

## **Guidance for Ministers – a month on**

A month ago we offered some very general guidance for ministers navigating themselves, and their congregations, through the Coronavirus crisis. Here we revisit the situation and our early responses.

One month further into lockdown, we all find ourselves a little, or a lot, more tired and with no fewer questions about our current situation. We offer here a rough framework of three dimensions for processing these questions and shaping a lived response.

### **Earthing**

The goal for any recovery from a shock event, modest as it may sound, is to reach a place where it is possible to say ‘what has happened has happened’. The initial shock of an overwhelming event (or time) can make even this kind of simple acknowledgement difficult or impossible.

Along the way one of the most effective ways of moving toward that place is to notice, and name, the various things that are going on in our bodies, thoughts and emotions. This is important even, or perhaps especially, when these things seem strange or unedifying. The more we are able to acknowledge without judgment persistent questions, niggling emotions, bodily discomforts and surprising compulsions, the closer we edge to an ability to bear the fullness of our reality. Biological research tells us that the simple act of naming a truth builds new neurological pathways in our brains. Allowing a place for each of the things we notice within ourselves, and approaching those places with gentleness, helps us to earth ourselves and to be fully present to our situation.

By the same token, being gentle with what we notice about others, including those whom we accompany as minister, and assisting them to recognize and name what is going on in them, helps to earth them also. Note that neither advice nor answers are necessary in the short term. What is needed is to acknowledge uncertainties and questions (both one’s own and those of others) and to allow them a place.

### **Mapping**

In order to help us to make sense and meaning, of our situation, it can be helpful to attempt some mapping of our context.

Our earlier guidance was subtitled ‘thoughts for ministers during the first phase of the coronavirus crisis’. Coming back to it a month later, it seems to us that we are still in ‘the first phase’. Perhaps many of us have moved past the initial, heady days of ‘heroic response’ in which rapid release of stress hormones carries us through the emergency of the onset of disaster, but we have not, collectively, experienced the decline that inevitably follows the adrenaline rush. We don’t yet know the parameters of the disaster.

Perhaps we are now in a ‘doing’ phase. We are keeping ourselves busy, attending to people and developing innovative and creative interventions, quite possibly while looking over our shoulders at the innovations and creativity of others. We’re doing some anxious assessment – ‘am I doing lockdown well?’

There are different motivations for all of this ‘doing’. Partly it is a natural response to the need we perceive. And it is true that we, ourselves, need activity at a time like this to help us to establish routines, patterns and aspects of identity to replace those that have been lost. But for most of us there will be, mixed up with all of these things, a subconscious attempt to avoid thought and feeling – a reluctance to bear the reality of what we face.

## Anchoring

In addition to a grasp on our reality, and a context in which to understand that reality, we also need hope to anchor us. Where does our hope come from? Studies that have mapped the various stages of responses to shock events often refer to a final stage that may be termed 'wiser living'. This stage is marked by wisdom in all its aspects. 'Recovery' is blessed with gifts of wisdom and experience as well as with the simple relief of receding pain and injury. However, recovery is likely also to be weighed down by such costly gifts. Perhaps recovery looks something like an increased capacity for the bearing of reality.

While it is counter-productive to attempt to side-track the necessary journey 'through the valley of the shadow of death' in order to reach recovery sooner (and there will be those in every congregation who will want to try), we nevertheless need to be able to perceive rays of hope when we are strong enough to look for them. Many people are beginning to ask what life will look like when this is all over. Tied up in those questions are half-formed hopes that out of this suffering and pain might come new patterns of life that, for example, value the earth, promote justice or support relationship better than the old patterns. It is almost certainly too soon to be putting flesh on such hopes, or prescribing directions for their fulfillment, but it is not too soon to be consciously planting seeds or to be noticing green blades where they are rising.

Associated with the quest for signs of hope will be questions about the place and role of God in the pandemic. Much writing about trauma cautions against getting caught up too soon in the 'where is God in this' question, and especially against the temptation to formulate premature answers. Rainer Maria Rilke counselled his 'young poet' to be patient with the uncertainties in his heart, to 'love the *questions themselves*' and to live them, without seeking answers. He would not be given the answers, wrote Rilke, because he could not live with them. Instead he should '*Live the questions now.*'<sup>1</sup>

Conversations we have had with friends and colleagues suggest to us that many of us are doing just this. Holy Saturday and the Easter period have been especially profound times this year, with some speaking and writing with vulnerability and honesty about their experiences of understanding in new ways the painful mixture of hope, despair, joy and confusion depicted in the post-resurrection accounts, as well as in the psalms. This is a time, if ever there was one, for vulnerability, honesty, and a tentative humility in theological reflection. 'Perhaps [we] will then gradually,' suggests Rilke, 'without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.'

Meg Warner, Hilary Ison, Carla A. Grosch-Miller, and Christopher Southgate (with thanks to Katie Cross)

25 April 2020

---

<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Tr. M.D. Herter (Norton; New York/London: 1993), 35 (italics in the original).