

Reflections and Prayers: God's mission in the World

This is the 6th of a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are sourced from a variety of people. You are invited to use them for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish. This edition is slightly longer than usual to do justice to the topics and include the authors' full texts.

Foreword

At the start of **Christian Aid week**, we focus on **God's mission in the world** in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Inevitably, most of our concerns at this time of crisis are for our families, our neighbours, our friends and, indeed, ourselves. This week would have witnessed thousands of people scuttling up and down the streets and lanes of our land, pushing envelopes through letterboxes, and later returning to collect them, hopefully containing lots of cash. It remains vitally important to remember the needs of the wider world, amidst our local preoccupations. As has been said, 'we are in this together'.

The first reflection outlines the huge challenge facing Christian Aid, denied its annual house-to-house collection in every city, town and village nationwide: you are invited to picture and think about their mission and to remember their redeeming work in your prayers, as we would have done in our worship on Sunday. The second comes from distant Singapore but we surely identify with its themes and thrust, for the gospel of Jesus, like the pandemic, knows no bounds.

Christian Aid



'Don't wash your hands'

Christian Aid faces a huge dilemma this year. For decades, it has relied on the generous donations of the general public to fund its overseas aid and development programmes aimed at alleviating poverty, tackling injustice and addressing crisis situations. Last year the total raised was in excess of £8m and engaged around 57,000 volunteers. This year, due to Covid-19, there are no door-to-door collections but we are still being encouraged to donate. This year the focus is on Kenya, which is experiencing its worst drought in living memory, and now has coronavirus to contend with too. The prospect is extremely worrying. What were we all told to do to combat coronavirus? 'Wash your hands'. Well, that's not difficult if you have soap and water. Christian Aid is helping Kenyans to build water traps and dams, without which many will die from a basic lack of water and hygiene. We remember from Holy Week how, when Pontius Pilate could not find any fault in Jesus, he 'washed his hands' claiming to be 'innocent of this man's blood' (Matthew 27:24). Please let us not 'wash our hands' of the plight of our Kenyan brothers and sisters.



If you can, please donate a little something to Christian Aid this year. You can do it via Christian Aid's 'Just Giving' page: <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/CAWeek2020>. Also, all profits from the sale of the music CD 'Michael Gough ... in the Gallery' are being donated to this cause. Please donate on-line direct to Christian Aid, or buy the CD which is available from The Norley Stores and from <http://www.michaelgoughmusic.co.uk/music> (via PayPal).

Michael Gough, Norley Christian Aid Group Co-Ordinator

[Readers from Norley and elsewhere can of course make use of the nationwide Christian Aid 'Just Giving' facility. And I commend Michael's CD of his delightful guitar music in many styles. *John Bell*]

Singapore Perspective

Introduction to the author

The Revd Dr Robert Solomon, pictured with Malar, his wife, is Bishop Emeritus of the Methodist Church in Singapore. Robert, who trained as a medical doctor before entering ordained ministry, served as Bishop from 2000 to 2012, and Joan and I had the privilege of first meeting them in 2004 as part of a short overseas trip prior to my becoming Vice-President of Conference. We have kept in touch ever since, met in both Singapore and the UK on holiday visits and when Robert has represented the Singapore Church at the British Methodist Conference. Now retired, they still live in Singapore, and I am most grateful to Robert for his reflection reminding us that, in the face of a global pandemic, we are part of a worldwide Christian community with a renewed 'Landscape for Missions'.



Photo by Edwin Hooper on Unsplash

The Post-Covid-19 Landscape for Missions

The world is being shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic. Apocalyptic scenes from around the world are being conveyed to our screens.

*'I have destroyed the nations;
their strongholds are demolished.
I have left their streets deserted,
with no-one passing through.
Their cities are laid waste;
they are deserted and empty.'* (Zephaniah 3:6 NIV)
How contemporary these words sound today!

If God has allowed such scenes, it is for a purpose – to turn us to Him with meekness and humility so that we can trust Him (verse 12).

He loves us and will accomplish His purposes. His presence is with us even in the worst of times.

*'The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.'* (verse 17)

Here is a wonderful picture of God's love. Like a mother who sings a lullaby over her troubled child, the Lord comforts us when we are afraid or disturbed. In this metaphor, God is not only singing a lullaby but sings loudly over His children. There is a combination of motherly tenderness and fatherly exuberance.

All this is to say that the sovereign Lord is ruling over what appears to be unruly tragedy. When the pandemic ends (and it is anyone's guess when) what will the world look like? We can think about what the implications are for world missions. There are three areas that may have significant influence in the way mission is carried out in the post-pandemic period.

Socio-Economic Situations

One of the realities that the Covid-19 pandemic is showing up are the weaknesses of economic and social systems and structures across the board. The plight of the poor and marginalised has been highlighted, though much more is hidden from the media's eyes and ears. The worst-affected are those who have been living from hand to mouth, whose resources are limited and who have been living on the edge, only to be pushed over the cliff by the pandemic and its many effects – including loss of jobs and access to food and health services.



When the dust settles, it will be necessary to rebuild and restore. The world and societies and individuals will have deep scars that will need healing – through loss of loved ones, jobs and businesses. Social inequalities must be addressed and corrected. Action must be taken by governments and other bodies to help build resilience into the economy and social network. People should not be forced to live on the cliff edges, but be given an adequate buffer for unexpected crises, which are bound to trouble us from time to time. Global economics need to be fixed so that fairness and compassion are built-in values.

The implication for missions is that we must review how we address social inequalities and needs.

Beyond providing relief (which will continue to be relevant), there is a need to address structural and chronic inequities, to advocate for real and deep changes that would help the disadvantaged and powerless. The frailties of health care services in many places have been exposed and will need to be addressed. There are huge implications for medical missions [a specific feature of the Singapore Methodist Church]. Creative Christian thinkers, practitioners and activists need to find ways to build resilience, sustainability and agility in societies, especially among the poor and disadvantaged.

Photo by Joan Bell, March 2018, of the Singapore Financial District, with the colonial era old Post Office (now the splendid Fullerton Hotel) dwarfed in the foreground: the white iconic Singapore Merlion is by the water in the centre.

Internet and Communication Technologies

The pandemic has brought to the fore the role of the internet and communication technologies. Churches around the world that had to close down their regular services and ministries have moved to online communication, broadcasting their services and doing their ministries and administration through Zoom meetings and so on. This heightened (and for many, new) use of online means and social media will remain as new ways of doing church in the future. It is interesting that more people are attending live-streaming services than has been the case in physical gatherings.

The implication for missions is that church and mission agencies will develop new methods of carrying out missions. They can reach wider and deeper and will have opportunities to modify their methods. This is not to say that the need for face-to-face ministry and presence on the ground can be replaced. But we may have new tools to do this.

Spiritual Needs

During the pandemic, many people may be quietly reviewing the meaning of life, the foundations and directions of their lives, and what really matters to them. They may have come face to face with their anxieties, including the fear of death. All this is to say that many human hearts are being ploughed by the Holy Spirit, making them fertile ground for the sowing of the seed of God's Word.

Post-pandemic, there is a great opportunity to minister to ploughed hearts and ready minds by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. What the Lord Jesus said 2000 years ago will be as relevant today and tomorrow as it was then. Jesus told His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful' (Luke 10:2). He also said, 'Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest' (John 4:35). Because of the potentially plentiful harvest, Jesus also said, 'Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Luke 10:2).

The pandemic has created a sense of urgency among believers. I know of young people who are thinking what they will do with their lives. With all the reflections that are going on in their hearts, we pray that there may be fresh waves of witnesses, evangelists and missionaries who will commit themselves for the urgent and clear proclamation of the gospel to a needy and dying world.

Both the world and the church must resist the temptation of going back to previous comfort levels and the status quo. We must go beyond playing church within our four walls. Already local churches are being led to think of who their real neighbours are. In Singapore, there is a growing number of churches that are opening their premises to homeless migrant workers and reaching out to the poor and needy through acts of mercy and generosity. This is a positive development that hopefully will stay and develop further. As churches sense the needy world around them, there is great potential that their eyes will be opened to see the ripe harvest fields, and that many will go out to a world that desperately and urgently needs the love and truth of Christ. The church that remains full of faith and trust amid death has a message to proclaim and demonstrate to a world gripped by the fear of death. All because we worship and follow the Lord who conquered sin and death, the ultimate problems in our lost and hurting world.

Missions will be affected in the near future as motives and methods are reviewed and renewed even as the message of the gospel of Christ must continue to be clearly and convincingly proclaimed.

Gathering thoughts

And so, keeping in mind the critical work and urgent needs of Christian Aid, not least in Kenya; the missional imperative of the Methodist Church in Singapore and at home to respond to the present crisis; and our own personal petitions for loved ones and for ourselves, we watch the sun go down on another day as we pray.

Evening Prayer



Living God,
May we all rest deeply
knowing that we rest in the shadow of your wings,
and rise to face the challenges of tomorrow
with renewed strength and hope,
for the sake of your kingdom, we pray.
Amen.

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Photo by Joan Bell: sunset on Remembrance Sunday, November 2016, Charleston, South Carolina

Note and invitation to readers

I have gathered these reflections and prayers and they include some of my own material. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Many thanks, John