

Summary of SCBA Covid-19 Lockdown: Time of Reflection on Zoom, 8th June 2020

On 8th June, forty-four people gathered via Zoom for two hours for a SCBA Time of Reflection on what has been emerging from this period of Covid-19 lockdown. The questions that we considered in a prayerful time together, both in plenary and in small groups, were:

Question One: What are we being invited to notice that is 'of God' at this time?

In our communities; in wider society/nation; in our church(es); in our own lives

('Of God' refers to themes, patterns, incidents which seem to be echoes and fingerprints of God, including love for God and neighbour both within and beyond church boundaries eg kindness, compassion, self-giving, sacrifice, fulfilling call, creativity, sharing faith and seeking God and meaning, beauty, justice and bias towards the disadvantaged and poor, deepening of connection with God and with others, care for Planet)

Question Two: What insights and practical responses arise from what we are noticing?

Question Three: In responding to what seems to be 'of God', what is needed and from whom?

We heard verbally from one another in small groups and in plenary. Extensive use of the chatbox facility enabled many voices to be heard. It also, of course, generated a large volume of text to be filtered for the main themes of what we are noticing that is of God and the practical implications. This occasion was simply the beginning of a process of reflection though nonetheless an important start. Inevitably some of what emerged is expressed in continuing and yet-to-be answered questions. Most encouraging is the sheer number of ways in which we noticed and celebrated together those things that, in this hugely difficult time, have been and are of God.

NOTICING WHAT MAY BE 'OF GOD'

A strong sense of *coming together* and unity in local communities characterised by many instances of *neighbourly kindness*, self-giving, and availability to care for and serve others although polar-opposite, selfish behaviour was also acknowledged. Human solidarity - imaging God's care, self-giving, compassion and community is not limited to Christians/church.

A fresh or *new valuing and appreciation of the work that others do* both on the frontline (health and social care) but also of other foundational paid and volunteer work from delivery drivers through to grocery shop staff to foodbank teams. In particular appreciation of the intensity, risk and sacrifice involved.

A thankfulness for everyday blessings and provision.

A fresh awareness of *how interdependent we are*, exposing the myth of 'I'/me', and in particular dependence on those who are paid less well and have least job security, with accompanying vulnerabilities.

Questions raised, partly because of frustrations about perceived poor decisions/behaviour by leaders, about *what good leadership looks like* in every context: nationally/politically, in local community and in churches. An accompanying desire for wisdom and compassion and the place of God's guidance rather than the elevation of scientists or knowledge alone as deciding.

A fresh *desire for social justice and equality* informed by a new sense of appreciation for those who do vital but low paid work, of how BAME people have been disproportionately affected by every aspect of Covid-19 and lockdown, and, prompted by protests following the death of George Floyd, a new awareness of racial injustice and bias in the USA and in the UK, including in church life. Importance of *care and carers over profit*

Valuing time/space/different pace/way of being ('sabbath') and not wanting to lose it. *Being* not only doing.

A heightened appreciation and awareness of nature accompanied by a fresh desire to stay with and develop care for the environment/planet.

A strong desire to connect with others (neighbours/streets, across churches, people not contacted recently) using social media, video and phone call resulting in connections that are wider (people not recently in touch with) and deeper (video and phone not as substitutes for face-to-face but complementing or providing a safe way into initial 'viewing' of 'church' and having contact).

Fresh awareness of human frailty including mental health struggles (not always present or worse in those with pre-existing mental health issues); a sense of helplessness, disorientation, emotional vulnerability and brittleness, triggered by an obvious range of stresses including anxiety and fear for self and family relating to Covid-19 itself, 'how long', isolation, loneliness, job- and income-security, illness, restrictions on care for the dying and sharing in farewells and services after death. The strain on mental health particularly on young people and adults as an *invitation to be prepared to accompany the disorientated as unaddressed mental health issues stack up* and need future resolution.

Disorientation leading to a *desire to explore faith and something beyond* themselves by those beyond the church (dipping into online services/prayer)...and by those within.

Strengthening of a *sense of dependence upon God* to hold and to work, a *heightened awareness of the Spirit's promptings* in life and ministry, a *deepened desire to be with God* through prayer, Scripture, worship and reflection (alone and with others)

The *need for neighbour-, self- and church-care* in a time of shaking and disorientation, and of missing face to face contact with friends and family, of severe pressure on people from a number of directions including on households trying to home teach or where domestic tensions/issues are exacerbated by lockdown.

Spontaneous increased mutual pastoral care across churches and in communities, not relying on or needing the specialist pastoral carer to be the only or primary provider.

Ministry and mission as a virtual and not just geographically limited physical possibility. Increased attendance at online church, at least initially, with an implicit invitation to work out long-term what investment, time and action is needed in the medium and long-term if online connection with people beyond and within the church is to be an aspect of faith exploration and deepening, particularly with people not related to in other ways.

Church as a flexible, creative, community willing to learn by gathering for and engaging in worship online. Raises a question about how online presence can helpfully and distinctively connect with one another and God in a way that complements face to face rather than simply trying to reproduce physical gatherings for faith-sharing, development and worship. Encouragement about an initial flexible, response; awareness that further creativity, resources and learning are required by churches/leaders.

Reassessing of priorities in this time of opportunity and of being open to new things, patterns and ways. Need for intentional individual and group gatherings to reflect on what has is being noticed as 'of God' and the accompanying invitation to consider new ways before being sucked into default arrangements and approaches.

A time of being open to new things! Clarity that a return to how things were before not possible. A move to continue with what has been put in place during lockdown in addition to returning to doing all that was done before and are neither desirable, possible to resource or mentally/emotionally/spiritually sustainable or healthy.

WHAT IS NEEDED AND FROM WHOM: NEGOTIATING NEXT STEPS

Need to intentionally and prayerfully consider next steps -short, medium and long term on basis of what is discerned to be of God for this time but also for/from what we know of God's future and from what we have been seeing in our communities. Theological reflection.

Use these *time of reflection questions* to facilitate this with leaders/church, to provide means of making considered 'next steps' as and when lockdown is eased rather than being rushed into the default of everything as before.

Mixed, blended, pioneering/online presence and engagement and traditional approach to church life and mission in a *new sustainable balance*.

Healthy individual and church rhythms of life. Balancing being with doing, and self- and other-care for leaders, ministers and across churches (proper nourishment, time off, rest) vital as many are exhausted - and vulnerable - as a result.

How to respond to many open conversations about life, meaning and faith with people beyond the church which have resulted during this time, partly because we are all in the same boat, also because of heightened awareness of one another, but also we have needed to live life at a different pace.

Using *technology to serve God's kingdom* and respond to opportunities balancing previous emphasis on using buildings.

Online experimentation gathering to cluster, network, and praying together locally and nationally provide a *fresh and valid way of including people* but bearing in mind the need to not exclude those without IT ability, engagement or inclination

Colleges and Associations (perhaps a regular regional conversation drawing in specialists to develop online savvy?) helping to *work out how to help ministers/leaders grow in pioneering/online* including support re GDPR safeguarding implications.

Ministries of others in churches to be celebrated and further released perhaps as one way of enabling a sustainable, balanced, blended response

Re-examining connections to the vulnerable including readiness for and investment in mental health care responses eg Renew Wellbeing

Making the most of heightened awareness to God, others and whole of life in these times. Need to *widen and deepen ability to keep attentive to Holy Spirit* and offer 'spiritual accompaniment' to believers and those who are seeking.

Asking *fresh questions about social equality and racial justice* in our communities, nation and church life and which has particular resonance with young adults.

Acknowledging *two opposite types of pressure and anxiety*: panic about a return to business as usual with fear that really good parts of this time including fresh ways of connecting online being lost; fear that everything might not just go back to how it was!

(Colin Norris, 15th June 2020)