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Still together apart

On Thursday 19 March 2020, a small group from the Arthur Rank Centre, plus Revd Simon Mattholie of Rural Ministries, met together on Zoom (something none of us had ever heard of, let alone done, just days before!). We were working from home, as instructed by the Prime Minister three days earlier, and the first COVID-19 national lockdown was still five days away.

It was clear Something was afoot, but we didn't really know or understand what that Something was or what it might become. Our nation and our world was facing a crisis of unprecedented (a word that quickly became ubiquitous) significance and all we knew was that we wanted to be ready to respond, 'to reassure and comfort folk'. But even in that first conversation we also acknowledged that there was the possibility we were looking at a long-term change in how we 'do church' and we wanted to create space for people to engage and wrestle with the implications of that.

By the following week, the group had expanded to include individuals representing a variety of Christian denominations and parachurch organisations, united by their passion for, and commitment to, the rural church, and we committed ourselves to encouraging and equipping rural churches in the UK – and, it turned out, much further afield – to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic. We decided to produce a weekly email containing a biblical reflection, a prayer and a practical response and we committed to doing this until the pandemic was over which, we confidently believed, would be towards the end of May 2020.

Eighteen months later, we are still living with COVID-19. Despite the lifting of legal restrictions in England earlier this week our lives continue to be shaped not only by our experiences of the last year but the ongoing reality of rising infection rates tempered by rising vaccination rates.

While our small group of rural advocates continues to work hard to support, encourage and equip those in rural churches, we believe that this weekly email has run its natural course and so this is the last offering. We are incredibly grateful to all those who have responded to what we've shared, and for the stories we've heard of creative, imaginative, small and faithful expressions of love, welcome, hospitality and compassion. It's been an honour and a privilege to share this challenging, complex, often infuriating but often liberating, journey with you and we hope we've been able to bless you in some small way.

Below are some brief reflections from members of the Together Apart group, looking back over the last eighteen months; we'd love to hear your own reflections on what these emails have meant to you.

Thank you for being our companions on this journey!

Louise Davis, Training Manager, Arthur Rank Centre

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Revd Elizabeth Clark, National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Church

Psalm 126

I have heard Psalm 126 at harvest sometimes but had a major fuller sense of lament reading it during lockdown. There is a profound sadness over what had been, a feeling of abandonment but also a sense of trust and confidence: 'those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy'.

Revd Richard Kirlew, Agricultural Chaplains Association

Psalm 150

This was a Psalm that I have known all my life from being a schoolboy. Yet I woefully ignored it! It has since taught me to praise God with all my heart and soul, and to do it on a daily basis. We need to praise God for everything that he does for us in so many ways.

Revd Simon Mattholie, CEO, Rural Ministries

Matthew 17:22-27

When I look back on the contributions over the past 18 months, I am struck by many reoccurring themes, not least the repeated critique of those in leadership positions not setting a good example. Back in October 2020 I reflected that 'as disciples of Jesus, our call I believe is to be obedient and set good examples for others. I believe part of our calling as disciples today is to be living reminders of hope, lives transformed, of future promise, and kingdom values that impact the here and now. If we are to challenge some of the injustices of what is happening today, let us do it with the subversive message of the kingdom of God; loving the lost, the least, the last'.

Ann Wright, Secretary to the Churches Rural Group of Churches Together in England

Psalm 105

Looking at the Bible through the lens of rural responses to COVID-19 has reminded me of the depth and timeless quality of these ancient, God-breathed texts and their capacity to speak into different contexts. The verses of Psalm 105 set for March this year spoke again to me of the way in which our experience of his presence and loving care, through all the ups and downs of this pandemic, gives us confidence and hope as we move into the future. 'Nothing that happens can ever take us out of the loving hands of God,' as one of my colleagues in Germany commented.

Revd Dr Claire Maxim, CEO, Arthur Rank Centre

Genesis 46:2-7

I'm not normally a big fan of the story of Joseph, Jacob and Egypt. But back in July 2020 – oh those innocent days! – I was drawn to the account of Jacob's move to Egypt from Canaan. I reflected on who was named and got a very strong sense that no-one from the family was left behind. This sense of no-one being left behind has stayed with me and seems to loom larger than ever. Those who could not come to church at all have rejoiced in the inclusion of being online, and of that not being the 'second best' option. Others who remain wary of the virus, who have seen what it can do, are still wearing masks to protect others – would you be gracious enough to wear a mask for them? The complexities continue. My prayer is that no-one will be left behind.

Revd Dr Mark Betson

Luke 7:18-23

One of the insights COVID-19 has brought to my reading of scripture is where the disciples of John ask Jesus 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus does not say 'yes' or 'no' but asks them based on what they see, not what they think. Vaccinations are incredibly important in the fight against COVID but they are not simply the answer; it is our ongoing behaviour, particularly how we react to new freedoms while many remain vulnerable, that points towards salvation.

Revd Dr Benjamin Aldous, Principal Officer for Mission and Evangelism, Churches Together in England

What keeps coming back to me is the idea that the pandemic has been apocalyptic. It has revealed how things really are. Our vulnerability as human beings, our frailty and innate weaknesses. It has revealed the gross inequalities that exist around race, gender and economic parity. It has revealed who is most key to keep society going: not bankers and managers but hospital workers, those stocking supermarket shelves, those who empty our bins. It's made us as the church ask some important questions about who we have been serving and who we should be serving. It is potentially the most important re-set since the Second World War.

Revd Barry Osborne, Rural Mission Solutions

This has been a blessed partnership, and I use 'blessed' in its meaning of 'happy'. I find it impossible to pick out any one contribution over the life of Together Apart because all have been valued. For many of us, it has been a difficult time, and still not finished, but through it all God's precious word has lifted my

spirits, and so often spoken with special relevance. My thanks to all who have contributed and brought special moments of blessedness. This has been a happy fellowship.

Revd Suzan Williams, Head of Rural Ministries New Wine

A prayer

I lay my head to rest,
and in doing so,
lay at your feet
the faces I have seen,
the voices I have heard,
the words I have spoken,
the hands I have shaken,
the service I have given,
the joys I have shared,
the sorrows revealed,
I lay them at your feet,
and in doing so
lay my head to rest.