

# What do we take for granted?

JOHN Wesley looked upon all the world as his parish. This not only made pastoral visiting hugely time consuming, but it made the whole world his, and our, concern. A universal concern for social holiness makes selecting issues for discussion by Methodists challenging in a world where many spheres of our common life fall short of the standards of God's kingdom.

I know this from recent experience when curating a series of recent online events on issues facing the world today. In the first week of July, the Centre for Faith in Public Life at Wesley House, Cambridge, held three online events as part of the Wesley House's centenary celebrations, under the banner of "For the World: Living Faithfully in Contemporary Cultures".

Our first seminar addressed the topic of what contribution public theology can make to the shaping of a post-Covid-19 "new normal". The second seminar focused on Methodist approaches to climate change. The third, a lecture, addressed the Christian case for democracy. All three events challenged us to think more deeply and theologically about what we have been taking for granted in our world.

I opened our first webinar on the post-Covid-19 "new normal" by quoting from Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt's devotional "The God who Heals" (p 117): "Illness has often led me to seek greater quietness, to seek anew the way that God wants to lead me. People assume that after I get well, I will take up my activities again in the old way.



## Wesley House

by Richard Davis

But times and callings change, and we do not please God by clinging to the old customary ways. Instead, we must pay heed to the signs that show us new ways." After Covid-19, will we continue our activities in the old way? Can we discern signs from God of new ways of being and doing?

### Assumptions

Exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic are many background assumptions of our ways of life. The ability to hug a friend or a family member, seeing a doctor or a dentist, the ability to travel outside of one's county or internationally are things we have taken for granted. Nations, economies and businesses are now failing because these assumptions no longer hold. Whether we like it or not, we are heading toward a new normal and it is up to us to what extent it is informed by social holiness. This was the question our first panel addressed.

The first speaker, Mike McCurry (recently retired director of the Center for Public Theology at the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC), approached the topic of "public theology for a new normal" as a political practitioner. Mike made a strong case for a prophetic voice from Church and religious leaders, which he believes is lacking today. Yet, this must be based on a working knowledge of how politics works, with seri-

ous implication for training of clergy. Mike suggested that love for neighbours and political opponents can overcome the nastiness in our politics today.

Sef Carroll (World Council of Churches) suggested that we are in the midst of four pandemics: Covid-19, economic inequality, racism and the climate catastrophe. Those who bear the brunt of these are already marginalised. Are we living in a Kairos moment? If so, there are two ways public theology can impact the new normal. First, the Church must rethink its identity and practices away from institutions and towards mission and ministry for public life; broadcasting one's worship is not enough. Second, active involvement of Church in reimagining the new normal. Public theology can guide this conversation through prophecy, critique of the status quo and re-visioning society.

Dion Forster (University of Stellenbosch) suggested that Covid-19 is reconstructing the stage on which the Church operates. The world in which we live has changed forever, forcing theology to reconsider many of its central doctrines. In this new and changing context, the Church owes the world a direction and orientation based on its traditions and theologies. When the Church does speak in public, its emphasis should be on what it has to say and do that is not already being said and done by others.

Our second seminar discussed what contribution Methodists can make to activism, advocacy and theological reflection on climate change. Climate change shows that humanity has taken for granted the ability of the climate to absorb limitless amounts of carbon and methane. This assumption is coming back to bite us, through heatwaves, cyclones, fires, floods and droughts. In the same week of the seminar, heat records were shattered in North America, with the town of Lytton recording the highest ever temperature in Canada with 49.6 degrees Celsius.

From another recent report, it appears that our built



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environment, including our buildings and infrastructure, was designed for a very different climate. The effects of a changing climate on this are not fully known yet, but the collapse of a building in Miami that killed more than 50 people may be connected to climate change. These realities lead many to the conclusion that we are facing a climate emergency that humanity itself may not survive. Some theologians are wondering if our theology was also designed for different times and whether we need to redesign our theology from the bottom up for our new era.

What can Methodists do in the face of the doomsday scenario? Our first panellist Mollie Pugmire (a COP26 campaign worker for the Methodist Church in Britain) gave us an overview of the Climate Justice for All campaign led by Methodist youth from around the world. Based on John Wesley's claim that God's love is for all creation, the campaign is mobilising the entire Methodist family on issues of climate justice with a specific focus on the COP26 meeting scheduled for Glasgow in November 2021.

### Witness

Mark Davies (Oklahoma City University and United Methodist Church) called on Methodists to witness against complicity in climate change crimes, illustrating this from his context of Oklahoma, where politics, education, economics and even the Church is dominated by oil industry money, with the result of stalling action on climate change. For Mark, climate action and promoting ecological holiness must be the key priority of the

Methodist movement.

Maaraidzo Mutambara (Africa University and United Methodist Church in Zimbabwe) began with the Shona proverb: "Hairy caterpillars are foolish; they eat down the tree on which they settle". She used this to highlight the paradox that long-term sustainability is traditionally valued and that economic growth at the expense of the environment is unwise, while the people's struggle for survival in an unjust society means this wisdom can no longer be upheld.

James Bhagwan (General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches and Methodist Church in Fiji) emphasised that a Methodist approach to climate change be practical, prophetic and pastoral and based in humanity's relationship with the rest of creation. He calls for an ecological conversion away from our throwaway capitalist culture and towards alternatives rooted in disciplining our desires.

Our third event was a lecture on the topic of "Constitutional Democracy - A Global Christian Imperative" given by Dr Jonathan Chaplin, a well-known Christian ethicist, political philosopher and political theologian. His lecture was based on his most recent book, "Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity" (SCM Press, 2021). I can commend this book to every Christian who lives in or wants to live in a democracy. It is a guide for churches on how they might react to issues of faith in public life. It gets behind the headlines to discuss the philosophical and theological issues at stake in our increasingly pluralistic society, where we cannot take Christendom or Christian va-

lues for granted.

However, are we taking democracy for granted if we assume that our democracies are fit for purpose to solve the challenges we face in the pandemic and climate change? Could society veer away from democracy if it thought another political system could be more effective in meeting the problems we face? If democracy delivers outcomes we don't like (Brexit?), then does faith in democracy become undermined?

### Imperative

Against claims that Christians can live under any political regime and global threats to democracy, Chaplin argued that a form of "constitutional democracy" is imperative for Christians everywhere, even if different contexts require different expressions of it and routes to it. In his words, "the jury is in" - and constitutional democracy has been declared not only consistent with Christianity but a Christian political imperative.

These topics remain with us. How the Covid-19 pandemic ends and what the world will be like afterwards is up to us. An important part of this world will be a changing climate and the question of whether democracy can solve these global problems. The Centre for Faith in Public Life at Wesley House, Cambridge, will continue to engage thinking on these topics as its work develops.

Recordings of the webinars and lecture can be viewed on the Wesley House Vimeo account (<https://vimeo.com/wesleyhousecambridge>). Dr Richard Davis is director of Contextual Theology and director of the Centre for Faith in Public Life at Wesley House, Cambridge.

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