



THE WORLD REBOOTED



THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH
IN BUILDING BACK BETTER

An invitation to discern together
2020

'LET LIGHT SHINE OUT OF DARKNESS.'

2 CORINTHIANS 4:6



In the midst of the current coronavirus crisis, many are beginning to wonder what life might look like afterwards. Might this be a chance to create a new normal? For many years, Tearfund has walked alongside communities around the world as they respond to disasters, helping them to recover and create a more resilient 'new normal'. Now, we each face a similar opportunity: how can we 'build back better', and what is the church's role?

In response to coronavirus, churches around the world have adapted quickly to serve their communities. With online services, food distribution networks, phone banks for the isolated and much more, we have been finding new ways to be a light in the darkness, to love our neighbours and care for the most vulnerable. Although our church buildings may be closed, the role of the church in wider society has never been more important. We've seen increasing numbers of people engage with church and heard stories of a rise in spiritual hunger.[1] [2]

Whilst this is likely to be a drawn out crisis, we can already start to play a vital role in shaping what happens next. Crises of this scale give us, as a society, the rare opportunity to ask questions about who we are and about our place in the world. As the people of God, we are called to abide in Christ and let his life flow in and through us. As we emerge from this crisis, how do we do this? How can we embody the values of Christ's kingdom and point people to a better way of living, in the midst of a hurt and broken world? This is an invitation to a conversation and to action.



📷 Above: A child washing hands in a displacement camp in Nigeria
Photo: Ruth Towell/Tearfund

WHERE WE ARE: CRISIS AND LAMENT

Coronavirus is a serious health crisis, but it is also a serious societal crisis. It has held up a mirror to our society, in the UK and globally, and revealed brokenness that was often previously ignored.

As many are currently saying: 'We're all in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat.' In the UK, along with risk factors such as age, it is the poorest and ethnic minorities who are most likely to die during this pandemic. Globally, the lockdown has meant cramped living conditions, increasing debt, no access to (even digital) school lessons, and days without food.[3] [4] Kuki Rokhum from Eficor, a Tearfund partner in India, highlighted this in a recent prayer: 'My biggest worry is the millions of poor people who do not have the means to protect themselves, or "work from home" or wash their hands or get their salary at the end of the month.'

Coronavirus has also put our current environmental crisis back in the spotlight. Dr Ruth Valerio, Director of Global Advocacy and Influencing at Tearfund, recently explained: 'As hard as it is to hear, the outbreak of coronavirus is not a "natural disaster". Environmental destruction makes it more likely for viruses to jump species and get into humans.[5] Deforestation, mining, the bushmeat trade, animal trafficking and unsustainable agricultural practices are all likely factors at play.'

The impact of coronavirus is made worse by these parallel social and environmental crises, nationally and globally. God has created a world where all things are interconnected, and there are consequences when those connections are damaged. Early research suggests that the poorest and those breathing the most polluted air are more likely to die of the disease.[6] With climate change intensifying droughts, floods and storms, those already struggling to provide for their families are now in an even more precarious position.

It is important to acknowledge all this, and to lament.

SELAH . PAUSE . REFLECT



WHAT IS EMERGING: HOPE AND RENEWAL

And yet, as a seed falls to bring forth new life, we believe that hope is beginning to emerge from this crisis.

Among the disorientating chaos and anxiety of this almost-global lockdown, many are rediscovering the centrality of our connection with God, and with those around us. People are reaching out to God and to each other. In the UK, community WhatsApp groups, online Alpha courses and daily prayer rhythms have all sprung up as the distractions of modern life are stripped away. For many, this is a moment of spiritual awakening, and in the past, spiritual awakenings have so often gone hand in hand with social renewal. In South Africa, the church is already a key part of the national Covid-19 response.

We are also glimpsing the benefits of living in harmony with God's creation. In China, it's thought that the two-month reduction in air pollution during the lockdown 'saved the lives of 4,000 children under 5 and 73,000 adults over 70 in China' [many times more than have died from Covid-19 in China].^[7] For the first time in 30 years, the Himalayas are visible from the Punjab, 125 miles away.^[8]

People are hearing birdsong louder than before, they're breathing cleaner air and realising just how important getting outdoors can be for our well-being. We are beginning to spot the potential of a better life on the other side of this, and both hope and imagination are beginning to rise.

Despite the chaos, we know that God's plan is for peace, for 'shalom'. This transcends our modern notion of peace to include ideas of wholeness, balance and tranquility: everything in its place, everyone in right relationship. The antithesis of chaos. A world reflecting back the love and beauty of God. Creation is groaning in anticipation of this (Romans 8:22). It's what we seek when we pray 'your kingdom come'. It's what we live out when we love God and love our neighbour.

**'MANY ARE REDISCOVERING
THE CENTRALITY OF OUR
CONNECTION WITH GOD'**



📷 Food packages being delivered to vulnerable Venezuelan migrant families in Colombia
Photo: Edrei Cueto/Tearfund

We're already beginning to see three great shifts in our social values emerging, towards ideals much more aligned with the kingdom of God:

1 From 'I, alone' to 'We, together'. Our interconnectedness and our need for one another has never been clearer. In the UK, there's been an extraordinary surge in local volunteering and activism, creating new expressions of community, and weekly celebrations of our vital 'key workers'. Globally, the rapid spread of the disease has also demonstrated how the health and well-being of just one of us has implications for us all. We are deeply connected with one another and with the whole of creation.

2 From valuing productivity above all else to valuing life. In response to this crisis, we've seen those without homes being housed, desperately needed water tanks and toilets constructed in poor areas,^[9] and communities coming together to make huge sacrifices to save lives. There has been a newfound urgency both to find and support those who are lonely and isolated, and a willingness among many to give up their time and their resources to support them. These solutions aren't perfect, and some may only be temporary, but they demonstrate a shift to valuing life over productivity.

'OUR INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND OUR NEED FOR ONE ANOTHER HAS NEVER BEEN CLEARER.'

3 From small tweaks to a new way of being. Many are beginning to realise that we have a chance to reshape culture and society. More and more people are joining this conversation, and there is an appetite for real change. In a recent YouGov poll, only nine per cent of Britons want life to return to 'normal' once the lockdown is over.^[10] We have seen that we are capable of adapting fast as human beings and as a society: fundamental renewal feels possible, with examples of this reshaping popping up in [Milan](#), [Amsterdam](#) and elsewhere.

The dignity of human life, the centrality of community and the flourishing of all people and all creation, these are values intrinsic to the Christian story.



Should building back better - as our partners did for this family in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake - be our response to the coronavirus crisis?
Photo: Eleanor Bentall/Tearfund

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE: THE CHOICE WE MUST MAKE

This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape society globally, but it is not guaranteed. In the words of a recent *Financial Times* editorial, 'The great test all countries will soon face is whether current feelings of common purpose will shape society after the crisis.' As we see it, there are three possible routes forward:



We could fall back to the old normal.



We could go in a dangerous direction where lockdowns result in a rise of racism and division, inequalities are worsened, vital aid to developing countries is reduced, and the economic stimulus package prioritises polluting industries.



We could truly embrace the three shifts we're seeing emerge. We could live in the knowledge that our decisions affect everyone else, and refuse to define people by their productivity or social status, instead valuing them as made in the image of God. We could pursue economic recovery measures that fast-track action against the climate emergency, protect the vulnerable and create greater global solidarity. We could reboot the world in a way that reduces the racial, economic and the other inequalities exposed during the crisis.



JOIN THE CONVERSATION

We hope that this is the beginning of a lasting transformation. And we want to invite you to be part of a conversation about how these values can be embedded in the way the economy works and how we relate to each other locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. As Archbishop Justin Welby highlighted in his Easter sermon: 'After so much suffering, so much heroism from key workers and the NHS, we cannot be content to go back to what was before as if all is normal. There needs to be a resurrection of our common life.'

As the people of God, we can speak prophetically to our society, casting a vision for a way forward. To do this, we must first reflect on what God might want to reveal to us personally through how we are experiencing this crisis, and on where God might be extending an invitation for us to join in with his work. In the study guide are some questions to help you with this process, go to www.tearfund.org/reboot.

This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape our society. After the unprecedented destruction of the Second World War, the UK had the hope, vision and unity to build the NHS that we appreciate so much today. With the Marshall Plan, the US provided Western Europe with vast sums of money to fuel its economic recovery.

In the past, Christians have so often been central at moments of social renewal – from the abolition of the slave trade to the civil rights struggle. As Tearfund, we have seen the crucial role that local churches often play as communities rebuild. The church can demonstrate that a different way forward is not only possible, but a better option for everyone. And together we can call on governments and businesses to reflect this in the ways that they reboot our economy and society.



📷 Faith leaders attend Covid-19 response training in DRC
Photo: Tearfund

THIS IS OUR TWOFOLD INVITATION TO YOU:

START A CONVERSATION

Talk about these issues over dinner and over Zoom, with your children and your church, with your colleagues and your networks. We want to discern together what God is doing now:

? What part will you and your church play in this great reshaping of society – locally, nationally and internationally?

? Based on what we've learnt and are learning, how can we ensure that the church, and society as a whole, enables everybody to flourish? In particular, what can be done to help those in greatest need (locally and globally)?

? Finally, considering how we have mobilised as a church and as nations in recent months, how could we respond to the climate crisis – a far greater threat to life on earth – with the same urgency as this pandemic?

TAKE ACTION

Pray for those who are struggling around the world, and for global leaders. Invite others into this great reshaping: convene local community leaders, write to the newspaper that you read, and email your MP to raise these issues. Play your part in building a better society as you pray 'your kingdom come'.

WHAT PART WILL WE PLAY AS THE CHURCH AT THIS TIME?

Go to www.tearfund.org/reboot to find out more.



**'WE CANNOT BE CONTENT TO GO BACK TO
WHAT WAS BEFORE... THERE NEEDS TO BE
A RESURRECTION OF OUR COMMON LIFE.'**

ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, JUSTIN WELBY

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Registered office as above. Registered in England 00994339. A company limited by guarantee.
Registered Charity No. 265464 (England & Wales) Registered Charity No. SC037624 (Scotland)

00293-(0520)

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