



ACT TOGETHER

Ashram Community Trust

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February Community meeting

Thank you to everyone who met at Andover Street in Sheffield on 15 February 2020. As a result, the Ashram Centre (Glossop Road) house committee recommended to the trustees that Ashram dispose of the premises as they are no longer fulfilling either of the original aims. The Gathering in Sheffield will consider bringing to the May weekend a request for other members of ACT to meet with them to re-conceive the Burngreave project. Rock Street house committee were asked to note that these properties are not currently covering their costs and the trustees will monitor this situation. Kath Clements is revising the website so that it reflects more accurately current ACT activities.

It was noted that it is the trustees, not the treasurer, who are responsible if Ashram runs out of money.

There was support for a wider discussion about the future of Ashram. Two searching questions were asked:

Do we want ACT to be a landlord or a community?

What is the potential of selling all properties and investing in a mother house?

Helen Davies (facilitator)

19 February 2020

From John Vincent-

These are a few thoughts of my own at the end of the meeting, which thirteen people attended. My thoughts are about the Past and the Future. I'm one of those involved very much in the present situation, but I want to suggest a couple of perspectives

The Past

We ended up with the Houses and Projects we currently have because they were seen as part of our mission in particular times and circumstances. 347 Glossop Rd was an attempt to challenge the West of Sheffield with the ethos and news from the East of Sheffield in 1987. 80-86 was bought in 2000 because we wanted a base to do a 1995 New Roots type of project in Burngreave. 75 and later 77 and 79 Rock Street were bought to provide housing for people involved in the Furnival project. And 6 Andover St was bought in 2003 to provide residence for members / workers involved in Burngreave Ashram (details are all in 'A Lifestyle of Sharing')

So now that times and circumstances are different, you would have to say either that they are not needed now to do those things, or that other things now justify them. Or you would go back and say "What are times and circumstances saying or suggesting in 2020? You'd have to ask the question of each House and project separately of course.

The Future

Second about the future. Are we at present in a time when we ought to be asking the basic questions? Like: What do we as a Community want to do that requires a building to house it? What kinds of people or members do we want to be providing house and home for? What project(s) are we doing or could do that need a building? What members and people are looking to join us? Whose hopes and ambitions fit with ours? Like some of the present residents in 6 Andover Street and 77&79 Rock Street?

Beyond that, ought we to be thinking of a Community Mother House? Margaret Mackley threw out the idea at this meeting and I immediately said it was something we should consider.

I also said that all Christian Communities go through basic self questionings like these – and that it's a sign of health and a feature of hope- and also a way to find new people who might be called to join us.

John Vincent

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Pictures taken when Andrew Weeks visited John last summer



SOME THOUGHTS ON ZOOMING AROUND!

During this time of lockdown these words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer written in the poem 'Who am I?' whilst he was in prison have often come to my mind.

... 'Am I then really only what other men tell of me
Or am I only what I myself know of myself
Restless and longing and sick like a bird in a cage
Struggling for breath as though hands were
compressing my throat
Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of
birds
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness
Tossing in expectation of great events.
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite
distance...'

Although our situations are very different I think we will all have experienced those feelings at times, especially that yearning to be with friends.

Nowadays we have many different media that mean some of that longing for connection, for communication can still be met. For me this has been via a social platform (I think those are the right words) called Zoom.

I have never engaged previously with on-line social media of any kind but was introduced to this by a group of Quakers I belong to. We are all on a two year course called Equipping for Ministry. We are from all over the country and indeed one person lives in Switzerland, another in Belgium and there are only four residential elements to the course when we are all together so one member suggested we meet by Zoom occasionally and gradually over a few months we have reached the point of early morning meetings every morning and more or less weekly evening meetings. These include a Meeting for worship Quaker style and then a certain amount of sharing, usually in the way that Quakers describe as worship sharing. So someone introduces a theme with their own thoughts or maybe a reading and then people add theirs one by one as they choose with a period of silence in between. This is not a discussion but simply an opportunity for each person to share what they feel called to say. Much to my great surprise I feel drawn into this use of the internet social platform.

During the period of lockdown it has become a lovely way of being together. On the screen you can see each person and yourself. On the other hand people can choose to be represented only by a photo or just

their name so everyone knows they are there but does not see them in their actual situation. I think one of the things I really value about this is knowing we are part of a group and even though it is sometimes a bit disconcerting to see yourself it is an affirmation you too belong to the group.

The early morning daily meetings are usually 'attended' by around seven people, the evenings often by more. Some people have never been to any. However during the week before Easter we should have all been together on a residential week at Woodbrooke. Some people decided we should have a Zoom meeting each day from 4pm to 5.30pm with a theme each day. Most days we had 15 people or more, so almost the whole group. One of those who joined us was the youngest member, currently living and working in Jerusalem in a school as librarian. The person who 'hosted' the meeting sometimes split us into 'break out rooms' of just three people for part of the time.

It really feels we have become a kind of intentional community. Over this time we have got to know each other well and shared quite deeply. We 'uphold' each other and encourage each other in the various local involvements.

We do not know where this will lead long term. It is unlikely joint projects will ever form part of our community but we do feel we are a community. Something of the longing for connection and depth of communication has been met.

However there are some questions about use of the internet during this time of lock down and indeed at all times. It has expanded exponentially and many of us in Ashram now for instance go to several Zoom meetings, church, and other groups as well as the developing two Ashram Zoom groups. I also found I am using email more and often responding to group emails I would previously have simply read and absorbed but had no particular inclination to respond to. I think this may be part of this yearning for communication though it may too simply be I have time. It has however also raised some questions in my mind.

1. How inclusive are such groups of people? Some people cannot use them either because they do not have access to the gadgets needed or because they really do not wish to join such

groups or do not have the technical know how. On the other hand some people find it is now possible to join in because previously they could not travel to events because of access and travel issues or time constraints or need to be in their on home because of the needs of those they live with.

2. All electronic gadgets, though their use may be more environmentally friendly than flying to conferences on the far side of the world, do still have environmental impacts. They contain a variety of rare minerals some of which are mined in industries known to wreak local environmental destruction, which are exploitative of people, even in some countries children, and once the gadget is no longer in use create waste that is often 'dumped' on poorer countries. Recycling the minerals is still often difficult and of course they are not renewable resources, and some very rare.
3. The electricity used in their making, use and disposal is not often from renewable sources and can still be considerable. The firms involved in search engines, manufacture and energy production include those with a very poor record re paying tax.
4. The above impacts mean at the very least we should take care in using them. Simple

suggestions have been for instance when someone sends an email to a whole group think carefully whether we need to hit the reply button 'all' or indeed whether we need to hit the reply button at all if it is just to say thank you.

5. As well as environmental impacts there are also the effects on us psychologically. I have seen some diaries which are now as busy as ever but with meetings via Zoom. I find the expression 'all zoomed out' coined by a Quaker rings very true at times. I now try to limit the number of Zoom meetings each day to two with one Zoom free day.
6. It seems to me we have been given, at least those of us not in highly pressured work areas, an opportunity in terms of time and space to reflect seriously and re-evaluate our whole way of life. It will be a shame if we just turn this time into a different kind of frantic rushing around the internet, rather than the roads and by air.

If I could produce a cartoon it would be at present along the lines of a protest gathering of computers, phones with placards making clear they too need sabbaths! Plenty of empty streets to march along and people to lean out and clap them.

Sandra Dutson

Covid 19 changes to normal life

This is an account of my life since the last physical Ashram meeting I attended at the end of February. Looking back at my diary from March onwards, on 4th March I attended a Just Share event at St Mary-le-Bow in London on the Future of Fairtrade, which was interesting and informative, with the main message being that we must continue with fairly trading whilst also campaigning for more transparency, higher ethical and ecological standards and such like. The following weekend I went to stay with friends who moved some time ago from Staines to Tonbridge so that I could go with them to the concert the husband's very professional-sounding choir was giving at a Public School in Sevenoaks (Bach's Magnificat and Handels's Dixit Dominus).

A week later, 14th March, my own choral society was able to perform Handel's Messiah with another smaller but more professional choir at Windsor Parish Church, in acknowledgement of our choir's 100th anniversary, as it seems that they started with Messiah in 1920. The audience was smaller than the number of tickets sold, because the virus had started to spread sufficiently to alarm people, and our concert turned out to be the last event at the church before the lockdown started, so my brother-in-law's Windsor-based choir had to cancel their concert in early April.

After this my diary consists of crossings out. The Traidcraft London Roadshow was the first, then on

Thursday 19 March, the exhibition opening of photographs by Peter Marshall and works by a watercolour artist friend of his, planned to be in the corridor of University College Hospital! Saturday 28th, GJN (formerly WDM) event in London to celebrate their 50th anniversary - and we have been members from the beginning. Palm Sunday, special reflection service at Staines Methodist, to be led by the choir. A Maundy Thursday service is not crossed out as it was due to be taking place at a relatively local joint Anglican/Methodist Church and they have their own You-Tube channel. That one worked well for me, whereas the Good Friday and Easter Sunday ones organised on Zoom for our church were not helpful because the music was so distorted that sitting through 5 verses of a hymn you couldn't even hear the words of made me very cross! Next crossing-out is London Agape Group at Liz Urban's on 18 April, though four of us managed to meet using Zoom which worked quite well for that small number of 'guests'. Fortunately(!) our Church Annual Meeting for 19 April did not take place, on or off Zoom.

As for my weekday activities, they have obviously stopped in their normal format. Home-Start visiting is reduced to a weekly contact with our allotted family by phone or email. Our foodbank operates by delivery only so that is continuing, but I can't go out with the deliveries any more because I don't have my own car and they can't have two people from different households in the same vehicle, as we usually do. I did offer to follow the delivery car on my bike, very fast, but they found a better solution, and seem to be receiving referrals as before so far. Regular donations are much fewer as most of the collecting points were in now closed churches, but there have been donations of money including a large grant from the local council, so that is keeping the shelves full. My own Traidcraft customers are largely just members of my church and live fairly locally, so I have sent round the offer of delivering their everyday essentials (including toilet paper!) by bicycle, as that can also count as my once-a-day permitted exercise outside the house, and I have had a number of responses so far.

I suppose there are good things to report as well. Our elder son Samuel, in Milton Keynes, has given us - well me, really, I think - a tablet so that we can Skype

meetings with their 4 month old baby, and this is the piece of equipment we can now use for other things, such as Zoom. Last Wednesday I was able to have an hour's chat with my German pen-friend, one of her daughters and her 25 year old granddaughter (and the dog), all living at the moment in the same household. The only problem with the conversation was that it followed just a couple of hours after my Italian conversation group on Zoom, and my head was quite challenged by three different languages in one day.

The other good thing is the birdsong, not only revealed because of less traffic on the roads, but the near disappearance of aircraft noise where we live, a few miles from Heathrow. Just occasionally now I will notice the sound of a single plane taking off, and already it surprises me in the way the odd aeroplane in the sky above our garden did when I was a child.

As soon as the lockdown began I started to worry about Christian Aid Week in May, especially as I am the local representative covering a number of churches in the area. We have in recent years still managed to keep up in some areas with reasonably good results from house-to-house collections, which of course raises money from non-churchgoing residents, and I was wondering what we might do to compensate for this - and then, unexpectedly, money started turning up in my bank account from ticket refunds for cancelled events and considerable savings were being made on train fares for journeys that I could no longer make, and before the end of March I calculated that I had already saved £94.70, which has since gone up by another £15 or so, and as far as I know the government has not as yet considered reducing the state retirement pension in order to shore up the NHS, so I am continuing to add to my spreadsheet week by week and shall make the amount an extra donation for Christian Aid Week. I have suggested this to the other church reps as well, but have only had one mildly positive response from one of them so far. The suggestions coming from CA's head office are for 'digital' events and activities, but maybe we need someone with a walking frame to do a marathon tour of their back yard and mop up the few millions that haven't yet gone to the (very worthy, of course) NHS.

Linda Marshall

Email from Nirmal in Sri Lanka

Here in Sri Lanka there have been incomparably less cases and deaths after Sars-CoV2 started to infect humans some 40 days ago. As of yesterday 203 cases have been detected while have died from Covid-19. That gives an average of some 5 cases a day and a death rate of less than 0.18 per day. Those dead are all males, over 60 years old apart from one, and having other long term serious health problems.

Special wards and hospitals are at hand, and suspects are subjected to a 14 to 21 day quarantine at adapted centres in military camps, while some are quarantined at home.

However, a 24/7 curfew supervised by the police is in force throughout the island with some areas having no break in curfew, while others have it lifted every 3 to 7 days for 6 to 8 hours to enable shopping for basics, accessing cash machines, and pharmacies. Food supplies appear to be being transported door to door for purchase. However, the gravest socio-economic contradiction among incomparably more than

those affected by the virus, is that the home economies of wage labourers who have no permanent employment and depend on daily earnings, have collapsed.

Shortly after the onset of curfew, I accepted a kind invitation from a family and moved from the capital Colombo, where most cases of Covid-19 are, to live out this period in their very remote rural village home in a rough mountainous region, hardly accessible by vehicle. Here people are removed from the market economy to a great extent and rarely purchase rice, fruit, vegetables, greens, and pulses, since most homes grow them organically in large home gardens, forest plots, and small fields. Their purpose is subsistence with sharing of surplus, not business and profit. Most importantly, traditional hospitality prevails, apparently not based on any religious norm, but on gene-culture co-evolution. No sign of Covid-19 here, and no de facto curfew. So, I continue being well and happy.

As ever,
Nirmal

My response to the lockdown

I am on the autistic spectrum, without intellectual difficulties, I am also schizoid in personality, with avoidant and detachment features in behaviour, due to prolonged early traumatising and isolation from significant others, at 4&1/2-5&1/2 years old. But I also after the burial of my beloved life companion Mary on 3rd Dec, 2018, have experienced an intensification of the chronic depression, that I have suffered from in decades. Low levels of personal stimulus accelerate this depression still further. I can't meet my friend ****, due to the self isolation.

The 50+ LGBT matures group I belong to, has gone onto Zoom, which is not something I desire to participate in. A local priest friend who knew Mary I used to meet for lunch, who is aged over 70, I can't meet. So the depression is deepening at times. After months with no mental health aftercare, following discharge from Willow Ward mental health unit, the mental health chaplain has arranged for a woman to give me pastoral support by email and by phone calls. I met her briefly when in hospital at a chaplaincy celebration.

She is studying for an M.A. in Pastoral Psychology. This is quite encouraging. She was about to ask for medical assistance due to my deepening depression, but I think I am just about pulling out of a severe downward spiral. My model for this time of lockdown are those ascetic saints who chose isolation with all the mental health risks, to deepen their connection with all that is. Also Buddhist sages like the Tibetan Milarepa, and many disciples including women, who sometimes sealed themselves up in caves, for long intervals of time.

I am a pensioner, so have less anxieties compared with many others in society. I have become more acutely withdrawn due to the lockdown, and presently am eating a lot less, but that may improve. It is rather like a long stay on a mental health ward, with personal restrictions, and waiting to be discharged. There are ups and downs in mood, but knowing discharge shall come. Maybe I am better adapted to this experience in some ways, yet also more vulnerable in other ways. For everyone the experience shall be different and the coping strategies shall vary

Ms Cerys Brangwyn

Mull and Corona Virus

We have been glad many times in the past six years that we made the decision to move to live on the Isle of Mull in the Hebrides, but never more so than during the current situation we all find ourselves in as a result of the Corona Virus pandemic.

Mull is a small community (less than 3,000 people in an area of around 875 square kilometres) and a very caring one. We have been impressed by the support systems, both organised and informal, that have been created recently and by the way in which individuals and businesses have sought to help others.

In Tobermory, where Brian and I live, there are basically 4 food shops: a bakery/café, a small independent deli/grocery, a fresh fishshop/deli and the Co-op. The three independent shops have all closed to physical customers but are providing a delivery service (the bakery offering fresh vegetables, cooked/fresh meat and ready-meals in addition to its usual bread, cakes, milk and eggs).

A support group has been established and volunteers will shop at the Co-op and deliver goods to people's homes and a bank account has now been set up so that people can pay for their shopping online or by BACS. All prescriptions have been delivered for the past 4 weeks, to protect the pharmacist and the staff in the sole pharmacy on the island. There is also a food bank established for those finding they are in financial difficulties due to loss of income. A local hotel is, obviously, closed to customers but offers hot, cooked meals delivered to your door as does the Indian restaurant.

The two distilleries on the island (one gin and one whisky/gin) have both created alcohol-based hand sanitiser which has been made available free of charge to key workers and the vulnerable and the soap manufacturer has donated 1000 bars of soap to be distributed via the Co-op. There are many other examples of businesses donating goods. Those individuals who can sew are making facemasks and scrubs for nhs workers.

There are lots of people looking out for neighbours and friends. We had intended to be involved in the shopping/delivery scheme but learned that, due to my medication, I am more at risk if I get the virus so we pulled back from that but are still offering our services for other things when required (e.g. we

expect to be involved at some point in the bookkeeping/accounts side). We go shopping once a week and shop for 2 or 3 others who are self-isolating at the same time. Although, like everywhere, the shops ran out of certain goods – toilet rolls, hand-wash, pasta etc. on the whole people have been good at shopping with consideration for others and most people living here have been observing the rules about not being out unnecessarily and maintaining social distance. Our main problem initially was that, until the official Lockdown, tourists were arriving in cars and camper vans, seeing the islands as “safe”. This, of course, puts pressure on the local shops etc but, thankfully, we have now seen a dramatic reduction in this.

One amazing achievement recently was the co-ordinated effort to get a doctor and his family to the island. He is one of a number of locums that have been making regular visits to the island for between 2 and 4 weeks at a time, during the past 3 years that there has not been a permanent doctor resident on the island. He and his family drove in a hired car from Germany and flew into Glasgow airport. The bus company provided a bus to collect the doctor and his family from Glasgow and bring them to an empty house, which someone made available, where they could be quarantined for two weeks. They will now stay for several months to provide some stability of care during the crisis.

Mull relies heavily on the tourist industry and so there are huge numbers of people who have lost their jobs and many self-employed guest-house, restaurant & café owners, who get most or all of their income during the period March to October, will have no income at all this year.

I have continued to produce the church newsletter and send as many as possible by email and the rest by post. I have offered to supply fairtrade goods from my stock and will deliver within Tobermory and have also used the local food delivery system to supply food items elsewhere on the island.

We are so fortunate to be living in such a beautiful place and to be able to get out and walk, often without encountering anyone, although sometimes our daily walk just takes us a round the streets of

Tobermory and we pause to talk with friends who are in their gardens. Personally, life isn't very different for us as neither of us now has to earn an income, so apart from not meeting friends for coffee, going to concerts/plays or travelling to Oban for certain shopping and me not going to church or Brian to football, things are pretty normal. It has made me think about friends and relatives that I generally only exchange Christmas cards and occasional letters with and I have phoned lots of people in the past couple of weeks, especially those living alone, just to make sure they're okay and so they can hear a friendly voice. I'm also spending a lot more time on Facebook and emails.

I know that many have lost loved ones and that many more are in real financial difficulties. There are issues for those with mental illness and I'm sure there are already an increasing number suffering from depression and/or feeling suicidal. There are concerns for those in abusive domestic situations too. And of course the homeless will be hard-hit too – many shelters/hostels are closed and those who were getting an income from selling the Big issue cannot

do so. The knock-on effects of this will be felt for a very long time.

However, there may yet be some positive things to come from it. Maybe people will not be so ready to fly or cruise across the world on a whim, maybe they'll realise the benefits of shopping locally, maybe people will not use their cars so much or discard perfectly good clothing because they want a change and maybe they'll realise they can have a good time just being at home with their families? Sadly, I think far too many will just return to their previous way of life as soon as they possibly can but if just some people change their lifestyle in the future it'd be something.

God bless you all in whatever ways you're finding to cope with this very unusual and, for many, frightening situation. The way to get through it is for us to think positive and to care for one another in whatever ways are within our power.

Lorraine Jones

'And People Stayed Home,'

by Irish poet- Kathleen O'Meara's poem, written in 1869, after the famine.

And people stayed home
and read books and listened
and rested and exercised
and made art and played
and learned new ways of being
and stopped
and listened deeper
someone meditated
someone prayed
someone danced
someone met their shadow
and people began to think differently
and people healed

and in the absence of people who lived in
ignorant ways,
dangerous, meaningless and heartless,
even the earth began to heal
and when the danger ended
and people found each other
grieved for the dead people
and they made new choices
and dreamed of new visions
and created new ways of life
and healed the earth completely
just as they were healed themselves.

Cabaniers 19/3/20

Dear Linda & friends of London group
Thank you for your last letters &
also congratulations on your exchanges with
Toulouse!

We're glad you found the 'Laudato
Si' study useful. We found the testimony
of the Amazonian the most telling because
the example of the way of life of indigenous
people & their harmonious relation with nature
very important. An example to show us there
is another way. Bolsonaro has just opened
up another tract of forest to 'development'
& laughing said (I saw it on TV) not to worry
about the native people, they are becoming
more & more human like us (or something very
similar). I thought it was outrageous but
it didn't seem to provoke any outcry that I
heard of.

My daughter Lily is in America
& last autumn attended the 'day of mourning'
held in Plymouth (Mass.) She came back for
Xmas with the family (all those air miles enough!)
bringing a newspaper 'Workers World' whose
slogan or motto is 'Workers & oppressed peoples
of the world unite!' which has an article in it:

(as an alternative to
Thanksgiving Day)

50th Annual Day of Mourning

Workers World Party

honors Indigenous peoples

November 28 marks the 50th National Day of
Mourning when indigenous peoples pay homage
to their ancestors & relate their history as the

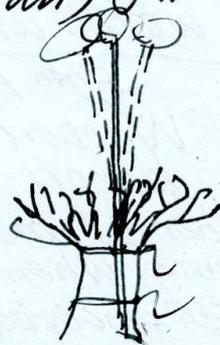
original inhabitants of this country while they expose the myths about the 'benevolent pilgrims'. European colonialists committed massive crimes against Native people ... Engaging in genocide ...

... It is a day to applaud Indigenous peoples worldwide who fight oppression & lead the struggle to save lands, rivers, & forests from Capitalist destruction'

As I must have said (repeatedly?) our 'Laudato Si' effort ended in a shambolic anti-windturbine meeting. It has struck me that the main reasons they don't like wind turbines - they're intrusive, there'll be too many of them, we don't like the look of them, they reduce house values, drive away tourists... could just as well apply to opposition to a proposed reception centre for migrants.

They also argue that ~~it makes~~ wind turbines installed by big international companies only make money for the rich, but when I suggested a community owned wind turbine they were against that too.

Our mini-turbine was only working on 1 of its 3 phases so we had to take it down & with the help of Ulrich (hurrah) fixed it. We had a strong wind (very) the other day & it was swaying impressively because it's only attached (by straps) to the tree lower down. It would be safer with guy ropes.



Eventually it might look something like this →

It's such a small turbine & the site is not ideal & it won't produce a lot of electricity but it's a start.

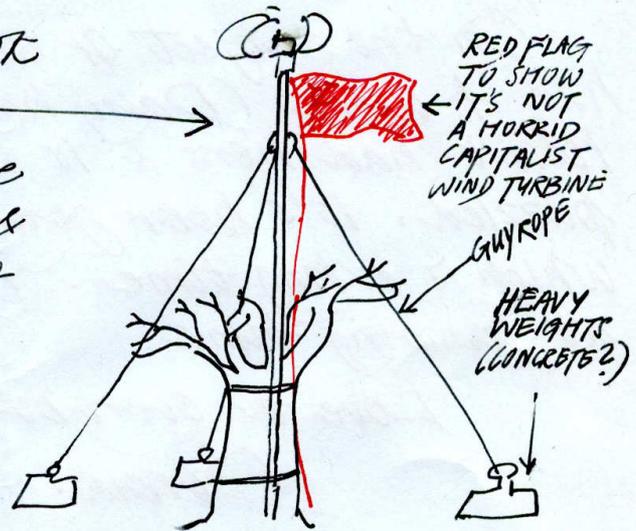
Meanwhile we have been lent (for ~2 years loan) two 300w solar panels & a load of batteries.

We've fixed them up but we still need an inverter to convert the 24V DC to 230 AC. We are counting on Ulrich.

In one of the alternative communities of yurts caravans & home built cabins there's a guy Nico who has a wind turbine. The idea might catch on.

Meanwhile it's gone so quiet. A lot less cars zooming on the road - more space for bikes. Less aeroplanes buzzing overhead. Nice.

If you go out you have to carry a piece of paper (printed off internet but since we don't have internet we just write them) saying where you're going & why. You have to have a good reason, you can't just be visiting friends. But you can take a dog for a walk, so we're wondering whether we could go about on the pretext of taking sheep for a walk!



LIFE AFTER COVID-19 – NEW NORMAL OR OLD?

Most people are living in a day-to-day mode, simply coping with the ongoing lockdown and social distancing and all that that entails. For many, this is of course a challenging time and it is the poor and marginalised who are most adversely affected. It serves as a sharp reminder of what Jesus tells us regarding material wealth and the need to live one day at a time (Matthew 6:19-34).

Meanwhile, there has been some discussion amongst people who have been long concerned about the state of the planet, especially the twin crises of climate change and species extinction. The lockdown has had the unintended effect of causing dramatic falls in CO₂ and other atmospheric pollutants as a result of the slowdown of business, industry and travel. Would there have been anything like these reductions in fossil fuel use if we had relied on governments agreeing them at COP26 in Glasgow this autumn? Most probably not.

However, no-one with any conscience would espouse global pandemics as a good way of bringing about a reduction in our impact upon the planet. Yet it could be argued the current situation has forced us to rethink our way of life and our economics. Whilst government ministers may talk about the “return to normal” once the virus has been brought under control, is this what we really want, or need? Do we really wish to return to the old normal of free market liberal economics where the poor get poorer and the earth gets more plundered? Where the few accumulate obscene amounts of wealth and the many are deprived of even the most basic requirements of adequate food, clean water, decent accommodation and freedom from fear?

Perhaps this enforced pause in the way we have been living our lives is a God-sent opportunity to seriously consider radical new ways of living. Looking back to when Britain was in the darkest times of WWII, there were committees working away on planning what a new post-war Britain might look like – planning that included the establishment of the NHS, formal education, a proper housing programme, the establishment of National Parks, and so on. All this, even as the bombs were raining down on our main cities!

One example of such fresh thinking is the commitment of Amsterdam City Council to adopt the *doughnut economic model* for all its decision-making.

First coined by economist Kate Raworth of Oxford University’s Environmental Change Institute in her radical book*, it outlines a new kind of economics that meets the needs of planet and people.

The inner ring of her doughnut sets out the minimum we need based on the **UN’s sustainable development goals**. It ranges from food and clean water to a certain level of housing, sanitation, energy, education, healthcare, gender equality, income and political voice. Anyone not attaining such minimum standards is living in the doughnut’s hole. The outer ring of the doughnut represents the ecological limits of the planet. It highlights the boundaries across which we should not go to avoid damaging the climate, soils, oceans, the ozone layer, freshwater and biodiversity. Between the two rings is the dough, where everyone’s needs and that of the planet are being met.

On Wednesday 8 April 2020, the model was formally adopted by the municipality of Amsterdam as the starting point for public policy decisions, the first city in the world to make such a commitment. “I think it can help us overcome the effects of the [Covid-19] crisis”, said Amsterdam’s deputy mayor, Marieke van Doorninck, “It might look strange that we are talking about the period after that but as a government we have to ... It is to help us to not fall back on easy mechanisms.”

Is such thinking and planning too idealistic or far-fetched to work? According to a recent YouGov poll, only 9% want life to return to “normal” after the Covid-19 outbreak is over. And 42% of participants said they value food and other essentials more since the pandemic, with 38% cooking from scratch more. The survey found that 61% of people are spending less money and 51% noticed cleaner air outdoors, while 27% think there is more wildlife. Two-fifths said there is a stronger sense of community in their area since the outbreak began and 39% say they are catching up with friends and family more.

It would seem that there is in fact a very real appetite for the kinds of changes that Ashram members and friends have been banging on about for rather a long time! Thus there may well be not only light at the end of the tunnel, but a brighter and much more sustainable light – provided we all hold onto that vision and not let the powers that be allow us to fall back into the bad old ways.

I hope and pray so! *Euan McPhee 17 April 2020*

Raworth, K. 2017. “Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist” 384pp. Random House.

Timetable for the May Community Weekend 8-10 May

Those who can and wish may join in via Zoom, or some may prefer to join in from their own home. joining in at the same time if they wish.

Friday May 8th at 8pm. Ian Parker will lead us in a specially adapted Ashram agape

Saturday May 9th at 7.30pm there will be news sharing and notices.

Sunday May 10th at 1.30pm there will be our annual commitment liturgy. which will be inclusive of both members and associates

Invite with links to Zoom will be sent nearer the time.

(As this newsletter goes to print Ian's thinking about a Zoom Agape is still developing. A liturgy with instructions for people new to Zoom will be circulated before the Friday evening of the Weekend by email via Sandra.)

Ashram agape

There is in our Community Worship book a Community Agape first written by branch members and the residents of the 1971 -81 Community House in Sheffield. Ian hopes to adapt this for a special version of an Agape for the Friday evening of our virtual May weekend. This may not be available till near the Weekend so in the meanwhile this is a brief summary of the liturgy. For those hoping to join in either via Zoom or at home this gives an opportunity to gather some of the things you may need.

Agape is the NT word for self-giving love. In the introduction to the Community agape it is explained: 'Agape has come to be used for love feasts, informal meals and times of togetherness and mutual sharing'. Though we cannot share even an informal meal we do see this as a time of togetherness and mutual sharing.

After an informal sing in and an opening statement and personal introductions the symbols of a candle, food, water and a cross are placed on a table. You may want to do this in your own home. You might bring bread, cake or fruit and maybe as part of sharing explain your choice.

The story of Jesus feeding the five thousand is read. Following this there is a communal sermon and sharing of concerns.

There is a prayer of confession and in conclusion an affirmation which reads:

Christ is not dead.	The truth for grasping.
Christ is bread.	The life for living.
Christ is light.	Through Jesus we live.
Christ's people are alive.	Through Jesus we love.
Trying to be leaven.	Jesus in words
Trying to be light.	Jesus in deeds.
Trying to be the way.	Jesus in action.
The way for moving.	Jesus, The way the truth and the life.

Setting up and Running a Foodbank – Challenges and Opportunities

A few years ago, I was involved in setting up and running a foodbank in Nottingham. It was at a time when the 'austerity' cuts were affecting the poorest in the community. A meeting had been arranged by a number of individuals and organisations to look into the possibility of running a foodbank. The meeting was inconclusive and another meeting was planned. Some of the people in the room wanted action as soon as possible. This group of around 6 people set a deadline of 6 weeks to get a foodbank up and running. I was drawn in by their energy and idealism and the opening did happen within 6 weeks. What followed was, for me, involvement in one of the most dynamic and imaginative community projects I have shared in.

Out of the ideals that shaped this group came a project that respected the people who were in need, which worked in a way which gave them dignity and responded to the reasons which had brought them to the foodbank in the first place.

The practical problems facing us from the start were obvious – where to locate the operation, how to gather in donations of food, how to let potential customers know we were there., how to arrange referrals. We needed to plan how to organise the distribution of food. We found a base in a house owned and run by a local group of anarchists. The old and rather shambolic house had a large room downstairs used as a meeting place for events, with a bar . Every Friday, we set up the foodbank by pulling out tables and arranging the available food. All the food we had gathered was stored in an old garage on the site. One condition of the operation was that no meat would be stored on site as the house was also used as a base for Veggies, a vegetarian outside catering operation. So we had to examine the contents of all the tins and packages and haul away on shopping trolleys all traces of meat.

Our donors came from a variety of local groups, from trade unions to schools, community centres, offices and churches. People were generous. A problem then was responding efficiently to the generosity by collecting donations. All the different parts of the operation had this quality of being invented from scratch very quickly. We had to identify and contact individuals and organisations that were in a position to make referrals. The opening few weeks were slow, with customers

having to find their way through terraced street to an unmarked house, but as time went on we were kept busy every Friday morning , providing food for between 30 to 50 people.

What I want to identify in writing this are some of the features which gave this foodbank a distinctive character.

1 When we opened up for customers, the food was laid out on tables in categories, tinned goods, dried goods etc., and people were given bags and allowed to choose what they put in the bags, within the constraints of how many of each item they could take. This meant that often there was a queue as people moved slowly around the table choosing what to put into the bags we provided. In such a culturally diverse area there was little point giving people food, eg tins of sausages, that could form no part of their diet.

2 As the foodbank became established and we got to know some of the customers, we developed a policy of recruiting some of them to help us. These helpers came from a variety of backgrounds – unemployment, recovering addicts, destitute asylum seekers. The principle we followed was to give people the opportunity to contribute and to find a feeling of self worth and dignity. Over the time the foodbank was running we had around fifteen people who moved from customers to volunteers.

3 It became obvious that many of the customers had other problems besides a shortage of food, problems with money, tenancies, utility bills, landlords. Our response was to engage with a local advice agency to work in partnership with us. Every week, an advice worker came along to triage the problems and make appointments with the agency.

4 The decisions we made about how the foodbank was run were made collectively. As most of the group came from an anarchist background, they were hostile in principle to statutory organisations.

These kinds of frictions can sometimes have positive results. For example many of the foodbank customers were eligible for the hardship grants that were available from local authorities at that time. Our City Council, we found out, made few of these payments. The

process for accessing the grants was opaque. The money set aside in the budget for this fund we found had only a fraction of the total spent. Two of our team made it their business to challenge this – through freedom of information requests, letters to the grant making department and interviews with councillors. As a result the trickle of grants started to open up, the hardship fund was being used for the purpose which central government had designated.

5 While the group needed publicity to attract donations and customers, not all publicity was welcome. When the PA of the local MP phoned to request a visit and a photo opportunity, the answer was no! It was regarded as an opportunity for the MP to be seen to be on the side of the poor, using our foodbank for his own ends. Other requests for interviews and visits were rejected or denied for the same reasons. Of course there were also the times when publicity brought us good things – the staff at the local hospital organising a car wash to raise funds, the property maintenance firm who fitted shelving into our storage space, and the Ashram grant that paid for the material to make the shelves!

6 After running the foodbank for 6 years, the core group felt that its activities were being used to shore up the welfare state. We had started the project as a short term measure to respond to the crisis brought on by the Government's austerity programme. By carrying on, it was argued, we were indirectly supporting the Government instead of challenging them to face up to the consequences of what they were doing. A meeting was held with the Local Authority to explain the reasons for our closure.

7 The final act in the drama of the foodbank was a meeting which was held to offer the running of the foodbank to other interested parties. In the first part of the meeting, an explanation was given of how the organisation worked. To the surprise of the rest of us, the leader of the core group then set out his plan to identify the best people to take over. It was his view that those responsible for running the foodbank should themselves have had experience of living in poverty, or have worked on a project dealing with deprivation. He handed out paper and pencils and invited those remaining in the room to respond. Ultimately, no one met these criteria and by default, the project was handed over to the local Methodist church to run, in a different

location and under the auspices of the Trussell Trust.

For those who are familiar with the Trussell Trust way of organising a foodbank there will be some obvious differences. The first and most obvious is allowing the customers to choose the food that they take. One drawback of working in this way is the amount of work involved – in putting out the food and in supervising the customers as they make their choices. The positive side is that we made an effort to ameliorate the stigma of charity and allow customers the freedom to choose.

Opening up the running of the operation to people who are users has about it the quality of the ideal community project. It takes away distinctions and offers empowerment to those who are vulnerable. And it undoubtedly achieved this result with some of our volunteers. Again, though, this way of working requires time, flexibility and a willingness to notice and to care for people.

Starting from scratch and inventing the project as we went along meant that we could easily adapt what we were doing to the circumstances that faced us. So when we had listened to the stories of the people who came along for food we realised that we needed to offer help with the problems that drag people on the edge into deprivation. Being open to finding and working with partner organisations (in this case an advice agency) easily amplifies the benefits of a project like this.

Sometimes projects like the foodbank have to step outside their immediate work of handing out food to challenge the statutory services. This is sometimes called going the extra mile, but in fact means making lots of phone calls, writing letters and going to meetings. All of which means taking energy away from the main activity. And it may be unpopular with those who prefer to keep the activity within boundaries with which they are comfortable as well as the organisations that are being challenged to provide a better and more humane service.

There are questions about the way we respond to the context we are working in and about the ethos of the work we are engaging with. Those question for us can only be answered by bringing faith into the way we look at and live out our common life.

David Jones

Food – an emotive issue

For several years I had been thinking about having a delivery of organic vegetables. However, what stopped me was the delivery aspect. I live in a small block of flats with a communal front door and entryphone. What would happen to my vegetables if I was not in and none of my neighbours (very often the case)?

Then one year I went to the local annual food fair and there was a community farm offering organic vegetables. There were three positives about this offer: it was a small community enterprise, it would drop the vegetables off at a community location with two days and times during which they could be collected and it was located just over a mile from where I lived as a child. So I signed up.

Although I can check what I will get in my bag, one of the delights is waiting to see what is there. The community farm always sends an email whenever I am due to get my bag which includes suggested recipes and news of what they are doing on the farm. They have regular open days but I have yet to get there.

So for four years, until March this year, I could be seen visiting my local community pub once a fortnight, not for the beer, but to take my empty bag back and replace it with a full one. When the news came through about the 'lock down' and then food shortages I thought that at least I would have fresh vegetables. With the pub closing they are now delivered to me and, of course, there is no problem about me being out. The one problem is how and where to leave outside the bag that needs collecting (for health and safety reasons because of Covid 19). At the time of writing, waiting for my second delivery at the end of the week, I have yet to solve this problem.

On a different note, even in the centre of London it is possible to forage. At this time of the year I look at the nettles on my local common and will start picking the tops when I am on one of my permitted daily walks. And, last summer, I discovered the one raspberry cane on the common hidden among the

blackberries and a happy time for a couple of weeks picking the few raspberries it produced.

Liz Urben

As a vegan of almost half a century I have noticed how, when my veganism becomes known, some people go into defensive mode straight away, sometimes even with hackles raised. It is as if I am challenging their core beliefs – which I probably am, without even saying anything. On the other hand, some people go into attack mode for the same reason...

Some time ago I was helping a friend to plan vegan catering for a Buddhist retreat after her sangha had decided that food at their events would now be entirely plant based. Whilst outlining what was required, my friend said “..*we are aware of greed*...” **Greed!** The appetite tendency that dares not speak its name! I was shocked. That's not a word we hear much these days. We have many words for our appetites, often under the banner of 'eating disorders' (which can be life threatening and are not properly understood), 'sensitivities' or plain 'picky'. And as a substitute for the taboo word *greedy* we have 'naughty but nice', the oxymoron used to promote high sugar and high fat 'treats' that are a fast track to vascular diseases and type 2 diabetes.

But this word *greed*. It's sometimes used to rein in children and encourage them at the table to learn about fare shares. But to say it seriously to an adult would be taken as a gross affront, despite the fact that, as a society, greedy is exactly what we are. Many people think it a human right to have new clothes and furniture at will, to drive wherever they want to go and to have a house warm enough to trot around in summer clothes all year round. As for food, we must be amongst the greediest in the world when we habitually over-consume animal-derived foods which use far more than our fare share of agricultural land (and that's just for starters). For nearly all of my working life I have not consumed any of those foods, though I have been paying my taxes to help subsidise

this most unsustainable and polluting industry. Now that does make me a little annoyed!

kathclements@yahoo.com

Our son, Richard is volunteering at Fairshare in Manchester once a week, helping to sort and pack food from supermarkets for Foodbanks. We are proud of him but also anxious that this puts him on "the front line" We are trying to get registered for on-line shopping slots at Sainsburys as my family worries about my own vulnerability. This is appreciated but the greater concern is for those who truly struggle for food and shelter across the world, and particularly in India. May God protect and bless us all as we care for our vulnerable world.

Pat Hamilton

I have a theory that the things we remember best from our past are events or circumstances that have an emotional aspect to them, and I realise that for me several of these are in some way related to food. The first is from the early fifties of the previous century, possibly earlier still. My grandfather lived next door to us and had his dinner and tea with us during the week, but at weekends ate on his own at home (though with hot food taken round for dinner by my mother, I think). It seems that I was only too good at making conversation, because one Sunday teatime my mother said to me "Linda, could you just stop talking for a while and get on with your tea," to which I responded, "All right, I'll go to Grandad's for my tea because he doesn't stop me talking," and off I went. After that I had my tea officially at Grandad's every Sunday till I left for University, and the menu was toasted teacakes, with slices of cheese put on them after they had been toasted. It was very exciting once Grandad got a gas fire, because he then toasted the teacakes by the gas flames, holding them on the end of a fork! The long-lasting result of this is that if I am home alone for lunch at the weekend I will often have toasted teacakes with cheese on, though not toasted by the gas fire, and think, not of England, but of Grandad Needleley.

I guess our Sunday dinner also had an emotive aspect to it, or even theological, because it was always mixed vegetable soup, made by my mother before we set off for church, and left to simmer till we came home at about noon, and pudding was sliced bananas with top-of-the-milk on and probably a sprinkling of sugar as well. This was because my father felt that Sunday should be a day of rest for his wife as well as for him, so the more labour-intensive dinner others would be having - roast beef preceded by Yorkshire pudding, for example - happened on Saturday in our house. I don't think there is a direct connection here, but as it has turned out, we almost always have a vegetarian meal on Sundays in the Marshall household today, and start it by lighting a candle, then bringing in from the kitchen the food and water, using the words from the London Ashram liturgy. I think the vegetarian aspect came in as a result of both of our sons, separately, becoming vegetarian and my wanting to keep this meal, at least, 'communal', if that's the right word. Of course, we have vegetarian dishes at other times too, but not for any particular reason other than to reduce our carbon footprint or other damage to the environment, or even because there are a lot of vegetables ready to eat from our garden.

Linda Marshall

In 1977 I returned from VSO in Nigeria and Malaysia to live in Middlesbrough Ashram House, just after Delia Smith's 'Frugal Food' was published. It gave recipes for traditional meals from round the world where, if meat was used, it was in small amounts for flavour, but you filled up on vegetables and pulses. Then I read "How the Other Half Dies" by Susan George which exposed the way that transnational agribusinesses were extending their control of food production over the whole planet for the benefit of the rich, showing that hunger wasn't caused by over-population or bad weather but by poverty, and what was needed was justice. So I joined WDM(GJN) and through it met Frank and we started our life of campaigning.

Six months after our marriage in 1982 Channel 4 was launched – with a 3hr ground breaking programme on

the animal industry We watched it in our then upstairs living room but half way through Frank went to bed – vowing for the second time in his life that he wouldn't eat meat again, and by the end of the programme I agreed.(but what to do with the Cumberland sausage in the freezer for bonfire night?) For him it was unnecessary to take a life. For me it was the scandal of intensive farming where rain forests and land were cleared and used to raise cattle or grow grain to feed animals, not hungry people. Having learned to cook with beans with Delia it was easy to leave the meat out altogether and enjoy tasty and healthy meals from round the world – not the bland cheese salads omelettes and meat substitutes offered when we tried eating out.

And then of course there's Fairtrade food - Frank and I met through WDM tea, and we spent nearly forty years campaigning for and promoting foods for which the farmers are paid a just price. It's obscene that those who grow our food are hungry, that half the children in the tea growing area of Malawi are growing up stunted, that coffee farmers in Latin America endure 3-4 thin months without enough food. Thank goodness for the Fairtrade premium they earn with which they provide breakfast clubs for their children – because as yet we're not buying enough Fairtrade so that they can afford to feed them

themselves and provide the other basic human rights we take for granted - shelter, healthcare and education..

I know of course that dairy is the flip side of the beef industry so I use organic milk and its products sparingly. But I also worry about alternative sources of protein - almonds and the overworked dying bees that pollinate vast US orchards, and big business/GM soya. I buy food from my local farm, and Asian shops. And I enjoy eating food in season – looking forward to the first flowering broccoli, emerging rhubarb and lovage, and English asparagus. And I'm lucky that I have wild garlic spreading round the garden(no longer a weed, I can eat it!) and a wonderful redcurrant bush with juicy summer fruit, down the lane - unlike the bush in my garden which hasn't produced fruit for years.

So food is really important to me – it gives life and it's best shared - with friends and family round the kitchen table, or by the living room fire, at our annual wassails or by the summer bonfire. I enjoyed sharing breakfasts and evening meals round a table with our N.East Ashram group - and especially that the food shared in the Agapes and Eucharist was real food.

Jenny Medhurst

Cerys says that she is aware that during the present time it may be more the difficulties of getting any kind of food that are preoccupying many people, but food raises important issues to consider under the overall theme for the weekend. She writes:

The "Uninhabitable Earth" by David Wallace Wells is available in a free pdf format, and is about 273 pages long. I would recommend people in the Ashram network reading it. Red meat is intensely destructive in climate emergency terms. It is such a different world to that when I did the UTU Study Year, 1990-1991, and gained my Diploma in Theology and Mission. Ecofeminist theology and responding to the global warming crisis, is the task for now. Getting advice from the Vegan Society and Viva about healthy ways to be vegan is essential. Milk and cheese and dairy products are also quite destructive, as well as milk chocolate bars and boxes of chocolates. Dairy free "Moo Free" chocolate bars are good, and "Booja booja" boxes of dairy free chocolate**. Alpro do soya yogurts, and many types of plant liquid. A block of "Cauldron" tofu,(curdled soya beans) is a rich source of easy to digest protein, which goes well with vegetables and olive oil. For those needing a cheese fix, dairy free vegan "Violife" cheese substitute is quite impressive in taste terms.

[*Note from Editor: Please look for vegan chocolates which are Fairtrade too – from Seed and Bean, Divine and Traidcraft, to ensure that cocoa farmers don't go hungry and protect their environment see 'Empowering Women Farmers]

1. <https://nutritionfacts.org/2015/07/21/why-deep-fried-foods-may-cause-cancer/> A few months ago I was reading about fried potato products and the risk elevation for cardiovascular and cancer diseases. I replace chips with extra peas sometimes. I avoid hashbrowns and eat avocado pears instead on occasions. My main sources of carbs are onions, shallots, apples and carrots, + walnuts. Amendment to diet is part of life.

2. [Climate change food calculator: What's your diet's carbon footprint?](#) There does need to be more thought given to the food and drink that we eat and the wider environmental impact. This could be used to begin reassessing our daily diets and what we drink. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-46459714>

3. Environmental cost of formula milk should be a matter of global concern: Support for breastfeeding is an environmental imperative

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/10/191002183657.htm>

'The production of unnecessary infant and toddler formulas exacerbates environmental damage and should be a matter of increasing global concern,' argue experts. This article points out the wider perspectives, beyond individual conveniences and choices. It does point out the very negative detrimental impact of using dairy and meat, in a world tipping deeper and deeper into excessive warming and climate alteration. *Cerys Brangwen*

[Editor- and of course unlike formula milk breast milk is free and sterile. 800,000 children worldwide die each year due to lack of breast milk (WHO/UNICEF estimates), and it helps reduce childhood obesity and diabetes and protect breast feeding mums from breast cancer. Amazingly only 0.5% British children are breastfed for a year compared to 44% in New Zealand and 27% in the US]

Jesus the Vegan

Sharing the world – with all the creatures

This is the second of a series from Ashram Press, covering different 'takes' on Jesus.

Jesus the Vegan explores veganism / vegetarianism in early Christianity, using overlooked evidence from the Old and New Testaments, as well as the scriptures of the earliest Christians themselves. These contemporary scriptures were not included in the Bible and only fragments are left, but they were described in detail and copied by the early Church Fathers.

Many of the Bible texts are familiar and have been read many times without their implications being fully grasped. The association of early Christianity with 'pure' vegetarianism was strong, and is worth remembering.

Kath is a mother and grandmother. A vegan since the mid-1970s, she wrote a short book *Why Vegan* so as to avoid having to explain continually and justify the many reasons to others, who always wanted to know 'Why (on Earth?..)' In 1985 the book was commercially published in the UK and the USA, and also in translation in Germany and Italy, with a new edition in 1995. Since then hundreds of books about veganism have been published, but Kath is still being asked to 'explain' veganism, which she does at a local level, these days most often in terms of climate crisis as a starting point.



JESUS the Vegan

SHARING THE WORLD



Kath Clements

£2.00

ASHRAM PRESS

I met the manager of this sugar co-op in Malawi at Traidcraft in its 25th birthday year (2004). He told me that the women went to the river 2 miles away to wash clothes and bathe, but it was polluted by factories and had crocodiles – and there were several deaths each year from attacks. He said that he wanted education, clean water and medical care to be a basic right for all, not the privilege of a few and that Fairtrade was enabling them to get closer to that dream. Sixteen years later one of the beneficiaries of their Fairtrade sugar sales came to Britain

....



Ndiuzayani's story

My family has benefitted a lot from Fairtrade and from our farmers' association Kasinthula. But the premiums from Fairtrade have helped not only us but also our community a lot". At Divine HQ,

Ndiuzayani shared how her community and the wider area now have improved housing and a health clinic. There are now over ten water taps for clean water, which has meant cases of cholera and diarrhea have decreased. She also shared pictures of the primary school that was built in her community. This means children can start learning earlier, as before they had to walk 7-8km to the nearest school, which young children weren't able to do.

The fact that I am a graduate of Business Administration is a huge achievement. I graduated last year whilst interning in the accounts department at Kasinthula Limited", Ndiuzayani says with firm pride. "I am a Business Studies Teacher now and want to be a role model to all girls and women".

'We have now learned that being a female doesn't mean you're a failure, being a female means that you can do everything that boys and men can do. So, I too have the right to go to school, the right to get employed, the right to do many things, because I am also human and also capable of those things. Just because I am a female does not mean that I should get married, be a housewife, do nothing... No, I am more than this and I have proved this, and this is something that I would like to share about being a woman in Malawi'.

Kasinthula sugar was used in Traidcraft biscuits, and is in Divine chocolate. I'm so proud to have been part of a movement that empowers young women like Ndiuzayani.

Rosine's story

In York in March I met Rosine from Cote d'Ivoire. Small holder farmers there and in Ghana produce 70% of the world's cocoa. Shockingly the women who do 70% of the work on the cocoa farms earn just 20% of the income.



Rosine's farmers co-op created a Women's Society which helps women access land, become more financially independent and improve their family's income and food security. Rosine told us how they have used the Fairtrade premium to grow cassava, aubergines, bananas, chillies and peanuts to sell, so they are less dependent on the volatile cocoa price. Some run a chicken farm selling the eggs, and the organic natural waste from the chickens as fertiliser at a big saving, making organic farming affordable..

Low cocoa prices have made it difficult for farmers to send their children to school, so they have used the Fairtrade premium to build local classrooms with canteens. Free school supplies and interest free loans are part of their drive to get 4000 children a year back to school.. They have funded solar panels and lights enabling children to study at night and a radio station giving Fairtrade training programmes.

But Rosine's life changed 'from night to day' when she graduated from the Women's School of Leadership. She used to have to beg her husband for money- and now they budget together. One of the male students agrees "I realised life for women on cacao farms was unbearable. Previously, men used to deny women their rights, but after training we realised women needed to make decisions too. Now I help my wife cook and clean, and we budget together. People sometimes call me a 'woman', but my wife and I now live in peace."

Empowering women is "not about trying to fight men" though, says Yaoua, another graduate, but about making women true members of society, since women will lift the whole community with them.

Changing attitudes so that women can inherit land, and thereby become co-op members with access to training and loans means that they are no longer 'invisible'. The training enables farmers to produce more from smaller plots – so that they no longer need to cut down trees to increase production (57% of cocoa from non certified sources comes from land that was primary forest)

Rosine is bursting with ideas- her latest to create a local chocolate bar. It's wonderful to see what possibilities are unlocked when we chose to switch to Fairtrade chocolate!

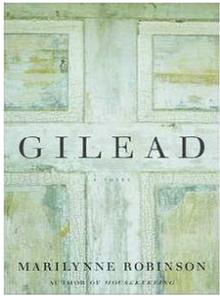
Jenny Medhurst

Three books I have enjoyed

Gilead 2004; Home 2006; Lila 2014.

by Marilynne Robinson

These three books belong together, although they are not a trilogy in the conventional sense, and when the author wrote the first, she had no idea that two more books would follow.



Gilead introduces us to the small town of that name in an agricultural area of Iowa in the United States in the mid 1950s. Though of novel length, the book is in the form of a single letter, written by Rev. John Ames one of the two Protestant ministers in the town. His first wife died giving

birth to their first child, a daughter who died soon afterwards. He then lived alone for many years until remarrying in his 60s. He realises that he will be dead before the young son from his second marriage is an adult, so he sets out to write down all the things he wants him to know when he comes of age.

Ames is a third generation pastor. We learn a little about his father, from whom he inherited his pulpit, but with whom he does not seem to have had a close relationship. We learn a lot more about his grandfather, who ministered at the time of the American Civil War, close to the border between the southern states, where slavery was still legal, and the northern ones where slaves could obtain their freedom. His grandfather comes across as a very colourful character, who preached in those dangerous times with a gun in one hand, and his bible in the other, and who was not afraid to use his weapon to help slaves gain their freedom and to chase those who were pursuing them back over the state line.

We are also introduced to the Rev. Robert Boughton, the other minister in the town, and a great friend of Ames. (Wikipedia says that Ames is a Congregationalist and Boughton is Presbyterian, but that was not clear to me on first reading. However, their reverence for the writings of John Calvin indicates they are not Methodists, and it does appear that neither Episcopalians nor Roman Catholics are present in Gilead!) Ames recalls many discussions

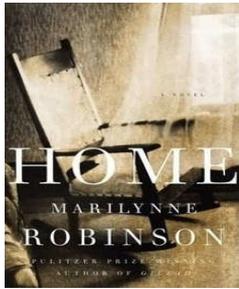
with Boughton both on theology, and also on pastoral practice.

Ames also interrupts his memoirs, and his ruminations on the effectiveness of his ministry, to give an account of things happening in the town at the same time as he is writing the letter, which is obviously composed over a period of several weeks. Boughton has quite a number of children, all of whom are now adults and most have moved away, with successful careers and marriages. However one of them, Jack Boughton, is the proverbial black sheep of the family, whose whereabouts are unknown and whose activities are not talked about. But during the writing of the letter, Jack returns to Gilead after 20 years, and there is speculation about whether there will be a permanent reconciliation between him and his father. The parable of the Prodigal Son hangs in the atmosphere of the latter part of the book, without being explicitly invoked to any great extent.

I enjoyed this book for many reasons. I had never really thought about the period of American history immediately before the Civil War, and the role of the church in the area near the boundary between North and South. I was also perhaps guilty of prejudice against Calvinists as being grim, judgemental and free of doubt. John Ames is portrayed as none of these things.

I also appreciated Marilyn Robinson's detailed knowledge of the bible and understanding of theology, and her ability to enter at a very deep level into the mind of an elderly male pastor, while being neither a professional theologian, nor, as far as I'm aware, ever having held pastoral office. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize, so it must have appealed to people who were not professionally involved in Christianity, but I am not sure it would be an easy read for someone who was neither a pastor nor a theologian.

Robinson decided that there was much more to be explored in the lives and families of the clergy in Gilead, so she wrote the second novel.

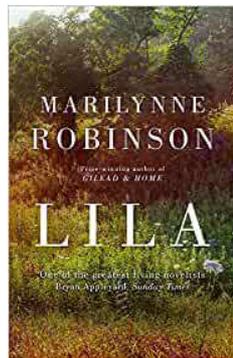


In *Home* we learn a lot more about the Boughton family. The story is told from the point of view of Glory, Bob Boughton's daughter, who returns home to look after him following the death of his wife. This is about the same time that Jack returns home. There are flashbacks to

their childhood together, as well as scenes which occur in *Gilead*, but narrated from a different point of view, and explaining some of the things which puzzled Ames in the first novel. Much of what Jack got up to during his 20 year exile from home is also explained. Although it is a third person narrative, the author allows us to enter the sensibility of the dutiful minister's daughter, for whom religion is a habit of mind and practice, rather than an object of analysis and speculation.

Some years later Robinson became interested in the back-story of John Ames' second wife, Lila, who is a fairly minor character in the first two books. *Lila* is effectively a prequel to the two earlier books. There are two narratives interwoven in the book: a few pages of one, then a few pages of the other. The first is an account of Lila's life up to the point at which she first came to Gilead. It starts with her memory of being a tiny child neglected and unloved in a chaotic household. From there she is stolen by a woman she only ever knows as Doll, who cares for her and brings her up. For most of her childhood and adolescence, Lila and Doll throw in their lot with a group of itinerant casual agricultural workers. When they can find a farmer who needs their labour, they have money to buy what they need from shops, but when times are hard, they live off the land. They are outside normal society, a little like the gypsies of English folklore, but without any inherited culture, or sense of belonging to a wider tribe. Doll does however take work as a cleaner in a pleasant house in a town for a year so Lila can go to school and achieve basic literacy. By watching Doll, Lila gains all the skills to make her very employable as a cleaner, which will stand her in good stead. Later when the 'dustbowl' agricultural depression puts an end to farm work, they separate until a terrible secret from the past re-unites them. Doll dies awaiting trial for murder. Lila then spends some time working as a servant in a brothel. When one of the 'Ladies' is expecting a baby she dreams of

stealing it, just as she was stolen by Doll, but her plans are frustrated when a relative arrives to take the pregnant woman away. She escapes, and eventually ends up in Gilead.



The second, interwoven, narrative relates in detail how Lila first lives in an abandoned hut a little way outside the town, gradually begins to come into the town, and shelters in the church one day to get out of the rain. So she meets John Ames, who treats her with compassion and does not enquire into her past. (So

too, surprisingly, do the women of his congregation, a testimony perhaps to how much they trust him.) The story of their developing relationship, eventual marriage, and the birth of a child, is told with great subtlety and insight. It is a relationship of mutual incomprehension. Ames has some inkling of her background, but cannot really enter the internal world this has created. He expects that she might one-day wish to resume the itinerant lifestyle that was her a lot before she came to Gilead, and does not believe he has the right to expect her to stay, even after they are married. She herself sometimes yearns for her old way of life, and feels out of place living in a house in a town, and especially out of place as the wife of a revered pastor. She expects that she might be sent away if people get to know about her past. But against this, both experience some solace in the relationship from the intense loneliness they have previously known. The deepest incomprehension in their relationship is at the level of fundamental convictions. Lila appreciates Ames' genuine kindness and deep sincerity, and tries hard to understand his faith, but without much success. She gains some comfort from reading the bible and copying out passages in her childish handwriting. For his part Ames attempts to explain what he believes, and regrets his inability to communicate the deep truths that have been fundamental to his life. Lila lacks the confidence to tell him the story of her life, and lacks the words and concepts to explain the significance of her relationship with Doll, and her deep knowledge and love of the natural world.

Of the three, *Lila* is the one which I can most imagine being made into a film. It is, after all, a love story, 22

albeit an unusual one. There is plenty of dialogue which could be incorporated into a script. But it would take an actress of a rare talent to indicate through facial expression and body language even a fraction of the

internal monologue which Lila is unable or unwilling to put into words.

Ian Parker; April 2020.

Howard Knight

Howard Knight, an Ashram Associate, died on 10th March 2020. His funeral took place on 19th March in Sheffield. Many people were not able to be there because of Covid-19, but were able to watch the service on a webcast. Roy Crowder held the service together and in his tribute to Howard said, "Howard, together with myself and four others, was a founder member of Ashram Community House at 84 Andover Street, Sheffield, an area of great change and challenges. It was an Intentional Radical Christian Community. John Vincent inspired us to be there. He wrote about the kind of Christianity which took action and didn't get lost in big buildings or holy mumbo jumbo".

Personal tributes were given by Sioned, Howard's wife and son Ben. Politics were Howard's life. David Blunkett's tribute mentioned three things he and Howard had in common – they were brought up and committed to the Methodist Church, they were members of the Labour Party and were supporters of Sheffield Wednesday football team. Clive Betts, a lifelong friend and M.P. said that Howard lived a life for the benefit of so many people and that his contribution to political and public service in Sheffield and beyond was immense. Howard's life had touched so many people. This was borne out by the number of people who travelled at Howard's invitation, to the 'Living Celebration / Party' of his life on March 1st as well as many from Sheffield.

CELEBRATION

Around 200 people came for the 'Party' on 1st March. Those sharing in memories of Ashram, UTU and friendship with Howard of the 1970's were Graham Coyne, Roy Crowder, David Dale, Pat and Ian Hamilton, Jaye Joubert, Robin Parker (Rochdale House), Judith Budworth, Margaret Mackley, Liz Urben and Stuart Buchanan (who were also at Nottingham University with Howard). Howard Knight's life with Ashram began, he always said, with a talk by myself at the Nottingham University Christian Association in 1969, which brought him eventually to Sheffield in September



Andover Street Ashram House in the 1970's. A young Howard Knight at the cooker with Roy Crowder. 1971

when he became one of the original members of 84 Andover Street Ashram Community House.

He became Labour Councillor for Firth Park, Sheffield, was head of the Labour Party's Local Government Unit and more recently a member of many International election observation missions. In between time spent in wide flung places, he found time to drive people (including myself) in the Pitsmoor mini-bus to Pitsmoor Methodist lunch club.

At the wonderful Reunion and Celebration with Howard on Sunday 1st March, with family and friends, other Ashram members and Associates came back to rejoice with Howard on a fantastically rich life he has lived among us. From the decade of the house came together many who had shared in it and in the wider life of the Ashram Community. I recall Howard getting my children, Chris, Faith and James into a Young People's Group at the Ashram Community Weekends, at the end of which they would lay on a Treasure Trail for the rest of us to follow. Howard was the heart and soul of every party!

What a great idea it was to have the event with Howard at the centre, with all his old clarity of thought, stories to tell, affirmation of others, celebration of the richness of life, and manifestation of Jesus-style character!

Margaret Mackley and John Vincent

OUR TIMES AND INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESHIP COMMUNITIES

Why do we think Spiritual Intentional Communities are important?

KEY POINTS TO TAKE ON BOARD

I am quite a newcomer to Ashram, and came into contact through The Urban Theology Union. On 29 March 2017 a meeting was held between John Vincent, Nirmal Fernando, Iain Cloke and myself to explore our common interests in RADICAL CHRISTIANITY. This led to a decision to write a book about what we called Intentional Spiritual Communities, and since 2018 this has been shaped and prepared.

We are now not far from having a draft text based around fifteen stories.

How this book was born – Introduction.

The stories. These are listed in the handout.

Commentary on the stories. We are in the process of sifting out what we are learning from them about contributing to the future.

Vision for the future. We have had some ideas from the beginning about this, but more thought needs to be given to this question.

Action. What do we want to happen?

We are now beginning to seek publication.

At the Middleton meeting in May 2019 it was decided to have a major focus at the Unstone weekend on the subject of intentional communities and this was propitious for it provided the opportunity to develop the book further.

Each of the main contributors have a different start point but we are all concerned about the future of the Church and how a new focus can be brought to Christian witness. I personally believe the only way forward is to bring the Church and the Christian community into a more direct contributory relationship with the day to day world. My experience of work within the Church leads me to believe this cannot happen unless there is a wide and deep rethinking of what the Christian community needs to be like, and for the taking of curative action to back this up. The current stance of the Church is far too didactic, and should be much more humble, sharing and open to ideas from outside. Obviously achieving this will not be easy, as most of the book's contributions make clear. We need a new beginning which in many ways would take the Church back to what it was like in the time of Jesus himself and the period of the early church. The book aims to make a contribution to achieving this change through the promotion of Spiritual Intentional Communities.

WHAT SHOULD A SPIRITUAL INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY BE LIKE?

At this stage we cannot be very precise but we do see the following characteristics being important.

Having a consistent and central outward looking practical focus to Christian life. This can happen in many ways and involve working with anybody, but there must always be a specific commitment to promoting some form of outward action.

Have a deeply held sharing vision and spirituality that broadens partner relationships.

Many could grow out of existing churches. (e.g., the Hope Corner story in this book).

Small size. (5-50 people)

Leadership is (genuinely) equally shared among all the members.

Freestanding status is essential. There should be no form of external hierarchy involved.

SOME MATTERS THAT ARE EMERGING FROM THE STORIES WE NEED TO THINK HARD ABOUT

'For me the Church is not dying but it is on a journey, leaving the centre and moving back to the margins from where it came, interreligious dialogue is part of that journey'. Ray Collier

'In these days we are living in a new world of religious pluralism. By *pluralism*, I do not mean that there are many religions, but that people of different religions are encountering each other in ways that were not possible in the past'. Ray Collier

'There is a very important prophetic kind of role for the church to challenge the world and to speak out on the destructive move to individualism and the abandonment of the concept of a universal morality'. Tim Hardingham

'I think most of the (story) contributions are addressing dominant neo-liberal market consumer culture and the role the English church has found within it'. Greg Smith

Should spiritual intentional communities be the basis of the future Church or should they work with and alongside the existing Church? Ron Ram

We hope there will be opportunity in the autumn for further discussion, bearing mind we are involved in an ongoing process
Ron Ram

Emerging Characteristics of Intentional Discipleship Communities

["Live the life of a follower of Jesus the Radical and tell that story!" John Vincent](#)

Stories from followers;

Stories from 'communities' - communities of place, identity and of interest

Stories from insiders and outsiders, walkers of the Way

Stories from organisers, inspirers, hand-holders

Stories ...

of solidarity in despair and lament;

of hope, healing and transformation;

of love and seeking for justice

of abundance from scarcity

People and Communities ...

of courage as the opposite of fear - enabling 'agency' through journeying in love

of solidarity and relationships - partnerships

of voices listening and speaking with

of creativity and renewal

on the way ... no failure/no success, just journeying in love

Cycles of Regeneration ...

My experience as a faith based community worker and activist is that 'Regeneration' seems to evolve in a cyclical way, or so a group of us involved in regeneration in inner city Sheffield discovered as we shared our experiences. (based on thinking with Revd Janet Lees, Revd Bob Warwicker and others).

As with any cycle, who's to say where it begins.

1. void/meaninglessness/empty
2. learned helplessness/powerlessness/worn down
3. agony/betrayal/exclusion
4. rebellion/resistance/outrage
5. co-operation/courage/crucible
6. build up/restore/regenerate
7. fullness/abundance/productivity
8. competition/individualism/self satisfaction
9. apathy/decline/dying

From a hymn by Joy Dine:

When we set up camp and settle

to avoid love's risk and pain,
you disturb complacent comfort,
pull the tent pegs up again;
keep us travelling in the knowledge
you are always at our side,
give us courage for the journey,
Christ our goal and Christ our guide.

Discussion Questions and Responses

Group discussions were prompted by these two questions:

1. What aspects of the Radical Jesus are most relevant as we explore our hopes for the future of the church and society?
2. What intentional actions by Christian communities and their partners would you suggest could promote hope for the future of the church and society?

Responses

1. "Affinity Groups" around an agreed purpose, such as Extinction Rebellion. These groups gather people who support the purpose and aim to mobilise around an agreed goal. These are effective where the need for care within the group becomes subservient to the purpose.
2. Encourage people to respond as Jesus' disciples called to a "journey downwards". (reference John Vincent re Mark's gospel.
3. A commitment to social justice is needed.
4. These groups are about "acting" and then "telling the story of the action". They are a current response to a current situation - they are not about asking "What Would Jesus Do?" rather they are about listening, discerning and taking action.
5. Groups should support people to take action together, growing shared purpose and spontaneous or timely response to issues.
6. Intentional Actions need to include
 1. places/time for openness, listening to people on the margins
 2. neutral meeting places
 3. identifying needs and responses
 4. tuning in to the language people use about the issues they face
 5. conversations and belonging will lead to "the smell of the Kingdom"
 6. an understanding that "church" puts people off sometimes
 7. joining in with others who are already doing things - not dominating or taking over
 8. small beginnings
 9. seeing people as assets not just someone with a 'need' 'problems' and as resources for making the change they want/need
7. Communities need regular review and evaluation including a check that they are still needed and meeting their core purpose.

Iain Cloke. 29.10.19



Members and Associates

We invite anyone interested to request details about becoming a Member or Associate from the membership secretary, Sandra Dutson: smdutson@btinternet.com
Members and Associates are listed in the 7-day cycle Community Prayers

Projects and Commitments

Ashram Press – Radical Christianity, Gospel Study, Discipleship, Community Study and Research- projects on Community and related issues
Homeless and Asylum Seekers - Residence and Community for people in need
Multi-faith - mutual activities and projects open to all faiths

DATES

2020

8-10 May Virtual Community Weekend
11 July General Meeting tbc
23-25 October Community Weekend, Cliff College tbc

COMMUNITY

Community Office: John Vincent
7 College Court, Sheffield S4 7FN
T: 0114 243 6688
E: ashramcommunity@hotmail.com

Ashram Press: 7 College Court
See Website www.ashram.org.uk for publications

Ashram Community Trust is a Registered Charity
Registered Charity No: 1099164
Charitable Company No: 4779914

Website www.ashram.org.uk
administrator: kathclements@ymail.com

Act Together editor: Jenny Medhurst
medhurst@phonecoop.coop
Articles for the Autumn 2020 edition needed by October 1st.
Contributions from members / associates who do not attend national Community events are especially welcome!

HOUSES AND PROJECTS

For current information about Houses and Projects in Sheffield please contact
John Vincent
T: 0114 243 6688
E: ashramcommunity@hotmail.com

BRANCHES

All Members and Associates are attached to one of five regional branches. Please contact secretaries if you would like to know more about meeting or events. The branch secretaries are the local contact points for the Community.

Secretaries

Midlands – Chris & Lorraine Smedley
Tel: 0115 9288430 – Monthly Meetings

East – A46- Twice Yearly meetings

London – Linda Marshall – 01784 456 474
Saturday Meetings – Monthly

North-West – Josie Smith – 01706 841 532
Meetings bi-monthly 11-2 at Luther King House
Restaurant, Brighton Grove, Rusholme

Sheffield – Tamara Donaldson – 0791 092 2462

North-East – Jenny Medhurst Tel: 01740 630475
Meetings as arranged

STOP PRESS!!

Hello, Jenny
Great to hear from you. Hope you and yours are all well and happy (enough) Is it too late to say 'Hello' to everyone from here in Jordan?

The authorities here put some fairly stringent restrictions in place at relatively short notice, and a combination of Fiona's disability, our insane cat-related situation, and the fact that we haven't actually got a place to live in the UK, meant leaving in a hurry wasn't really feasible, and didn't actually make sense anyway!?

As for coming back, who knows.....

Lots of love to all (and sundry) Gary