

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



Heaven in Ordinary

Life will never be the same again.

I've lost count of the number of times I've heard this refrain on the radio, the news, on social media over the last few weeks. In times of immense change, it can be hard to imagine life ever really going back to normal, and yet we all know from past experience as individuals and as Christian communities just how easy is it to fall back into tried and tested patterns – good and not so good – after we've been through experiences that we think will change us forever.

Much of what this 'new' post-COVID-19 world will look like is – and will remain – impossible to predict, but we can, even now, begin to engage intentionally with its possible impact and in doing so equip ourselves to be better able to respond appropriately over the next weeks, months and years.

Here we simply want to offer some tools for reflection that you might find helpful as you seek to process these extraordinary few months. You can use them as a church community or as individuals; you might even want to adapt them for use with your wider local community.

We hope that they might work on a variety of different levels. For some of us, the process of reflecting on our experiences will enable us to simply hear God say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'. For others, it may be an opportunity to process and evaluate some of the new or different ways of being Christian community that we've shared under lockdown and begin to articulate how we might commit to and embed lasting change. And there will be those who will hear God's call in a new and transformational way in an echo of Moses' encounter at the burning bush.

Using the reflective resources

We would encourage you to think creatively about how you might use the resources below. The three different approaches below will, we hope appeal to different people; you don't need to use all three! Consider what tools you might use to help you process your answers; these are simply suggestions:

- Activities like baking or cooking, gardening, knitting, woodwork or any other familiar practical task can create space for 'mindful' reflection while our hands are occupied.
- Journaling can be a useful way of 'externalising' things that we haven't realised our brain is preoccupied with.
- Going for a walk or hike can connect us with the world beyond ourselves and give a new sense of perspective (but continue to observe any social distancing measures that are in place).

- Sharing our reflections with others – either by working through the questions together or sharing our own thinking at a later date – can be particularly helpful; make sure that you and your conversation partner are clear about the level of confidentiality you are committing to **before** you start the conversation. Again, you may need to chat over the phone rather than in person, depending on what social distancing measures are still in place.

Be aware of how you are feeling as you approach these questions. Most of us will have experienced some level of grief, bereavement or even trauma during these last few months, and engaging in these kinds of reflective exercises is likely to bring these to the surface. Choosing to take these difficult emotions to God is often helpful, healthy and cathartic, but be mindful of the possibility that this might be a challenging process. Some of us are likely to need to allow significant time to elapse before we are able to fully engage in a reflection process such as this: please don't rush into it.

Tools for reflection

These two exercises can be used by individuals or church communities; the 'you / you're' in each question can be individual or collective!

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For Rural Mission Sunday 2020 we are drawing Bible passages from Exodus, Matthew and Acts; a short reflection on each can be found on pages 13-20 of this issue of Country Way.

Exodus 3:1-6: Moses and the burning bush

- What ordinary, everyday encounters have you experienced as 'holy ground'?
- How have you experienced the 'ordinariness' of your home and day-to-day life as 'holy ground'?
- What things have you found yourself paying attention to in unexpected ways? How have you encountered God in those times?

Matthew 13:31-35: The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

- What are the small seeds that have been planted in your community over these last few months? How can you continue to nurture them?

Acts 16:12-15: Paul and Lydia

- In what ways have you given and received care and hospitality during the last few months?
- What are the unexpected places of prayer you've discovered?
- What unexpected responses to God have you seen?

Looking forward, looking back

Looking back...

- What one word best sums up your experience of living through COVID-19?
- What was the best decision you made?
- What was the greatest lesson you learnt?
- What was the most loving service you performed?
- What is your biggest piece of unfinished business?

- What else do you need to do / say to be complete with your experience of COVID-19?

Looking forward

- What is God calling you to do / be next?
- What would you be most happy with completing during the rest of 2020 in response to COVID-19?
- What would you most like to see change?
- What about your ministry are you committed to changing and improving? (We encourage individuals to interpret this term in whatever way is most appropriate to them; it's not just ordained people and 'leaders' who have ministries!)
- Where have you flourished during COVID-19 and how will you continue to make that part of your life?
- What Bible passages have become important to you during COVID-19? Could you learn them by heart?
- What one word sums up your ongoing approach to learning and growing as a result of COVID-19?

Using Appreciative Inquiry

These questions are adapted from the Appreciative Inquiry process of 'paired conversations' and are best used as part of a one-to-one conversation.

Person One asks Person Two each of these questions in turn, in the given order, and Person Two should answer each question before moving on to the next. Person One should make brief notes of the answers. Then the process should be reversed, with Person Two leading Person One through the questions and taking brief notes.

- Describe something that happened during the COVID-19 outbreak that was a positive experience for you. Why was this? What were you glad to be able to contribute?
- What have you valued about this unusual time?
- What have you found particularly challenging about the last few months?
- Following on from your answer to question 3, identify up to three things you would like to see happen in the next few months? (Don't worry if you can only think of one!)
- What immediate steps could be taken to help achieve the things you've just identified?
- What next small step do you intend taking to set things moving in a positive direction?

Find out more about Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciating Church by going online to [appreciating church](https://www.appreciatingchurch.org/).

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