



# What May Grow From The Compost of Covid?

by Emma Nash

**M**uch has been lost over the past year. Physical and social contact; income; education; family harmony; good mental health. Most devastating of all, much loved people who have died. We have not all lost the same things, but we have all experienced loss.

Ministers and other church leaders have had a huge upsurge in pastoral need at the same time as sweeping restrictions which have made it very difficult for them to meet that need. They have been forced to learn new skills and to operate using new media. Their church members have had the option of sampling other churches' worship. They may have jumped ship, preferring the preacher down the road or on the other side of the world. There have been times when government guidelines have changed so frequently that keeping up with and interpreting

them has been a considerable challenge. Furthermore, some ministers have found that there are fewer church members who are willing or able to share the load. People who are clinically vulnerable may not have felt it wise to help run the food bank. People whose mental and emotional health has suffered badly, or who are juggling work and home schooling, may not have had the capacity they once had to offer time to the church. And, of course, many ministers are also themselves clinically vulnerable, or home schooling, or suffering mentally and emotionally from the all-pervasive culture of fear. Most Baptist churches will only have, at most, one paid member of staff – probably a minister, who has had to adapt very quickly, in a very stressful situation, probably with less help than they have been used to having, while carrying other people's stress and grief. Many ministers are reporting that they are now just barely hanging on, running on empty.

Loss of income and job security have also been experienced by ministers and other paid church workers. Many are nervous about their church's long-term financial sustainability. While some church members do continue to give via standing order, many churches rely on Sunday in-person collections, which have not been possible for months at a time. Income from groups that use their buildings during the week has also slowed or dried up completely. No one knows what church attendance figures will look like once the pandemic has passed. There are likely to be challenging times ahead for many churches.

In the face of loss, many people, including church leaders, have found themselves able to adapt, to experiment, and to acquire new skills. Churches which would never have considered using YouTube or Facebook Live



as part of their ministry at the start of 2020 discovered very quickly, once their buildings had to close, a digital town square in which they were able to share Jesus with people who wouldn't normally enter their buildings anyway. It has been widely reported that Google searches for 'prayer' increased sharply at the start of the pandemic.<sup>i</sup> Many churches reported unexpectedly high viewing figures for their online services, representing significant increases in attendance at Sunday worship and midweek prayer gatherings (although anecdotal evidence suggests that in some cases these high viewing figures have not been sustained). The missional energy and creativity have not been confined to the digital realm. I know of churches whose buildings have never been closed, because they host a food bank. Other churches and individuals have painted messages of hope on windows, delivered goody bags to help families with home schooling, and carried out community fundraising to help people most affected by Covid-19. The difficulties of social distancing have generated creative energy which has resulted in adaptations of lasting value.

Academic, author and new monastic, Elaine Heath, has spoken of 'the compost of Covid time.'<sup>ii</sup> I love this image. Really disgusting things go into a compost heap: rotting food, even manure. And yet the big disgusting mess is gradually transformed into something life-giving which allows new things to grow. For me, this is an image of resurrection. It affirms all that

has been traumatic, in all sorts of ways, for all kinds of people, while recognising the creative possibilities that are so evidently there.

While acknowledging all that has been difficult and painful for many in the closing of church buildings, the fact is that church the way it was back in February 2020 already wasn't working for most people. For many decades now, the UK church has been experiencing decline. Around 90 per cent of the UK are not practising Christians.<sup>iii</sup>

Many churches were already looking to the future with fear, wondering how they would survive with so few members who were getting on in years and wouldn't be around forever to do the jobs or pay the bills.

I believe this time offers the church huge potential for growth – and I mean that in the broadest sense. The ten percent have been propelled out of a way of being church that, while not perfect, was comfortable for us, into an uncomfortable, creative liminal space.

And in this space of great uncertainty, where everything is up for grabs, the Spirit is doing new things. The power with which God raised Christ from death is at work, bringing new life to the church, for the benefit of the 90 percent who do not know God. The new things the Spirit is growing will look a little different in each place. For some churches, it may be a curiosity to experiment with evangelism in digital space. For others, a desire to show God's love by building upon the fresh waves of community spirit that some areas

have experienced – as has been the case in my own commuter town. Busy churches may find a desire for sabbath is growing from the exhaustion of trying to maintain their programmes. And many churches will notice their compassion for people experiencing poverty growing as they see the need grow all around them.

Let us look for and encourage the growth only God can bring in the garden of resurrection. At a time when church leaders are experiencing exhaustion, and when churches have less volunteer time and less money, we will not have the energy to do all the things we used to do, as well as to take on new things. Let us have the courage gently to set aside programmes and practices which have served their purpose. Let us lovingly allow some things to die, in order that the new things may have space to grow. As churches, let us ask ourselves: what one new thing is God prompting us to do?



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<sup>i</sup><https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/pandemic-prompts-surge-interest-prayer-google-data-show/>

<sup>ii</sup> Comments made by Elaine during a webinar on Digital Church Planting in Autumn 2020

<sup>iii</sup> Stuart Murray, *A Vast Minority: Church and Mission in a Plural Culture* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2015)