

Assembly July 2020

An Analysis of Responses

Introduction

The July Assembly took place against the backdrop of the Covid crisis. This crisis has caused both Church and Society to begin to ask deep and searching questions. For the Church, there have been “internal” questions as to how the Church conducts its life when buildings are not available, when people cannot meet up easily in physical arenas and there have been “external”, missional questions about the calling of the Church in new and rapidly changing circumstances.

In order to open out these questions, we prefaced the Assembly with a short survey, asking the questions

- 1) What is the single most important thing you have observed during the Covid crisis?
- 2) What are the two most pressing issues arising from Covid that you believe churches should seek to address locally?
- 3) What single word/phrase should best describe churches over the next year?

The anonymised responses are available on the website in the MKMP Covid 19 section [here](#).

During the Assembly, we conducted two polls based on the survey responses. We also asked small groups to respond to the questions

- 1) What is God calling us to?
- 2) What should characterise the church of the future?
- 3) What will most impact *MK: a City Alive to God*?

and feedback. We transcribed the feedback as part of the minutes which are available on the website in the Assembly section [here](#).

From the feedback, we developed a word cloud reflecting the frequency of particular thematic words in order to give a visual representation of the key topics.

What follows is a rough analysis of each piece of data, with an attempt to draw together some key information.

Analysis

a) Survey

22 people responded to the survey. As the survey represents a group which has taken extra time to think and respond to the issues, it is important to note its detail on its own terms before folding it into the other approaches. Respondents represented those in leadership (both clergy and lay) disproportionately.

- 1) Responses to the question “What is the single most important thing you have observed during the Covid crisis?” can be summarised as follows:

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Neighbourliness (including fellowship, community, relationships)	Online Worship	Inequality, Polarisation (including wealth gap and “zoom gap”)
Adaptability to Change	Telling of stories	Fear
Creativity of Church		Isolation

- 2) Identifying concerns raised by the second question, “What are the two most pressing issues arising from Covid that you believe churches should seek to address locally?” can be summarised as:

Social issues	Within Church: tangible issues	Within church: process issues
Food poverty 1	Pastoral care 1	Strategic sustainable vision 1
Loneliness 9	Online worship 4	Clergy leadership development 1
Debt advice 2	Ageing congregations 1	Listening to the laity 1
Bereavement 4	Finance 1	Discerning what to change and what to retain 1
Racial justice 1	Inclusivity 1	
Mental Health 5		
Poverty 4		
Exhaustion 1		
Inequality		
Climate change 1		
Unemployment 2		
Neighbourliness 1		

I have separated out process issues within the church from more tangible issues.

My reflections would be;

- a. It is heartening to note that outward looking, missional interests outweigh the internal concerns by a considerable margin.
- b. Loneliness tops the social issues concerns. This is a consistent feature of many of these conversations. It is something that the church is ideally placed to address, and which resonates with its fundamental theological vision. Of all the things on the list, it is perhaps the one to which we should pay most attention.
- c. We are responding to the need to address bereavement through our Bereavement Cafes project.
- d. Although the “process” column only attracts four entries of one “vote” each, it is important that they are heard clearly because of their considerable impact on other things. Those involved in leadership need to take particular note.

- 3) In answer to the question, “What single word/phrase should best describe the churches over the next year?”, what stands out are particular values. These are:

Humility
 Hope
 Welcome and inclusivity
 Creativity
 Outward looking
 Care and compassion
 Courage

b. Polls – Discerning the Issues

Two polls took place during the meeting. The first poll asked the question, “What are the two most important internal issues for the churches to address this year?” The options offered were drawn from the combined themes of columns two and three in the survey. The results were as follows:

Online worship	55%
Pastoral care	55%
Finance	33%
Strategy	24%
Response to laity	14%
Age profile	10%
Leadership	10%

This refines the survey results, with online worship clearly emerging as a new and important concern. The process items featured lower in the list, but it is clear from the percentages and the comments made at the time that these were not insignificant, which reinforces the importance of strategy and listening to laity.

The second poll asked the question, “What are the two most important issues in the city for the churches to address this year?” The results were as follows:

Loneliness and isolation	53%
Mental Health	45%
Grief and loss	31%
Racial justice	22%
Food Poverty	14%
Poverty	16%
Neighbourliness	8%
Employment	6%
Debt advice	4%
Exhaustion	0%

In the transcript, I observed that, “Loneliness and Isolation are top and this absolutely reflects what came out in the survey. It is something we’ve touched on in a number of these Assembly meetings over the last few years but clearly in this particular environment with the pandemic, that is one which becomes sharpened to a point where we really do notice it. It’s right there amongst us, all over the place.” I am also aware that Mental Health tends to score highly in such discussions as it does in this poll. Clearly, there is a close relationship between these two themes. It is to be noted that there is a group from the Anglican Deanery who have been working on this for some time and we await to see what might emerge practically from their efforts. Grief and Loss is the third theme picked up here and is something we are responding to through the Bereavement Cafes project as noted above. Two comments from the later discussion on the polls remarks that poverty did not score highly here which perhaps reflects the lived experience of the respondents or a fearful reticence to recognise the major significance of poverty in the near future.



Humility and hope come into the foreground. The need for listening to the community around us is connected to **humility**, which suggests that we may need on the one hand to overcome our reticence to “leave the building”, and on the other to spend the careful time to listen to others before imposing or offering solutions. What approaches are we adopting to ensure that we do this well?

Observation of the emerging unemployment/austerity/loss etc pushes towards the importance of offering **hope** to our neighbours. What characterises us as a hopeful people and how can that be practically shared?

I am struck by a whole matrix of language around **unity**, togetherness and the absence of competition. Can we identify the forces which push us away from one another and towards competition? If ecumenism teaches us anything, it is that we are called to embrace our diversity and work together. If we are to resist the forces of fragmentation then it will be through the hard work of honest relationship building, which must be a priority.

Allied to the recognition of the importance of unity, is that of **inclusion** which has become a noticeable issue through the crisis. It is, in the way it presents in the transcript, the outward face of unity, which suggests it is a missional imperative. How do we make that tangible?

In one response, the value of **patience** comes through strongly. This comes in the context of holding back from over hasty action and suggests again the importance of deep reflection on the new and emerging context. We need to engage prayerfully, theologically and strategically here in order to discern our particular vocation in the midst of a maelstrom of change. What spaces are we developing in which these things can take place?

Creativity is mentioned more than once. This reflects perhaps the release of creative energy we have discovered in the enforced turn to online worship. This is clearly something we need to nurture as we recognise that in the absence of crisis or change we can become stuck in a repetitive rut which is not only unattractive but lacks energy, hope and a future orientation characteristic of Christian faith. How do we maintain this creative momentum into the future?

Many people have been discovering a more simple approach to life through the lockdown. That **simplicity** marks a recognition of the trappings and baggage we all carry around not least in the outward expression of our faith. Buildings, however loved, appear to be less essential than we had come to believe. Large gatherings prove

less life enhancing than the strength of small groups centred on discipleship of Jesus. What do we need to strip back in order to focus on the truly important?

If we are to embody a response to all three of the questions posed, then it is as we engage together as a ***community for character formation***, living out the values we have identified in our discipleship of Jesus that we will become the Church that we are called to be.

John Robertson
August 13th 2020