

CITYtheology

The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

Summer 2019
Issue 18



“Maybe the sheer pace of life now, and the expectation on us to be demonstrably and economically productive renders most of our physical journeys little more than an inconvenience to be endured...

But I’ve been trying to use my journey times more fruitfully..”

Si Smith

reflects on journeys that take us through the woods.



Poetry is the person of faith’s native language.

Canon Mark Oakley gives us a taste of this year’s Hook Lecture.

Illustrator Si Smith shares his insights about journey, meaning and story.

A meeting of law and faith in Leeds: Dr Helen Reid reflects on the past year at LCI.

“The journey, Not the destination matters...”

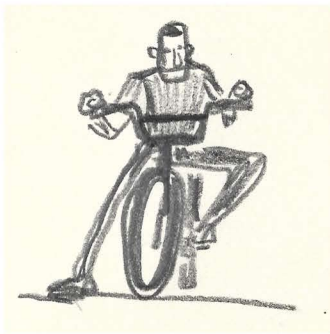
TS Eliot

Illustrator **Si Smith**, talks about his process of story creation and the events that have influenced him.

A few years ago I was part of a group who came together for a bit of mutual support and shared learning. Quite early on in our meet-ups, the word ‘Journey’ was banned. We scorned it - such a lazy cliché; banal; it’s meaning all emptied-out through casual over-use.

Scrabbling around for alternatives, we tied ourselves in linguistic knots (talking about “My Trajectory” or being on “A Pathway” or sharing “Our Ongoing Story”?!) before succumbing to the inevitable, and ‘Journey’ was allowed back in the room.

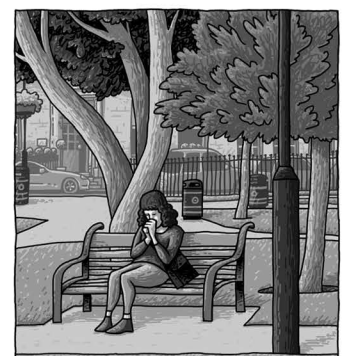
And maybe there’s a good reason that we have to talk about journeys.



In his excellent book *‘Into The Woods’*, screenwriter John Yorke tells us that “...storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation” and that, “we render *all* experience into story.”

Broadly speaking, Yorke’s thesis is that narratives all bend towards (or seek to invert) one definitive arc - the journey into the woods, where dark truths are encountered and conflict happens; followed by the journey back, bringing home new wisdom, experience and learning.

And so every story is the tale of a Journey – and Story is the way that we make sense of our lives. We’re building narratives all the time. We’re hard-wired that way*.



When you think about it in church terms, all your rituals and ceremonies - they're all journeys.

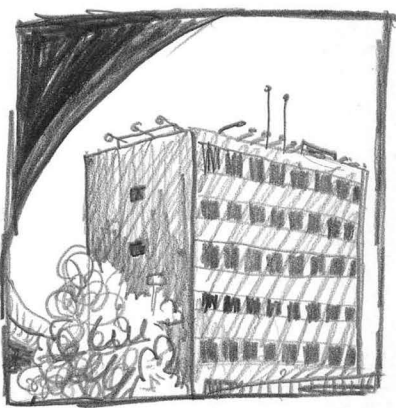
Walk the labyrinth and you travel in - to its heart for the mystery of a meeting with God - and then back out to live your life intentionally in the light of that communion.

It's the same adventure with the Eucharist.

And back in the day, Ascetics wandered out into the wilderness to face their demons and returned enlightened.

Walk the stations of the cross, and you're journeying with Christ to Golgotha and the tomb.

It's all a pilgrimage, even if you don't realise it.



And I don't think that I realised quite what I was doing when I started making work with LCI.

Whole chunks of our first comic together (*'How To Disappear Completely'* - since republished by Valley Press) were dreamt up whilst I pedalled away on the exercise bike. I was literally going nowhere, but the story was off and running, sometimes so fast that it was hard to keep up with it...

Later in the process, I'd hop on the 13A bus into Leeds, purposefully looking for the places that story could happen. Sometimes I'd travel in knowing exactly what I was after - I'd go and draw and photograph specific places, buildings, public artworks - whereas at other times it was more of an open-ended thing - I was searching, exploring, imagining, discovering...



Gallus
Steps
27th July



In my most recent comic, '*Signs*' the protagonist observes that everyone is, "always on the way to somewhere else, and never really here."

Maybe the sheer pace of life now, and the expectation on us to be demonstrably and economically productive renders most of our physical journeys little more than an inconvenience to be endured. They just represent dead time - frustrating obstacles separating us from our very important destinations.

But I've been trying to use my journey times more fruitfully.

So the liminal space of the bus or the passenger seat of the car becomes a place to draw - I've crammed countless notebooks with drawings of landscapes and roadside furniture observed out through windows**; and I've surreptitiously sketched hundreds of my fellow Firstbus pilgrims.

Meanwhile, many of those people have found their way into the pages of the comics, populating the streets, panels and frames of my Leeds.

There's something important for me in that - it's difficult to find the right words without sounding pompous, but there's something kind-of-devotional about this intentional act of drawing Leeds and its people. Someone once described my comics as "love letters to Leeds", and I like that idea very much. To me, the work that I make is a way of celebrating this place and its inhabitants.



Now of course, there are some journeys that you don't choose to make.

Life will take an unexpected course and leave you with little choice but to follow its new path - narrow, less travelled, rockier maybe. Into the woods.

In the Autumn of 2017, while I was making '*Abide With Me*' (the second of my three LCI comic projects) my mum was diagnosed with a secondary, terminal cancer.



And so back in December last year I made a couple of train-and-bus trips out to Norfolk to be with her and to say goodbye.

Of course, those journeys were pregnant with significance already – you don't need to invest a trip like that with additional meaning or intent.

This was a new emotional space for us to navigate. And those journeys - out and back - gave me a transitional space where I could begin to process stuff and to focus on the things that really matter; a place to explore the flex of softening-up-and-steeling-myself; a somewhere - just me, in-between and anonymous - where I could start opening up to Grief.

Also on those trips out East, I drew; doing some fairly significant work on the final chapters of 'Signs' in the process. Pulling apart the way that I'd planned for the story to end and reconfiguring things; rethinking page layouts and panels and searching for a better way to end it. Balancing things, reordering and restoring them. And then at the end, by my mum's bedside in the hospital, I drew. Her hospital bed and furniture from her ward are there in 'Signs' too.



Now, as I look back across the work that I've made with LCI, I see a very clear reflection of our family's journey into my mum's illness; her death and our mourning. In the preoccupations and concerns of those comics - in the words and the lines and the colours and the layout of the panels. That's me, out in the woods, wrestling with questions of mortality and working through my feelings of loss. Right there on the page.

And so I'll end where I started, with a TS Eliot quote...

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."



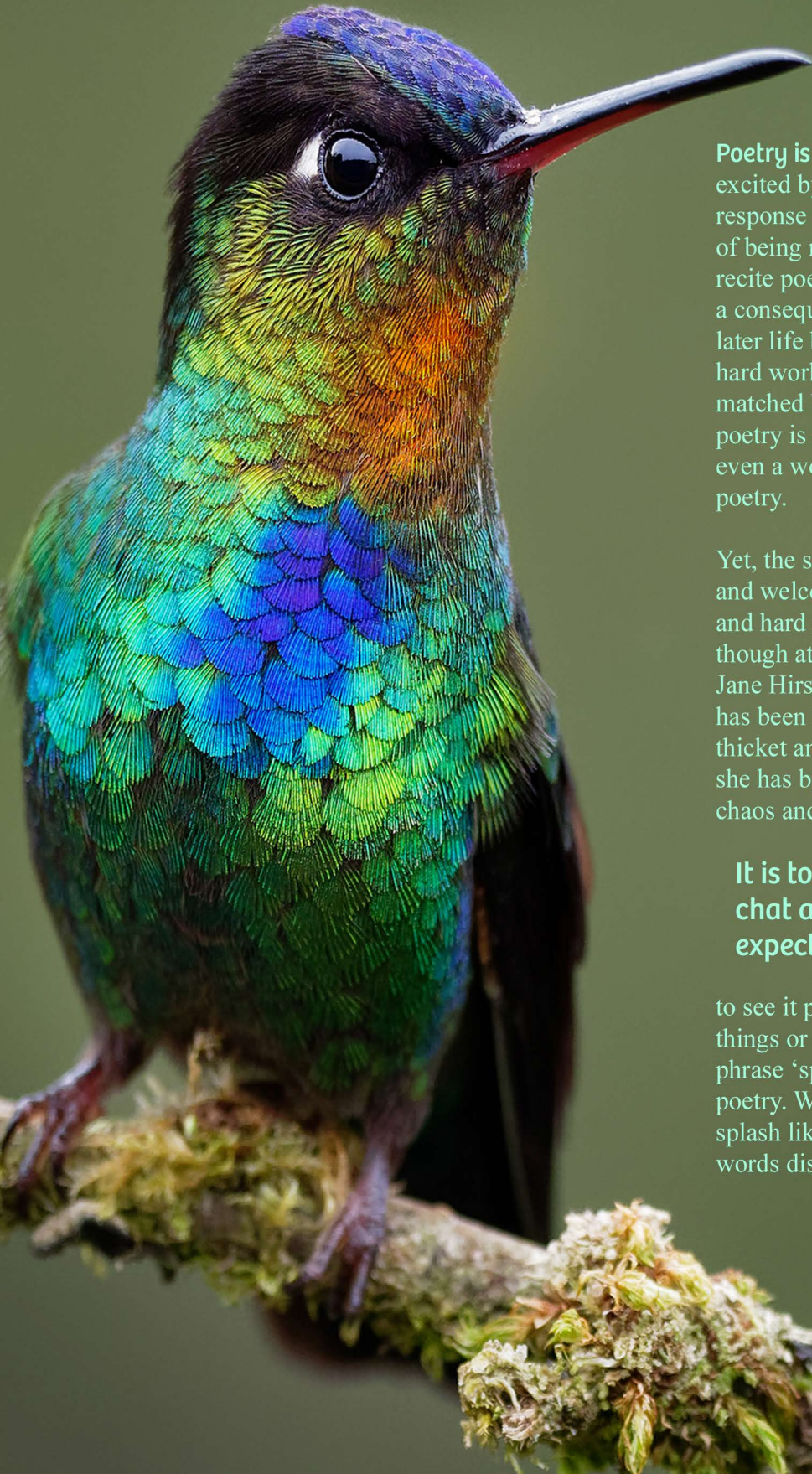
**"It sounds simplistic to say that ordering is at the root of storytelling, but ordering is absolutely about how we navigate the gap between our inner selves and the outer world."*

John Yorke, 'Into The Woods'

*** I've been doing this since 2010, when I set myself the (possibly ill-advised) task of making a lino print of every bus trip that I made that year - <https://2010ayearofbustrips.blogspot.com>*

Poetry is the person of faith's native language

Canon Mark Oakley, Hook Lecturer 2019, makes the case for more poetry in our lives.



Poetry is a divisive word. You can feel either excited by it or negative about it. The second response often has its roots in school memories of being made to plough through boring texts or recite poems to the rest of the class. Or it can be a consequence of having tried to read poetry in later life but finding it incomprehensible, all the hard work put into reading it seemingly not matched by what you get out. For many people poetry is a scary or a frustrating concept. There is even a word for it: 'metrophobia' – the fear of poetry.

Yet, the struggle of poetry is part of its pleasing and welcome work. As in life, it is the difficult and hard moments that have most potential even though at the time it can feel like anything but. Jane Hirsfield has said that for her a good poem has been like spotting a beautiful bird in the thicket and jungle of her life. Just for a second she has been made to stop in all the overgrown chaos and see the colour of the world as it is.

It is too easy in a world of constant chat and comment to develop low expectations of language,

to see it purely as some helpful utensil to point to things or clarify reason with. Consider rather the phrase 'splash of words' as a description of poetry. When you read a poem there is the initial splash like a pebble thrown into a lake. The words disturb your surface and have an impact.

Then, as the poem begins to do its work, the ripples of meaning head out towards your shore, often slowly but relentlessly, and you realise that these words are shifting your perceptions. A poem's ultimate meaning is found not in the words but in us, in our response to the words. The poet's task is to wage war against cliché so that words take their rightful place in the development and growth of human lives and the world itself.

As a Christian, I believe that God has given us all a gift. It is our being. God asks for a gift in return – our becoming, who we become with our being. Our gift back to God is life-long and continually shifting and changing. This means that

any language that is to be true to this spiritual adventure of being alive needs equally to resist closure, to protest at black and white conclusions and fixed meanings.

It is not for nothing that the Psalms remain one of the most treasured parts of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Ever since priests and people of the world's religions have been aware of the numinous they have opened their arms to invoke the divine name and have done so with poetry pouring from their lips and dramatized into movement. It is also striking that the holy texts of the world's religions, believed by many to be revealed by God as holy wisdom from beyond the human mind, are often found in poetic form. With all these scriptures, truth is expressed through poetry for the faithful. It is not just a better way of saying truth but rather truth is found in this form. Truth for the person of faith is inseparable from the way it is spoken. As Les Murray has written

Religions are poems. They concert our daylight and dreaming mind, our emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only thinking whole: poetry

So as people of faith, we can take the advice proffered by Thomas Merton, 'Let us be proud of the words that are given to us for nothing, not to teach anyone, not to confute anyone, not to prove anyone absurd, but to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing

can be said'. Instead of it being used to barter, argue and casually relate, poetry is the language that is more rooted in a deeper earth and which, with patience and attentiveness, we can learn to trust. We can have faith that it is leading us to places of refreshment even if we don't yet know where those might be.

Both poetry and faith work to challenge the sleepwalking life

of those who only believe in their first impressions, those seduced by the quickly passing, the gut instinct or the immediate defensive response. To live in a world of first impressions, teach the scriptures, is a half-life. The haunting question of God to the first human beings in Eden still echoes:

**Where are you?
Where are you hiding?
What from?
How has your fear made you blind?**

Poetry and faith reflect parts of each other and, even if not married in everyone's mind, should at least be on friendly terms as they seek to deepen and not resolve the meanings, mysteries and mayhems of the world and the rumour of God that encircles it, infuses it.

*This article quotes from Mark Oakley's book **The Splash of Words. Believing in Poetry** (Canterbury Press, 2017) It includes part of the poem 'Poetry and Religion' written by Les Murray and to be found in *Collected Poems* (Carcenet, 1998)*

*In the paragraph on Thomas Merton, it relies on Patrick F O'Connell ed. *Message to Poets in Selected Essays* (Orbis, 2013)*

*The description of finding a good poem from Jane Hirshfield is to be found in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (Harper-Perennial, 1998)*

Canon Mark Oakley will be our speaker for the Hook Lecture 2019 and will be speaking on *Poets, Prophets & Protestors: The shape of things to come?*

Friday 27th September 7.30pm at Leeds Minster, LS2 7DJ

TO BOOK YOUR TICKET contact LCI at events@leedschurchinstitute.org or call 0113 245 4700

A meeting of law and faith in Leeds

Dr Helen Reid, Director of Leeds Church Institute

At this time of year lots of charities are publishing annual reports and holding annual general meetings, and Leeds Church Institute is no exception. It is a time to dot the i's and cross the t's while appreciating that the legal details and demands ensure we are systematically accountable and motivated. Recognising this, Leeds Church Institute seeks to find a creative place where these demands interact with theological reflection and overall pursuit of our vision for 'learning for a faithful city'.

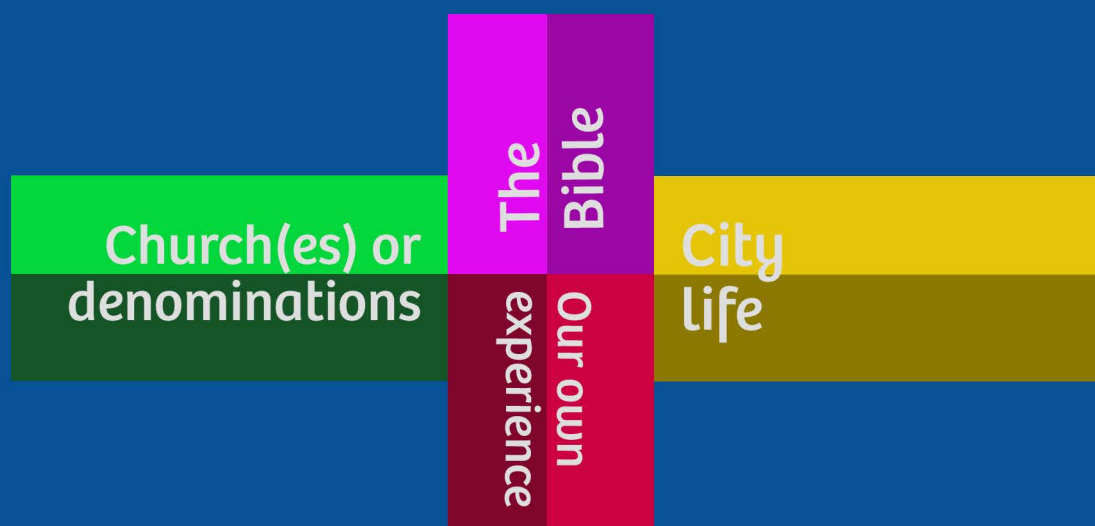
Leeds Church Institutes' formal objects as recorded in our Memorandum and Articles are to promote, advance and maintain religion and education (both religious and secular) consistent with the Christian faith as expressed by Churches Together in England, and operating within Leeds. As a charity, we also have as a general object to ensure our work is for the benefit of the public at large.

To achieve these objects Leeds Church Institute names its mission as, 'to be an active and progressive agent in city life for the benefit of all' and to work

within an ethos of learning, hospitality and service. There are four key areas of our activity in this regard:

- **An ethically run charity governed by a council of elected members**
- **An educational programme of events, media, the arts and research that generates theological conversations and provokes thinking on faith and justice**
- **City engagement that supports the contribution of diverse Christians in city life**
- **A Learning Centre that resources city life and learning**

Intrinsic to all this is a way of shared theological reflection and learning that is non-denominational, inclusive and seeks the good of the city. Our approach to reflection is dialogue that engages four distinct perspectives.



Such dialogue leads us to jointly own a theology for city life, here and now, as a basis for action and future reflection. The next few pages of infographics illustrate what this way of reflecting and working meant in 2018. For a full copy of the Annual Report, please contact Miriam at administrator@leedschurchinstitute.org

The process of dialogical reflection as shown owes much to Roger Walton's writing on the Letter to the Hebrews in *The Reflective Disciple* (SCM, 2012).

2018 in infographics

6 Members of Staff



5 Publications

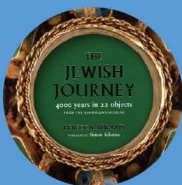
9 Council Members



Educational Themes and Topics



Remembrance



Books



Perspectives



Reflection



Theology and Ecology



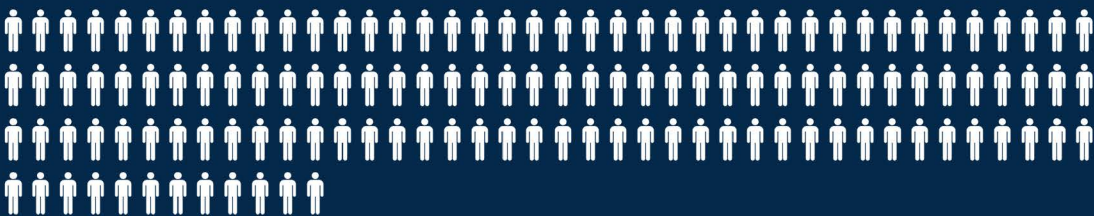
Universal Credit



Inclusion



Ecumenical Mission



132 Members

2 Research Reports



City Engagement



We worked with these and other organisations

Learning Centre

350



Days open

28,731



Footfall

1,578



Meetings, teaching sessions and conferences hosted

2,542



Meals

15,155



Refreshments

Educational Programme

55 Events



1100 Attendees

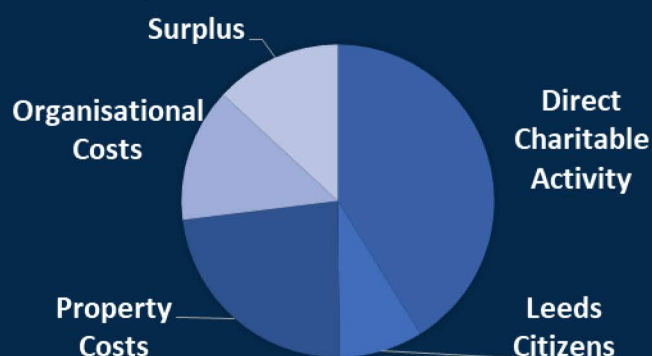


Finance

INCOME
£273,698



EXPENDITURE
£238,348



Social Media

2017

2018

Twitter Followers	482	619
Blog visits	7601	10907
Podcast listens	1305	4384

**Our most read
blog post**



25/09/2018

Why do Christians participate in Pride?

Anthea Colledge, in partnership with Leeds Church Institute (LCI), the White Rose College of Arts and Humanities (WROCAH) and the...

Our most listened to podcast



Black Men Walking interview with Testament

Our most viewed tweet



LCI @LCILeeds · 7 Aug 2018
Don't miss this year's Hook Lecture with Jonathan Bartley on 12th September at Leeds Minster. Tickets are free but limited and available through eventbrite here @Clean_Leeds @jon_bartley

PREACH IT UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN CARIBBEAN PREACHING



Book Launch

Tuesday 30th July 6-8pm at LCI

With author Dr Carol Tomlin
Reflections from Bishop Dr Delroy Hall
Gospel singer and Caribbean food

To book email events@leedschurchinstitute.org
or phone 0113 245 4700



The Leeds Church Institute is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers life long learning through events, publications & social media.



www.facebook.com/LCILeeds



www.twitter.com/LCILeeds

Email: events@leedschurchinstitute.org

Phone: 0113 391 7928

Address: 20 New Market Street, Leeds, LS1 6DG

For more articles, and information about events, visit www.LCILeeds.org

Images:

Adobe stock images: Forest path (front cover) © Piotr Pawinski, Humming bird © phototrip.cz

Shutterstock.com images: Leeds Bridge © Alistair Wallace

Si Smith illustrations © Si Smith