

The New Better (The New New!)

I am fed up of the phrase 'the new normal'. I do understand it's appeal, but I wonder if 'the new better' or even simply 'the new new' might more helpfully describe our yearning for a better future. So let's have a think about how lockdown has disrupted 'normal', how this relates to churches, and what questions we might ask as we co-create our futures!

No More Normal

'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens' -
Ecclesiastes 3.1

Covid19, and the measures intended to limit the devastation that it has caused, disrupted normal in both terrible and wonderful ways. There is a time for everything, even lockdown, and lock down we did. This year-and-a-bit of disruption has been incredibly difficult for individuals, communities, and organisations. Many people's health and wellbeing have worsened. Isolation has become endemic. Communities have become distanced and businesses - both small and large - have had to close. Many people are struggling with grief; both for family members and friends lost, and for the ways of life that have been left behind. No wonder we are tempted to yearn for a 'new normal'.

And yet, this has also been a time in which the 'normal' has been disrupted in positive ways. We have become ever more aware of racism and transphobia. By learning to enable work at home education establishments, businesses, and other workplaces have become more accessible to people who are disabled and/or neuro-diverse and many people have experienced an improved work-life balance. We have spent more time outdoors, and less money. Even churches have changed immensely, worshipping online, via post, over the telephone and in the great outdoors, lessening our environmental impact and connecting with people who have never been to church, or who used to go to church but have faced exclusion or inaccessibility.

Whilst many people are looking forward to a 'new normal' many, myself included, are really worried! Those of us who are trans, black or brown, disabled and/or neurodiverse, and those who work with people who are adversely affected by the norms of society and of church, are afraid that things will simply go back to normal. That transphobia and racism will go back to being ignored. That workplaces and churches will expect people to return to sit behind desks or in pews, regardless of accessibility. That 'attendance' will be expected, and those who can't or won't attend will be excluded and isolated, just like they were in the years leading up to 2020. That those who communicate best on social media, or via typing and responding to images, rather than listening and talking verbally, will be marginalised.

Good News Now?

'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' - John 10.10

The Religion Media Centre, and countless newspapers, suggested in March that for the first year ever the number of reported Christians in the U.K. census will fall below 50%. The most regularly suggested reason is that most people see churches as unjust or corrupt, particularly in relation to anti-LGBTQ+ messaging and silence on racism and church-related trauma. I

don't doubt that this is true, and I am a loud advocate for change in these areas. I do wonder, however, if the underlying truth is a little more basic. Our lives have changed, and sitting in a building on a Sunday for an hour largely listening no longer makes sense to the vast majority of people, nor does it fit into their busy lives.

Does that mean that churches in buildings should cease to exist, or that Sunday services should no longer be a thing? Of course not! There are still many people, myself included, for whom time spent in a church building is a wonderfully life-giving, community-building, spiritual, worshipful experience. I believe that there will always be some for whom building-based spiritual practices, fellowship, worship and prayer are essential and central. I do believe, however, that if the church seeks to bring good news to all, or at least to more, we must move beyond a 'bums on seats' model of worship, mission, deployment and finance.

And so, I have a plea for church goers, members, elders and ministers everywhere - focus on the NEW, not merely the 'normal'. As you move forward into the joy of life post-covid, do not forget your neighbours and kin who may be struggling with a return to injustice and exclusion, do not forget the people you have met online over the past year, do not forget those who will never enter your church building. We are ALL God's children. We should ALL be able to access an abundance of life.

Some Questions

'See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.' - Isaiah 43.19

I have some questions for us to consider, questions that might help us to move towards a 'new better' rather than a 'new normal':

- How might your church intentionally include those who need to fidget, make noise, or move around?
- How might your church intentionally minister to - and receive ministry from - those who never enter the building?
- How might your church consider different learning styles?
- How might your church contribute to, or support, online churches and church online?
- What social and/or eco justice issues might your church learn, think and pray about?

If these questions seem daunting, remember that 'God is doing a new thing', that everyone finds change tricky, and that you can reach out for support!

It's time for things to change for the better. Do you not perceive it?

Revd. Alex Clare-Young is part-time minister of Churspacious, a social media based church supported by Yorkshire Synod. For more about Alex visit www.alexclareyoung.co.uk. For more about Churspacious visit www.churspacious.com.