 30 when it increases¹. Similarly, the World Food Programme suggests that the pandemic could double the number of people suffering from acute hunger in 2020.

Across the world, sectors such as tourism, transport, and clothes manufacturing have collapsed. Many developing countries were already dealing with high levels of debt before the pandemic, and currency devaluations coupled with falling tax revenues have made this situation worse.²

At a household level, those already struggling to provide for their families on daily or weekly wages are now in an even more precarious position.

Revelatory effects: brokenness and beauty.

This crisis has revealed the brokenness of our current world, and exposed elements of injustice that before were frequently ignored. As many have said, "we're all in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat." In the words of Dr Vinoth Ramachandra, a senior leader in the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), "just as a receding tide exposes the debris that we would rather not see, the virus has

exposed the deep health and economic inequalities within rich nations, as well as between nations. Poor economies are on the brink of collapse. And it is the poor and vulnerable communities within the rich nations that have been disproportionately affected.”³

Similarly, coronavirus has put the current environmental crisis back in the spotlight. Environmental destruction makes it more likely for viruses to jump species and get into humans. Deforestation, mining, the bushmeat trade, animal trafficking and unsustainable agricultural practices are all likely factors at play.⁴

Nevertheless, at the same time as revealing our brokenness, the early weeks and months of lockdown provided glimpses of beauty. For the first time in 30 years, the Himalayas were visible from Northern India, 125 miles away, because of the lack of air pollution. People heard birdsong louder than before; they breathed cleaner air.

The crisis has revealed just how much our well-being is bound up with everyone else’s, and with the natural world. This recognition of our interconnectedness resonates with the deep wisdom of “shalom”. This transcends our modern notion of peace to include ideas of wholeness, balance and tranquility: everything in its place, everyone in harmonious relationships.

Perhaps as a result, this has also been a time of spiritual renewal for many. I was particularly touched by the first story on the *Your Desert Island Discs* lockdown special.⁵ Listening to a group of NHS workers singing *Amazing Grace* in their team meeting, before returning to the wards, I could sense the presence of the Spirit with them.

A values impact

So often, times of spiritual awakening go

hand in hand with social renewal. As people wrestle with these revelations and with the direct impact of the crisis, many have been asking life’s big questions: “what is important in life?” and “who do I want to be?” Of course we all ask these questions from time to time, but it is rare for so many to be wrestling with them at the same time.

As a society, our values are in a state of flux: the immediate response to the crisis saw communities pull together, and make huge sacrifices in order to save lives. Lockdown prompted many to re-evaluate the importance of the natural world. Now, we are deciding how much of this we hold on to, as shops re-open and a semblance of normal life returns.

The way we answer these questions, as a society, will determine how we respond to both the direct impacts of the crisis, and the injustices that have been revealed to us.

Signposts to the future

As coronavirus took hold, Churches adapted quickly to serve their communities with online services, food distribution networks, phone banks for the isolated and much more. Now, we have a role in speaking prophetically to our society, casting a vision for a way forward. The Church can demonstrate that a different way of living is not only possible, but a better option for everyone. And together we can call on governments and businesses to reflect this in the ways that they reboot our economy and society.

In relation to the greatest threat that humanity currently faces – climate change – I find myself cautiously hopeful. Recent research commissioned by The Climate Coalition found that seven in 10 (70%) people want the government to undertake stronger climate action and almost three quarters (72%) believe we have a once in a

lifetime opportunity to tackle climate change and protect the environment; a third (36%) said they were actively looking for ways to virtually attend protests and lobby politicians during lockdown.

However, an ambitious green recovery package is far from a done deal, and (as of early August) recent government announcements have not been especially encouraging. What can we do as Christians in the UK, to move the needle on this? With the UK government hosting the G7 and COP26 in 2021, there is a clear opportunity. Back in May, Tearfund launched our Reboot Campaign, calling on the Prime Minister to reboot the economy in a way that prioritises the poorest, tackles the climate emergency and builds a better world for everyone. The Reboot pages of the Tearfund website have a template and guide to help you write your own letter to Boris.

When the historians look back on 2020, they might perhaps say that this was the time when we changed direction. At the moment, it hangs in the balance.



Rich Gower is Senior Associate for Economics at Tearfund, Director of the Praxis Centre for Hope and Activism, and co-host of the Hopeful Activists’ Podcast (where you can hear a discussion of the topics in this article).

Tearfund has produced a set of resources for Churches and communities to help them consider how we can “build back better”, accessible at www.tearfund.org/reboot ■

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Connecting Under Lockdown

Isobel Murdoch reports



Credit: Shutterstock

When writing my previous local groups report at the end of 2019, I little imagined that six months later, lockdown would have become an everyday reality. Then, groups and contacts were planning various events for this year, all now halted, postponed or cancelled. There were plans for talks, outings, a green weekend, day workshops and the hosting of a Green Christian "On The Road Together" event, none of which could go ahead.

Yet time has not stood still, and neither have Green Christian's local groups. If the pandemic closed doors, Zoom has held them ajar. **Cheltenham** moved their fortnightly prayer circle on to Zoom, praying "in praise of Creation, in repentance for our disfigurement of it and in petition that we may come truly 'to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor'". **Lincoln's** Faith and Environment Group, co-led by GC's local contacts there, met by Zoom, looking at alternative ways to promote Eco Church during lockdown. Green Christians in **Reading**, also meeting by Zoom, have taken part in carbon reduction lobbying events with the local council, and a citizens' assembly, all online.

Three new groups have even formed during lockdown! Two groups began in **Leicestershire** during June, one within **Leicester** itself and one across the county. These developed out of Green Christian's Radical Presence course. A **Worcester** group began in May and held three Zoom talks within the first few weeks. One (by Margot and Martin Hodson) was on coronavirus and climate change from a Christian perspective, one on *Laudato Si'* (by **Cheltenham** group leader Martin Davis) and one on sustainable transport design, by Jenny Cooke. Visit the group's "Green Christian Worcester" Facebook page to follow their progress.

Two other existing eco groups have become Green Christian groups during this time. The Parish Ecology Group at Sacred Heart Church in **Fareham** is a Catholic and ecumenical group which is active in promoting recycling, as well as in justice and peace work. **Beverley's** group, based at the town's Toll Gavel United Church, had to cancel a planned second day event this spring, but reducing carbon footprints and working on Eco Church remain local priorities.

All in all, Green Christian's groups and contacts have found creative, alternative ways to connect under lockdown. Thinking of times in the Bible when we see lateral thinking at work, I remembered the day when a disabled man's friends were forced to use their imagination. They could not get their friend to Jesus to be healed, so "they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd..." (Luke 5:19). They thought up an alternative, and barriers were overcome.

By the time you read this report, the situation will have changed once again. Maybe lockdown will have receded and groups will be free to plan events as time moves on. Maybe uncertainty will remain as coronavirus casts a long shadow. Either way, groups and contacts will go on, as will the wider movement. Only in this way will momentum not be lost, even with so many plans suspended. Only in this way will we look at the way lockdown opened up some breathing space for nature, and glimpse in that space a different future. ■



Isobel Murdoch
01790 763603
isobel.murdoch@greenchristian.org.uk

Email addresses for groups and contacts may be found on the local groups page of the Green Christian website www.greenchristian.org.uk

Entering holy ground

Paul Bodenham reports on an experiment in crisis conversation



Smouldering peat fires in woodland at Gomde, June 2020

Photo credit: Rangjung Yeshe UK

Shortly before lockdown a group of Green Christian members gathered in South Yorkshire for a weekend's exploration of climate breakdown with some surprising partners: Buddhists and local authority managers.

Navigating Ecological Tragedy out of a chain of serendipitous relationships, I had been introduced to the manager of Gomde UK, a Tibetan Buddhist centre at Lindholme Hall, hidden in the crook of the Humber. The Centre hosts regular management awaydays for Doncaster Council. The Council had recently declared a climate and ecological emergency and established a Climate Commission chaired by the local MP Ed Miliband. And so the scene was set for conversations for which there was no precedent, but for which we intend to build a legacy as soon as the pandemic allows.

Our focus was not the usual preoccupation of striving for net-zero – vital though that is. Rather we sought to face into the consequences of the further climate change that is already inevitable, not least for a town already traumatised by flooding; and even beyond that, into the growing risk of wider ecological and social collapse. If this sounds like a counsel of despair, let me explain.

For the Buddhists and Christians the experiment grew out of a threefold hunch, which to its credit the Council was prepared to entertain. First, that our respective faiths could set us free to think the unthinkable, and to do so safely and with emotional resilience. Second, that in accounting for our faith to each other we might find new honesty before the truth. Third, that together we might break new ground from which a new kind of action is possible, spiritually and politically.

The weekend opened with a public meeting at Doncaster College. Jackie Turvey Tait, a theologian and ethicist from the University of Chester represented Green Christian alongside me, with Buddhist teachers from both Tibetan and Zen traditions. Facilitating through the weekend was Stefan Skrimshire from the University of Leeds, who had spoken at Green Christian's Annual Members Meeting in November 2019.

Over the rest of the weekend, the participants and speakers tackled two "focus questions" posed by the council's chief executive, exploring how faith and local government can work together to navigate the unfolding crisis. You can read our findings on the Green Christian website,¹ but here I will offer three reflections of my own.

First, exploring my faith with people of a different faith brings forward forgotten gifts in my own. The Buddhist focus on emptiness, impermanence and renunciation helped me to reconnect with the "apophatic" in the Christian tradition.

That's the stream represented by the self-emptying God of Philippians 2, the early desert hermits, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, John of the Cross, and in our own time the poet R.S. Thomas and ecofeminist theologian Katherine Keller. As restraint is forced on us by both climate and Covid-19, it seems increasingly urgent to answer the call in our faith to relinquishment.

Second, I admired the genuine curiosity of the local authority professionals we met. In multicultural Doncaster, the

council cannot officially engage with one religion alone, but joining with Buddhist friends opened doors at the Civic Centre that would never have opened to us individually. Our conversations were free of the suspicion of proselytism, as we explored ethical, spiritual and emotional realities in a relaxed frankness.

Third, we found that the commitment we had made to listen was not for ourselves alone. We were called to make safe "listening spaces" with entire communities. A local authority has little freedom to create such spaces: in places of suffering, truth-telling and reconciliation organised by the council can quickly become ensnared in recrimination. With simple ritual, meditation and an appeal to virtue, however, faith can open up the potential for transcendence and transformation.

In June this year, Lindholme was visited by another reminder of ecological tragedy. Acres of woodland close to the house were consumed in flames, fuelled by the peaty soils. It seemed confirmation, if any were needed, that on that strange and holy ground, with our unlikely friends, we had met the God who is wounded for a wounded Earth. ■

If you would like to be involved in similar dialogues in future, please contact paulbodenham@greenchristian.org.uk



Paul Bodenham is a Trustee and recent Chair of Green Christian, co-founder of Operation Noah and Borrowed Time, and officer for social action in the Catholic Diocese of Nottingham.

References:

- 1 www.greenchristian.org.uk/navigating-ecological-tragedy-report-of-weekend-at-gomde/

As with everyone else since the emergence of Covid-19, Green Christian has had to rethink ways of communicating – both within our organisation and beyond, with much of our "business" (discussing, planning, reviewing of events and projects) being carried out via Zoom! Unfortunately some events have had to be cancelled – including our very popular On the Road Together regional days and our annual appearance at Greenbelt; others are being presented in different ways. Here is an overview of what's been happening since the previous issue of the magazine.

Green Christian Retreat is now an Online Festival!

Our scheduled retreat at Ringsfield Hall in Suffolk, for the weekend of 23-25 October, has unfortunately had to be cancelled. In its place we will be holding an exciting Green Christian Online Festival covering the same period. The theme of the weekend is "Reimagining the Promised Land" and will include talks, discussion and conversation; worship and prayer; sharing of ideas for action and activism; space for reflection and creativity, with the freedom of dipping in and dipping out of what's on.

The festival kicks off on Friday evening with a panel discussion featuring Bishop James Jones; environmentalist Sir Jonathon Porritt; Christian Climate Action co-ordinator, Melanie Nazareth and writer, blogger and activist Jeremy Williams.



Melanie Nazareth



Jonathon Porritt

Revd Frankie Ward, will be joining us in an interactive session on Saturday morning to discuss how Christian spirituality can free us to find trust in an uncertain future. Frankie Ward's recent book, *Like There's No Tomorrow* is reviewed on p24.



Frankie Ward Photo credit: St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Workshops on Saturday will look at both ways of getting involved in practical and political action; but reflecting the theme, we will also reflect on the gift of the imagination and creativity, with poets, thinkers and dreamers. Please join in with what we know will be interactive and stimulating virtual meetings.

Throughout the weekend there will be space for prayer and reflection led by our chaplains and others. See the Green Christian website for more details and updates on events and speakers, and to reserve a place.

Annual Members Meeting

This was originally planned for 7 November, but will now be held on Friday 23rd October at 5pm at the start of the Online Festival via zoom. All welcome – go to the website www.greenchristian.org.uk to reserve a place.



Radical Presence

Many members, and others from

beyond Green Christian, took part in the Radical Presence course, a series of weekly group conversations and reflections, held over a seven week period, and designed and led by Paul Bodenham. The course enables sharing, both of our experiences during the pandemic and our thoughts on how we may emerge from it, drawing on Biblical wisdom and contemporary writings. Two full programmes have been run so far, averaging 60 participants each week – and from it new ideas and networks have already emerged which have already begun to influence other areas in which we are working. www.radicalpresence.org.uk/ New member, Staffan Engstrom has written about Radical Presence on p.12 of this magazine.



Borrowed Time

Borrowed Time, A Journey Through Climate Grief and Eco-Anxiety, aims to provide support for those grappling with the realisation that the climate and ecological emergencies are genuine, rapid, and growing threats to the whole of Creation, and who are experiencing grief, shock, and fear.

Borrowed Time consists of six discussion sessions, together with preparatory reading, including poetry and online articles, and visual art and occasionally music. It is designed for anyone, whether Christian or not. It is not, and cannot be, a substitute for professional pastoral care or psychological help.

The aim is to help people travel from a place of grief to a place of realistic hope, by means of honest and confidential discussion and mutual support. The pilot took place in June and July via Zoom, although the ideal (and what we originally planned for) is to have in-person meetings.

The 12 participants in the pilot ranged from ordained clergy to therapists, engineers to writers, doctors to students, with a wide age range. Feedback has been robust and helpful. Please keep an eye on the Green Christian website for news and opportunities to become involved in this network of support, or email deborahatomkins@greenchristian.org.uk for more information.



Joy in Enough

Our Joy in Enough project, convened by John Payne, is a challenge to Christians to join in building a just economy within the ecological limits of the Earth. Trial runs of the “café conversation” sessions on consumerism, entitled *Plenty!* have now been held. Through a generous grant from the Sisters of the Holy Cross, we have engaged a consultant to work with us in creating a full set of appealing resources for Churches, both to educate Christians in realising the need for a new economic system, and to mobilise them to work to bring it about. Our website has regular updates including articles, news, essays and sermons; a recent series called “Green Shoots”, introduces ten examples of fairer and greener businesses, each of which hints at what a new economy might look like. www.joyinenough.org/

Way of Life

The Green Christian Way Of Life with its four elements – Daily Prayer, Living Gently on the Earth, Public Witness and Encouragement – continues to develop, in terms of our resources, participants (our Companions now number around 50) and how we communicate. In

addition to our *Monthly Letters*, describing the personal journeys of their authors, we are now holding Companions’ Zoom gatherings every two months and are looking to develop prayers and other resources for the Community.

See www.greenchristian.org.uk/way/

Green Christian responding to government consultations

Green Christian has responded to two recent public government consultations, one from the Dept for Business, Energy, Innovation and Science (BEIS), and one from the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC). The EAC inquiry, *Greening the Post-Covid Recovery* is looking at the UK’s goals for net-zero carbon, increased biodiversity and sustainable development. A small group of Green Christian volunteers developed a theologically-informed response to the questions that focused on energy and transport policies, reforestation and peatland restoration, taxation measures and much more. The EAC submission can be found on the Green Christian website.

Green Christian Online Workshops

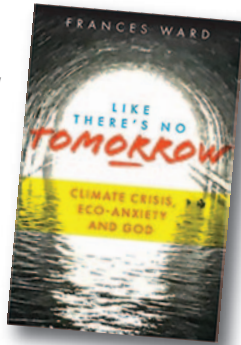
Several workshops have taken place as a response to the Radical Presence courses. *Influencing Local Authorities* was presented online by Geoff Stratford followed by a workshop on Non-Violent Direct Action led by Revd Prof David Jenkins. Both can be viewed via the Green Christian website.

Video News

Finally, do look out for “Video News” – 5-minute films on our website at www.greenchristian.org.uk/videos/. Each one highlights a specific Green Christian programme and includes an interview with Green Christian people. By the time you receive this magazine the first two videos will be on the site – one on Radical Presence featuring Paul Bodenham and Clare Redfern, and the other featuring Arts Convenor Graham Norman. ■

Like There's No Tomorrow

By Frances Ward
March 2020
Sacristy Press
ISBN: 978-1789590883
254 pages
RRP: £12.99
(paperback)



Like There's No Tomorrow will be a heartening read for anyone who cares even slightly about the major moral and ethical conundrums of our day, seen here through a theologian's lens. It casts a godly eye upon the Climate Change crisis, so often seen as the sole province of scientists. How refreshing to find the whole area firmly situated in terms of what it is and always will be: a moral and philosophical challenge.

The poetry of our natural heritage is evoked, but never really strays into chocolate box territory idealising a bucolic idyll (which would be grand were it not for the associated typhoid, rickets and polio) and the romanticism is admirably held in check by the simple down-to-earth conviction of faith. It is chatty without being preachy, as well as containing an admirable index and notes for the more scholarly amongst us. This kind of endeavour has for far too long been held back by its adherents lacking the courage to lay claim to the imagining of heaven on Earth, rather than to the sackcloth and ashes in which its detractors have been able to shroud it (in spite of the empiricist legacy from which it was birthed). This is a welcome addition to any library, representing less anxiety and more celebration of Creation, creativity and the wilder recesses of all our minds.

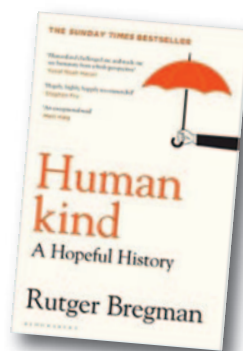
Custodianship of the natural world and ecology are not diametrically opposed to science, progress and a better world. Indeed many of the early pioneers of the innovations that have enabled us to have such a romantic view of planet Earth (improvements in health facilitated by vaccination, for example) would be quite bemused by the current discourse, and the worrying

ease with which the forces of reaction have been able to sweep this progressive tradition aside. Frances Ward tackles her subject with a confidence, brevity and wit sorely needed in an epoch which will be defined by its adherence to polarisation, opposition and strife. This book is a beacon of hope in a field which has found itself to some extent a victim of its success – awareness and its close cousin “worry” will never be a substitute for the adherence to progressive attitudes and values that this book, and indeed the Christian faith, demands.

Lucy Johnson

Humankind: A Hopeful History

By Rutger Bregman
May 2020
Bloomsbury
ISBN: 9781408898932
496 pages
RRP £20 (hardback, other formats available)



Rutger Bregman, a Dutch writer and historian, has been described as one of Europe's most prominent young thinkers, and this is borne out in *Humankind*. In this book he points out that for centuries our view of human nature has been one of cynicism and belief that we are inherently selfish and driven by self-interest. This belief has been held across the political spectrum and by psychologists, philosophers, writers and historians. It has underpinned the way we do economics and politics, and how we treat one another. Bregman argues the reverse, taking the stance that most people are basically good and that the instinct to co-operate and trust others has a strong evolutionary basis that has helped us to survive and develop as a species.

He begins by looking at William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, which posits that civilised behaviour is merely a veneer that will crack under pressure. Bregman counteracts this view by re-

telling the true story of a group of young boys marooned on a remote island for over a year who survived through co-operation and looking after one another. He also examines the history of hunter-gatherer communities, with their emphasis on mutuality, and contrasts this with the rise of settled civilisations and the gradual emergence of the nation state.

He examines two notorious social behaviour experiments – the Milgram shock machine and the Stanford Prison experiment – revealing both the flaws of the experiments and the manipulation of the results. He concludes that, if people think the intention is ultimately good, such as for scientific knowledge, and they are manipulated enough, they may do evil. He explores how the sense of connection to a greater cause, and loyalty to those around us, can lead to results such as the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Power, it would seem, is the great corrupting influence and can produce this “acquired sociopathy”.

The book looks at various successful social experiments throughout the world that seem to overturn conventional wisdom, from local democracy in Venezuela to a pioneering healthcare provider in the Netherlands and humane prison systems in Norway. It explores the idea that we feel less hostility and prejudice towards others when we have more contact and see them as fellow human beings, with Nelson Mandela an individual example of this. The story of the Christmas truce between German and British soldiers in 1914 illustrates what is possible on a larger scale, and the human aversion to killing others when we know them as people. Finally he sets out his rules to live by, which include assuming the best in others, adopting a win-win mentality, developing compassion as opposed to empathy, avoiding cynicism, reaching out to the enemy, doing good because it is good, and living by the new realism outlined in the book.

I found this book both challenging and inspiring, and highly recommend it as a very good read.

Linda Wickham

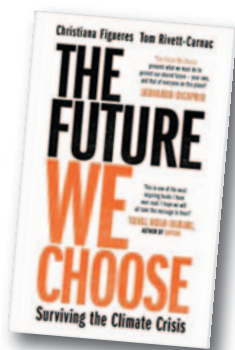
The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis.

By Christiana Figueres and
Tome Rivett-Carnac
February 2020
Manilla Press
ISBN: 978-1838770822
225 pages
RRP: £12.99 (hardback; other formats
available)

Between 2010 and 2016, Christiana Figueres was the Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and Tom Rivett-Carnac her senior political strategist. They were the public face of the Paris Accord of 2015, which has been called the most pivotal agreement in history, requiring radical change to the world's economy and the way we live now. Key dates for achieving change, 2030 and 2050, are rapidly approaching, well within the lifetime of my five grandchildren.

This is a practical book for politicians, both national and global, and for the rest of us who will have to live out these changes. 10 actions, all practical plans, make up half of the book: Let Go of the Old World; Face Your Grief but Hold a Vision of the Future; Defend the Truth; See Yourself as a Citizen – Not a Consumer; Move Beyond Fossil Fuels; Reforest the Earth; Invest in a Clean Economy; Use Technology Responsibly; Build Gender Equality and Engage in Politics.

The Paris Agreement set a new target, limiting the increase in global temperature to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Humanity has already caused an increase of more than one degree. The authors identify the necessity of reaching net-zero by 2050 at the latest, and, to have any chance of achieving this, to halve carbon emissions by 2030. The book details what we must do, and what the Green Christian must advocate, in order to achieve these reductions,



abandoning the fossil fuels upon which our civilisation has depended since the beginning of the 19th century.

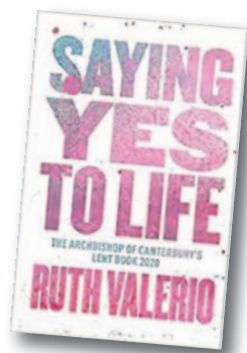
We are in the middle of a new age, the Anthropocene, the age of humans. It will not be so comfortable as the Holocene. But we can know enough to choose a sustainable future. "Our collective responsibility is to ensure that a better future is not only possible for future generations but probable". This book is a straightforward foundation of that knowledge and hope.

My only regret is that it has no index, which would have considerably enhanced the value of this important text.

John Smith

Saying Yes to Life

By Ruth Valerio
December 2019
SPCK Publishing
ISBN: 978-0281083770
216 pages
RRP £11.99
(paperback)



The Lent groups I was involved with this year did not get beyond the third week, as the pandemic began to bite and I suspect this will be the same for many who followed the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2020, *Saying Yes to Life*. Maybe some will take it up again next year, but it will need a certain amount of revisiting if it is to feel relevant in a post pandemic world. For example, the risk, in terms of disease transmission, that we take in encroaching further and further into wilderness areas for economic purposes may need more robust analysis than we read in the section on Yasha the Pangolin. However, it's maybe unfair to criticise an author for not predicting a global pandemic!

The structure of the book is built around the six days of Creation as outlined in Genesis 1. There is a

helpful introduction which puts into context how the story of Genesis was told as a counterpoint to the Babylonian myth of creation, Enuma Elish, and then we are off to explore how "a good God who reigns supreme has created a very good world". That sentence, which comes at the end of the introduction, sets the tone for the book as a whole.

Each chapter tackles the theme of a biblical day – light, water, land, lights in the sky, the waters and creatures and humankind: the scripture is laid out, then stories are told, from abroad or nearer to home, with the author and her family making several appearances. We are invited to learn, to act, to use our voices and our resources to make the world a better place. All of which is a good thing.

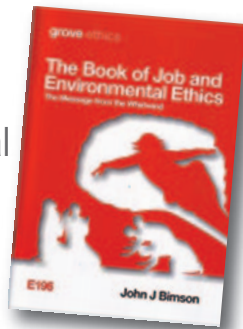
What was missing, for me, was much bite about the very real challenges we face about globalisation, inequality and environmental destruction that were, for instance, laid out so clearly by Pope Francis in his (much shorter) *Laudato Si'*. I do not share the author's evangelical outlook and struggled with some of the language, for example, the formidable God, the God of power and might, and thought the use of biblical material was sometimes not very helpful. For example, the story of Jonah is indeed a great one, but I have never thought of its purpose as "giving a beautiful insight into God's heart for people and animals." Overall, though, if exposure to the material in *Saying Yes to Life* nudges a few people along the path of greater awareness of the massive issues that confront us, then that can only be good.

Jonathan Morris

Please email our Review Editor,
Tanya Jones
tanyajones@greenchristian.org.uk
with your ideas for future reviews,
and also if you would like to join our
regular reviewers' list.

The Book of Job and Environmental Ethics

By John J Bimson
2020
Grove Books
ISBN: 978-1788271080
28 pages
RRP: £3.95



The Book of Job and Environmental Ethics is a little booklet, but a goldmine for ecology. The author, John Bimson, does not deal in any depth with the central theme of Job – the problem of suffering – but concentrates on the many references to the natural world, particularly in the final five chapters. The booklet is ideal material to enable Bible study on Old Testament “Creation theology”, deserving several sessions in the process.

Even in the early chapters of Job however, Bimson notes that Job wants to challenge God about the innocent suffering of creatures – “ask the animals and they will teach you...” We are reminded that nature is “red in tooth and claw”, and alongside mankind the innocent creatures suffer also. It is in the final chapters that Job is confronted “out of the whirlwind” by God and compelled to think thoughts he has never thought before about the majesty and complexity of the natural order, first about cosmology and then about meteorology. Bimson points to delightful details about the creatures in Job 39: the wild ox (the auroch, extinct since the 17th century), the wild ass (the onager, extinct in 1927), the ostrich’s little knowledge of how to protect its young, the hawk in its migration. These descriptions of the animals are important for Bimson’s conclusions because they show both the wastefulness and the wildness of God’s Creation. They also bring about Job’s acknowledgement of his own inability to respond. Bimson sees the inclusion of Behemoth and Leviathan in Job 40 as indicating that wild and unruly forces are a “necessary ingredient in Creation”.

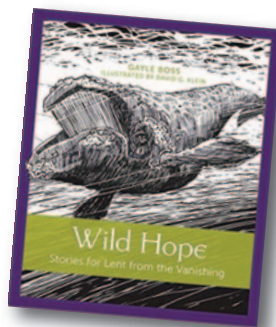
From these descriptions Bimson draws his overall conclusion that Creation as understood by Christians should not be anthropocentric, in spite of Augustine and Aquinas making it so. Quoting Kathryn Schifferdecker, he uses the word “nonanthropocentricity”. This eight-syllable word should be recited – and its meaning understood – by Bible study groups who use the booklet!

Throughout Bimson relies heavily on other scholars and his references for further reading are useful; he shows himself not to be a groundbreaker, but a very valuable and accessible gatherer of the insights we should build upon. Bimson makes Job the David Attenborough of the 4th century BC, and sees his message to be of the utmost importance to the 21st century. This book is both immensely challenging and fun.

Peter Dodd

Wild Hope: Stories for Lent from the Vanishing

By Gayle Boss
January 2020
Paraclete Press
ISBN: 978-1640601994
125 pages
RRP £16.99



If you want to do something different for Lent next year, this is the book for you. Each of the 25 sections describes the state of an animal or insect, its relationship to human beings and how its life is threatened by our actions. Those actions vary from the careless use of lines (whales), through the threat of ivory poachers (African elephants), to climate change (tropical corals).

Each section considers various threats, except the first which, for Ash Wednesday, includes a meditation on the state of the Orangutans in Sumatra, threatened by the burning of the forests and the planting of oil palms. The final section lists the organisations trying to counter these threats to biodiversity

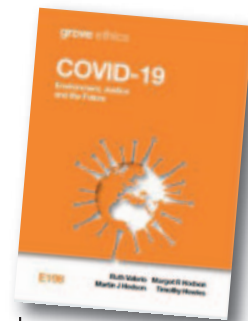
and to prevent what may be the sixth global extinction of life. The threats are listed as *The Hungry, The Sick, The Homeless, The Poisoned, The Hunted* and *The Desecrated*. Unusually for a Lent course there are no Bible readings or prayers. Perhaps we need to pray for each creature, whether pangolin or mussel, but the texts moved me also to consider prayers for both our human condition and the human threat to God’s biodiversity.

It is a “wild” book of text and full-page illustrations which describes the pain now felt by many creatures because of humanity’s carelessness and greed. My immediate reaction to these texts was to be critical, but reading it in depth has led me to a re-evaluation. Through sensitive prayers and readings (not all biblical) we learn to shed tears for the unthinking cruelty of human beings. This book could start a local rethink of how diverse nature is and how we humans have been given the task to sustain Creation and not to destroy it.

John Smith

E 198 Covid-19: Environment, Justice and the Future

By Margaret Hodson, Martin Hodson, Ruth Valerio and Timothy Howles,
June 2020,
Grove Books
ISBN: 9781788271295
28 pages
RRP: £3.95



This little booklet responds promptly and thoughtfully to the current pandemic; as framed by Timothy Howles’s introduction, it explores how the world may be changing, how this relates to the environmental crisis, and how Christians might respond.

Martin Hodson summarises the science and history of the virus, as currently understood, highlighting underlying social, political and economic factors. He concludes that, although the virus

itself is a “natural evil”, its spread and impact are principally the fault of humanity, and of what can be described as structural sin. Margot Hodson discusses environmental and justice impacts of the pandemic. She identifies positives such as reduced air pollution and a perceived sense of community, but notes how these are limited and often outweighed by the negative. Local and global injustices are discussed, including the combined impacts of the virus, structural racism and climate breakdown. She reflects on the “groaning” of Creation, and the role of the Church as the healing body of Christ.

Ruth Valerio’s section is entitled “Looking forward to a better world” but cautions against rushing into premature answers. She outlines the Tearfund “World Rebooted” campaign which focuses on three positives: awareness of interconnectedness, valuing of life over productivity and the opportunity to reshape society, to address domestic and global poverty and environmental issues, especially climate breakdown.

The conclusion, again by Timothy Howles, calls upon Christians to work towards a society where “justice, healing and reconciliation are available to all”. There is probably little that is new in this booklet to Green Christian readers, but it provides a reliable and accessible introduction to the issues.

Tanya Jones

Legacy

Leaving a legacy gift to Green Christian will help ensure the work we do lives on. When writing or amending your Will you need to make a note of our official name (which is still CEL), our registered address and our charity number: Christian Ecology Link, 35 Kitto Road, London SE14 5TW. Charity No. 328744.

Metamorphosis

Cocoon closeted,
New me emerged, emboldened.
Flying, full coloured.

Yes to life

Earth’s bounty free.
Destroyed, greed of you and me.
Restore to beauty.

Simple lives will give
All nature a chance to live.
Spare us and forgive.

“Yes to life!” we say.
Care for Creation today.
Heal our land, we pray.

Mary Andrews, with permission



Prayer

Prayer, the Church’s banquet, Angel’s age,
God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet, sounding heaven and earth;
Engine against the Almighty, sinner’s tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days’ world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

‘Re-imagining the Promised Land’



Green Christian Festival

23rd-25th October 2020

This free online event replaces the Green Christian Retreat at Ringsfield Hall

Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate crisis call us to move forward beyond established certainties, to re-imagine the land that lies ahead. Join us in our 2020 Green Christian Online Festival, as we come together to encourage faith, courage, justice and hope.

The weekend will include inspirational speakers, discussion, conversations; art, poetry and music; prayer and shared ideas for action; with the freedom for busy people to dip in and out.

Booking details can be found at
www.greenchristian.org.uk

The Green Christian Annual Members Meeting will now take place online during the weekend on Friday 23rd October at 5pm – all welcome.

Look inside on the GC News pages for more details