

Continuing to support each other

Being the people of God in the face of Covid-19

Being in the moment

The response required of everyone to the continuing spread of the Covid-19 around the globe is to isolate ourselves physically from friends and family, groups and clubs, churches and communities, to stand alone in the face of unprecedented government control in every aspect of our day to day lives.

It is no wonder that many are filled with fear, sadness and uncertainty.

The most important place to start any response to such a crisis, is to let ourselves respond in these perfectly human ways. It is perfectly natural to feel afraid, upset and angry at what is happening. Why now? Why like this? What are we supposed to do now?

Take some time to sit with these natural feelings. What's the most difficult thing facing you right now? What upsets you most about this situation? What brings you the most fear in this moment?

The Bible is full of people who not only experienced negative feelings, but made them known to God. In Psalm 13:1-2 we read of David's despair at God's apparent absence in a time of great sorrow and suffering. In Exodus 17:11-12, we read of Moses feeling tired with the somewhat bizarre order to hold up a staff for a long time in order to secure victory in battle.

In Luke 22:41-44 we read of Jesus asking fervently to be spared from the torture and death that awaits him. Indeed, in Jeremiah 6:11, we read of God's own anger building up within the prophet!

Stop your routine for a while. Put your to-do list to one side, and for five minutes practice coming to a standstill. What might God reveal to you in the stillness and silence?

We know, on further reading, that God was able to achieve extraordinary things through these people, despite it being far from obvious to them at the time. David became a great leader known for his faith and trust in God. Moses was helped to hold up the staff when he was tired, helping to secure a victory through teamwork, Jesus rose from death as Messiah and God led His people on from the uncertainty and frustration of Jeremiah's time.

This does not, by any means, take away from the struggle and suffering that led to these achievements, but it does offer hope

that, even in the darkest of places, God is present, whether we feel God beside us or not. Once we have come to terms with our negative responses to the situation, it's time to seek out the presence of God.

Name one good thing around you at this time. Where might God be in that? What might God be trying to say or reveal through this?

Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today is all about recognising and responding to the presence of God in our everyday reality. For the time being, much of that everyday reality will not involve what it usually does. This will inevitably be confusing, frustrating and scary, but it also provides opportunities for us to notice and respond to God's presence in fresh, new ways, connecting with others in innovative ways, offering support to vulnerable people around us, loving our neighbours, both individually and collectively. In order to do this, we must begin by being in the moment, accepting both the negativity and potential of the situation.

Living the life of Jesus in imaginative ways

Many of the responses we've seen from Christians and churches to this crisis, around the globe, are aimed at continuing worship and prayer. All of these responses are very encouraging, and you can learn more about how URC congregations are engaging in such action here: www.urc.org/latest-news/3385-coronavirus-worshipping-digitally.

However, the whole purpose of worship and prayer, especially in the context of gathering together, whether physically or virtually, is to focus ourselves on God and God's will for our lives so that we can prepare to be disciples throughout the rest of our time, when we are not gathered together. In these times of isolation and lockdown, we need, more than ever, to focus on those times when we are apart from others, the Church scattered.



The popular 'red dots' graphic from the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity shows this well. In the UK, around 6% of people claim to attend Christian worship regularly (once a month). One of the images shows what this looks like when we're gathered together. The other shows what this looks like when we're scattered. See this video for more: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1B5eqsqY7x8

When we are gathered, we seem quite small and insignificant. However, when we are scattered, we clearly have more contact and influence in more and varied places.

Normally, the image of the scattered dots would represent Christians being present, every day, in different places of work or education, enjoying different hobbies, participating in different activities, etc.

In these times, however, being scattered means that aspects of our everyday lives which normally take up some of our time, now consume all of it. In terms of whole-of-life discipleship, this requires a rethink of what it means to recognise and respond to God's presence in our everyday reality.

In some ways, this might seem obvious. We can clearly see the benefits of being a disciple who is able to spend more time with their children, teaching them God's ways of love, peace and justice.

We can see the benefit of being a disciple who is surrounded by vulnerable neighbours, able to provide a safe, listening ear to hear concerns, do shopping or collect medication. In these cases, we can clearly live the life of Jesus today in everything we do, big and small, in supporting people through this crisis.

- What happens, though, when we ourselves are vulnerable as disciples?
- What happens when our jobs are on the line, or income in jeopardy?
- What happens when we need to balance isolation with looking after an older relative who doesn't live with us?
- What happens when the care we need as a disabled person is in danger of being postponed or lost?

In these cases, we need our fellow disciples to give us space to express our feelings and concerns without prejudice, patronisation or judgement, and to help us find practical solutions to the issues that face us. In these cases, more imaginative responses are required, both personally and collectively.

Could you commit to phoning and writing to older relatives to make sure they feel connected in this time of separation? Could you ask a disabled neighbour if there's any support you can provide over the coming weeks?



As well as being used for worship and prayer, could online video call systems be used to run a coffee morning for people who are isolated, or keep activities for families going online?

It has been confirmed (www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876535/270320_Revised_Guidance.pdf) that church buildings are still able to stay open, only for the purposes of offering night shelter for homeless people, or foodbanks for those who cannot access what they need. Is this something your church could offer? Could financial resources that are usually used to run church organisations be redirected to support those in the community on low incomes at this time?

As with everything, the most important means of encouraging others will be the sharing of ideas, inspiration and stories of how individuals and churches are responding to this crisis, not only in terms of prayer and worship which, whilst vital, must lead to other, practical, missional action. Please e-mail wtw@urc.org.uk or call **020 7520 2718** to share your stories, or those of others which have inspired you.

Support and resources

In response to this crisis, there are countless efforts to do something meaningful to support people through these strange times. If you have found something useful, please e-mail wtw@urc.org.uk or call us on **020 7520 2718** so we can share it.

- **Stories and examples** – Over the coming weeks, the Walking the Way news page, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram will be prioritising stories of innovative responses to the crisis. Please contact us using the details above to share these, and find more here: www.urc.org.uk/wtw-news
- **URC Communications** – Through the URC's dedicated webpages, the denomination continues to share information and provide support support, including a series of information guides to help individuals and churches shape their responses. Keep checking these page regularly. Reform magazine is now available to read for free here: www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2020/03/read-reform-for-free/ including an article from Terry Waite, in the July/August 2018 edition, on living in isolation for 1,763 days.
- **URC Children's and Youth Work** – Resources and information for children, young people and their families is shared regularly through Facebook and Twitter, which promote such things as the office's March 2020 special newsletter on activities for families in isolation. The practice of making art and craft rainbows to display in windows for children to find during their daily exercise in lockdown is also proving popular, as reported on CBBC's Newsround. Find more here: www.urc.org.uk/our-work/children-and-youth.html
- **Safeguarding** – In all responses which are taken to this crisis, it is vital that we seek to protect the most vulnerable. Please check out the URC's latest safeguarding advice here: www.urc.org.uk/images/Communications/docs/safeguarding-people-in-the-midst-of-coronavirus.pdf and tips from the Methodist Church here: www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/safeguarding-considerations/
- **Joint Public Issues Team** – This ecumenical team which supports the URC, Methodists, Baptists and Church of Scotland in engaging with social justice is also gathering stories of inspiration to share as it re-focusses its work firmly on the most vulnerable people facing this crisis, considering the impact of income loss, job uncertainty, poverty and hunger in light of the current situation. Find more here: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/
- **Churches Together in England** – Although focussed on ecumenism in England, much of what is being shared is relevant to individuals and churches across the UK, including a call for everyone to light a candle in their window every Sunday at 7pm as a sign of hope, prayer and connectedness. Find more here: www.cte.org.uk/

- **Arthur Rank Centre (Rural)** – The ARC’s website acts as a hub for content on the current situation which is particularly relevant for rural churches, but also helpful to everyone. Find the website here: www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/
- **London Institute for Contemporary Christianity** – The LICC is especially good at articulating the idea of whole-of-life discipleship. This is a good time to explore their material afresh. Find more here: www.licc.org.uk/
- **Directory for Social Change** – The DSC is a good source of advice and resources for charities, volunteers and employees. Find more here: www.dsc.org.uk/
- **Online churches/responses** – In being the Church scattered, it is vital for us to be able to feel connected with each other as we encourage and equip each other for Mission. Churspacious, Sanctuary First, St Pixels, and the 24/7 online activities going on with the Liturgist podcast/ community are good places to begin, with countless other options being promoted across social media. Please let us know of any that we might share more widely.
- **Advice for Remote Working** – Some helpful tips for working from home can be found here: www.hargraves.com.au/remote-working-playbook/ NHS leader Helen Bevan also offers this helpful Twitter account: @helevbevan.

Written by Simon Peters for the Walking the Way Steering Group, March 2020