

CITYtheology

The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

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WHAT'S
OUR
STORY?

"It's that combination of a critical eye and a hopeful heart that we need to uncover in our storytelling and in the action we take. If we recognize the change that needs to take place, but retain hope for the future, new, more positive stories will emerge."

Becky Howcroft

on rewriting public narratives with Leeds Citizens.



How should we respond to civil disobedience and the climate crisis?

Rev John Swales on protesting with Extinction Rebellion.

Poet and magazine editor Ian Harker asks what else we can do with power except misuse it.

Something Veiled: Meredith Evans takes us on a journey into a world of casinos.



How should we disobedience and

Written by **Revd Jon Swales**, Lighthouse Mission Priest for Leeds and Tutor in Biblical Theology at St Hild College and **Dr Simon Kittle**, from Christian Climate Action.

On July 15th, activists from Extinction Rebellion drove a boat onto Victoria Bridge on Neville Street in the centre of Leeds, closing off the street to cars. They secured the boat and then camped on the site until Friday 19th July. During the week they held workshops on the climate emergency, training sessions on non-violent direct action, gave out free food, and entertained passers-by with music. Their message was simple: the UK government needs to act now to prevent the climate crisis from getting even worse.

I, along with several other Christians including Rev'd Ruth Newton, decided to join them.

My decision to be involved came after several months of deep reflection on the latest climate science and asking myself what allegiance to Jesus means in this context.

With a disturbing sense of call I joined with Extinction Rebellion and was prepared, if needs be, to face arrest if the police made the decision to clear the area. It turned out that no arrests were made but I'm grateful for the opportunity as a church leader to participate in print, radio and TV interviews about the issue of climate change.

Extinction Rebellion is a group of citizens from all walks of life convinced that the situation we face is dire. More significantly, the situation is no mere environmental crisis, rather, it is a matter of societal, economic and political justice. In 2015 at a UN

climate summit in Paris, 197 countries agreed to do what they could to limit global warming to an average of 1.5 degrees Centigrade and said warming of 2 degrees would be "catastrophic". And yet four years on, given the current governmental policies, we are headed towards global warming of 3.3 degrees according to Climate Action Tracker. These temperature rises can sound small, but because these figures refer to average surface temperature rises for the whole planet, the effects are huge. With 2 degrees of warming by 2100, for example, studies suggest global per capita GDP would be down 13%, while global crop yields would be down 9%. With 3 degrees warming, annual crop yields could be down as much as 20%, the tropics would have expanded north by 120 miles, southern Europe would likely experience constant drought, and large parts of Rio, Osaka, Shanghai, Miami, Alexandria and many other coastal cities would end up underwater.

Climate Central, a US-based non-profit, estimates that 275 million people currently live in areas that will be flooded with a rise of 3 degrees. Long before that, hundreds of millions will have been forced to migrate due to drought and extreme weather such as hurricanes.

There are likely to be 143 million climate refugees by 2050 according to the World Bank, while the United Nations anticipates 200 million. Both these sets of figures are towards the low end of other current estimates.

respond to civil the climate crisis?



Extinction Rebellion, in other words, cannot be faulted for reading too much into the science. The situation we face is, as Justin Welby has said, “an existential problem for the entire global community in a way that nothing else is”. Extinction Rebellion also see clearly that the issue is one of justice. It is predominantly the rich, Western countries which have caused climate change, while it is the developing nations that suffer the brunt of its effects. Western countries also have the resources to blunt the effects they suffer from climate change, whereas many countries in the Global South do not.

But what about Extinction Rebellion’s methods? They argue that the government has broken the social contract because it has failed and is continuing to fail to take the problem seriously and has failed and is continuing to fail to protect its citizens. As a result, Extinction Rebellion advocate a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience. Is this justified? Should Christians be joining them? Should the Church be voicing support?

While these are tough questions, some things are clear. In what John Dear describes as “the boldest political event in the entire Bible”,

Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers, and in doing so, performed a symbolic, non-violent act of civil disobedience which served as a rebuke to a systemic injustice that exploited the poor and erected a human-made barrier between people and God. Jesus then proceeded to teach the crowds: to tell them the truth.

The Church commissioned by Jesus is called to the same: to love its neighbours and care for creation by challenging injustice, and alongside this, to exercise a prophetic call to speak the truth, which today means exposing the dehumanising tendencies of Western culture (consumerism, unrestrained capitalism, individualism) whilst also stirring imaginations for a society in which all can flourish.

The climate crisis is an emergency. Given that, perhaps the time is coming, or now is, when the Church should act, not as cheerleaders or chaplains for the political and economic status quo, with its vested interests in the stranded assets of the fossil fuel companies, but as followers of the Lamb who will join with others in raising the alarm about the ongoing climate catastrophe whilst simultaneously resisting the seductions of the consumerist lifestyle many of us see as normal. As Rowan Williams has said commenting on Extinction Rebellion, “it might just work; it might allow a new space and a new imagination to flower in the face of incipient tragedy”.

Further reading

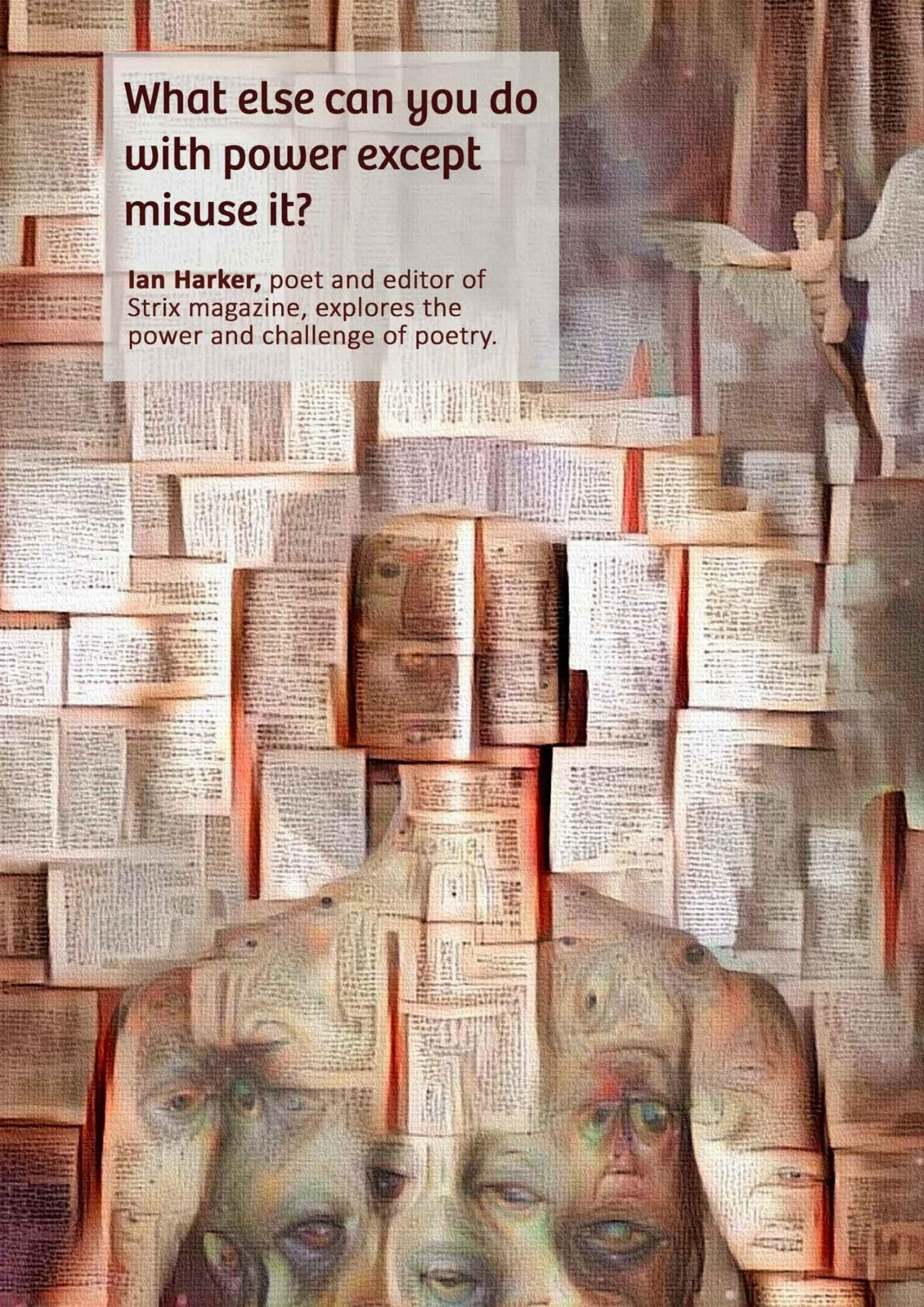
John Dear *Jesus the Rebel: Bearer of God's Peace and Justice* (Sheed and Ward, 2000)

Extinction Rebellion *This Is Not A Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook* (Penguin Books, 2019)

Tripp York and Justin Bronson Barringer (eds) *Faith Not Worth Fighting For: Common Questions about Christian Non-violence* (Cascade Books, 2012)

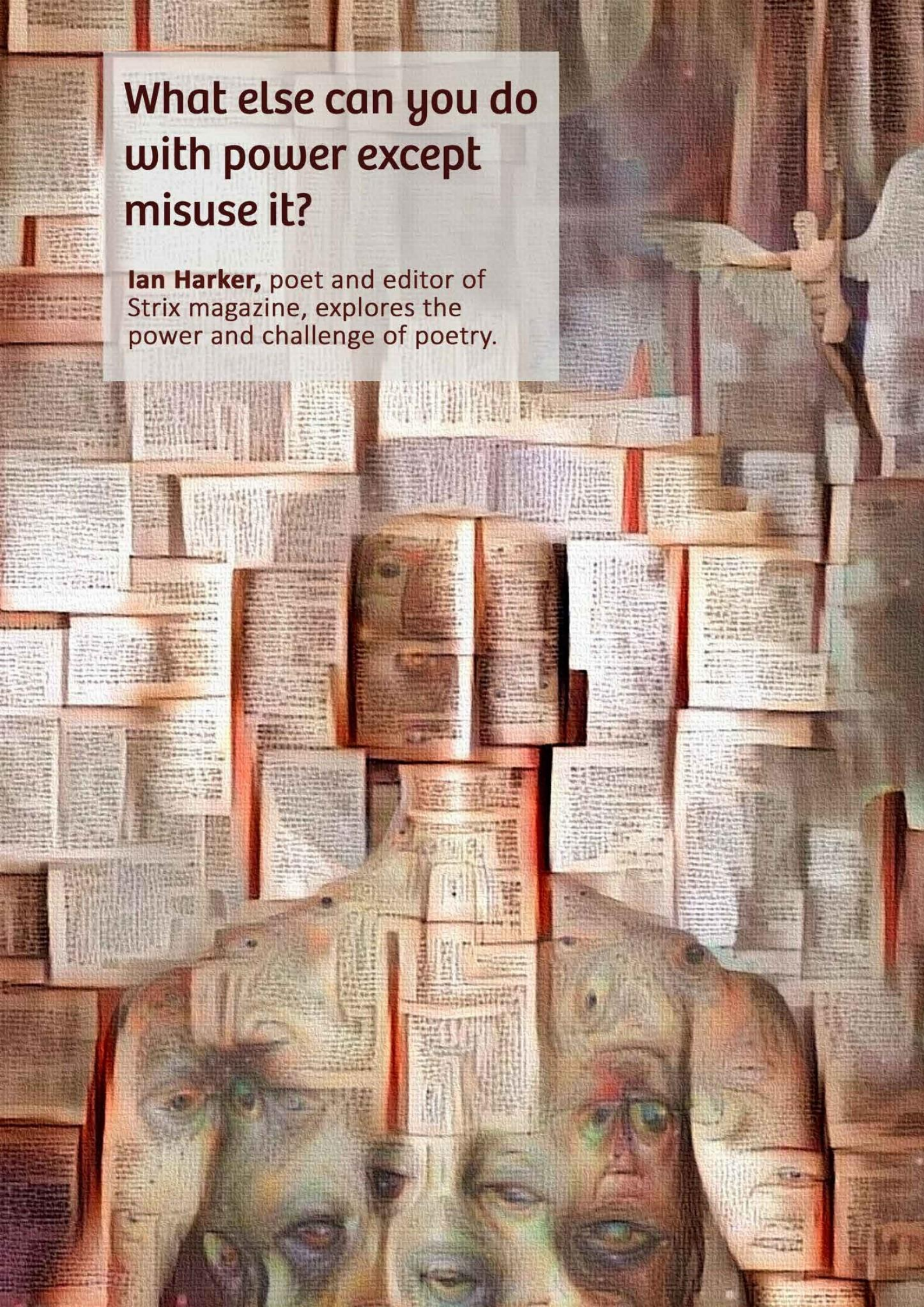
David Wallace-Wells *The Uninhabitable Earth : A Story Of The Future* (Allen Lane, 2019)

To find out more about Christian Climate Action in Leeds contact ccaleeds@protonmail.com




What else can you do with power except misuse it?

Ian Harker, poet and editor of Strix magazine, explores the power and challenge of poetry.



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Ian Harker, poet and editor of Strix magazine, explores the power and challenge of poetry.



William Tindale asks this question in UA Fanthorpe's poem 'Tindale in Darkness', as he struggles against the clock in his prison cell, by the light of a single guttering candle, to finish a translation of the Bible that would give the English language so much of its poetry.

Fanthorpe's Tindale strikes me as a haunting contradiction of the stereotypical poet: he isn't a slave of the Muse scribbling away in a garret, above the petty concerns of the world. He is indeed starving and he suffers for his words; but he's also right in the thick of international politics, and as a theologian and scholar and a poet too, he pays for his convictions with his life.

Of course, political poetry can bore its audience to tears. A poem needs to surprise us in some way, and it's easy when writing a poem about, say, Brexit, to just repeat what we overhear all the time on the bus or in the pub, or what we can read in newspapers. But then love poetry can end up like the contents of a Valentine's Day card. Even poems about the most energising and exciting subjects (like power and its abuses, like love) can end up stale and uninspiring.

So we have to keep poetry moving, we have to keep looking for it. More and more people are doing just that: reading it, listening to it, writing and performing it. 2017 saw the best sales on record for books in the poetry category, an increase of 66% over five years. Book sales are only one part of the story:

People engage with poetry on the radio, in podcasts, on social media, and at poetry nights up and down the country.

Consequently, the definition of poetry (always contested) is broadening. The magazine I run receives over 3,000 submissions a year. The only similarity between all those poems is how different they all are. Probably every poet has their own definition of what poetry is. My definition is 'sound pattern'; and the things you can do with a sound pattern are as endless as language itself.

One of the things you can do with a sound pattern is speak words that have the power to send a shiver down people's spine, make the hair stand up on the back of their neck. It's the power of music and singing, the power of a prayer. It's the kind of power a political speech-writer can only dream of.

So at the end of September, Leeds Church Institute will open submissions for its anthology of poems *Poets, Prophets and Protestors*. The working title is borrowed from Canon Mark Oakley's 2019 Hook Lecture.

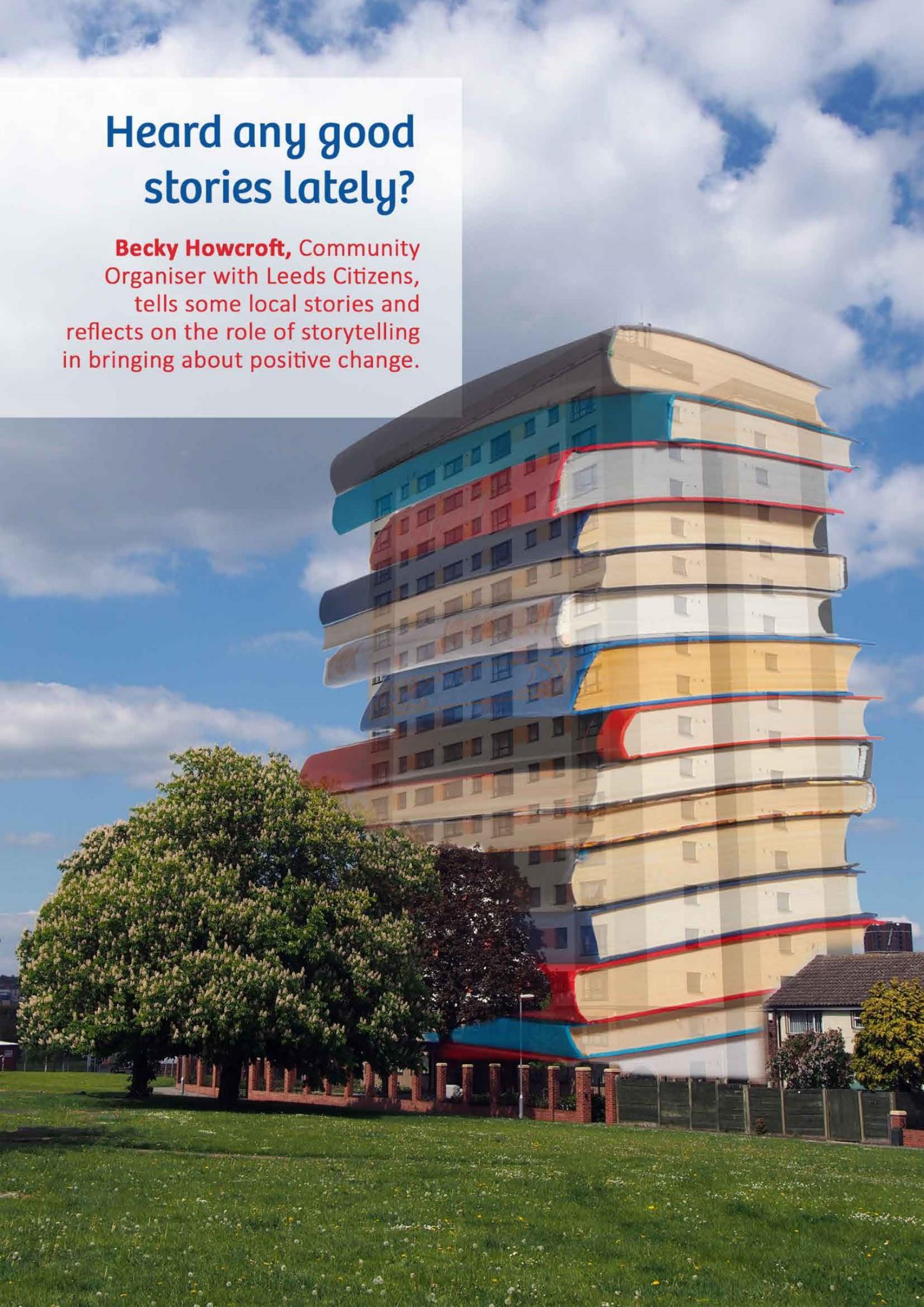
Submissions will be open throughout October, and people who have perhaps never written a poem before, or not since school, are warmly invited to send in their work. Who are this city's prophets? Where are its protestors? What stories aren't being told? We hope to find some answers to these questions when people's work starts landing in our inbox.

To find out more about the poetry anthology, visit www.lcileeds.org/poems

Attend poetry workshops at Leeds Church Institute on Thursday 17th and Wednesday 23rd October at 6:30

Heard any good stories lately?

Becky Howcroft, Community
Organiser with Leeds Citizens,
tells some local stories and
reflects on the role of storytelling
in bringing about positive change.



Storytelling is perhaps our oldest art form. Even before the written word, people used sounds, gestures and expressions to communicate and make sense of the world around them.

Storytelling is both ancient and universal.

Today, we use stories to understand and explain who we are, bringing to life the challenges, choices and obstacles we face on our journey to becoming what Harvard academic Marshall Ganz calls 'full human beings'.

Sharing our story with others helps us to connect and deepen relationships with those around us. It is as if through listening to our story, the listener is given a glimpse of our soul.

Powerful stories are usually more persuasive than data or facts alone. It is their emotional clout that changes opinions, moves hearts and inspires people to respond by doing something. A story can make you feel afraid, anxious or hopeful. It is those feelings which cause the message, argument or moral to hit its target. Feelings will always have the upper hand over abstract concepts. Stories live on in people's memories and, even if the details become hazy, the emotions they stirred at the time are often imprinted into us.

Stories of places can be as evocative as stories of individual lives. Leeds is a city of many stories.

A particularly stirring one is emerging from Holbeck, a South Leeds neighbourhood grappling with complex social issues. Despite its diverse community and rich heritage as both spa village and industrial centre, Holbeck's story has recently been dominated by the Managed Approach to street sex work. The scheme, which has been in place since 2014, involves various interventions including:

- a larger police team
- support for a charity to build trust and reduce the risks sex workers are exposed to as well as referring them on to other support such as drug rehabilitation and housing services
- a dedicated street cleansing team
- a managed "zone" in designated non-residential streets where street sex workers can operate without fear of arrest between 8pm and 6am

This sits alongside longstanding issues of drugs, crime and antisocial behaviour, some of the toughest problems a neighbourhood can face. But this is the situation Holbeck finds itself in. Complex social problems require everybody to work together but in Holbeck, trust in and respect for the established authorities has long been low.



A sense of abandonment has built up over decades on many different issues, from the splitting of the community when a motorway was built through it to poor quality housing. For many, the story of Holbeck has not been a positive one in recent years and hope is a scarce commodity in that part of South Leeds.

But in February 2019, 150 local people crowded into The Holbeck, the UK's oldest surviving working men's club, to begin to tell a new story for Holbeck and rewrite the public narrative surrounding this community.

Leeds Citizens worked with local community groups to form a collective, known as the Voice of Holbeck, and launch a community-led listening exercise called, 'Listening Well' in response to the issues of street sex work and community safety.

During the event, local residents gathered in small groups to listen to emotional stories of fathers clearing out condoms and needles from children's garden toys and women bracing themselves for the walk to work as they know they will be likely kerb-crawled and asked for sex. While previous council-led meetings on this issue have been unruly affairs, awash with outpourings of rage and frustration, this community-led event was different. The meeting was actively facilitated by trained local people. The community held its dignity. Instead of shouting and interrupting, residents publicly applauded people holding very different views on the situation. In a powerful moment of community unity, residents watched their churches, their charities, their residents' groups and their primary schools stand up together and lead, as they committed to hosting and running more listening events across Holbeck.

Listening without action though can be a dangerous thing because it can create a void of both responsibility and accountability. The launch of 'Listening Well' helped encourage a more corporate responsibility, with conversations including a focus on ideas for ways forward and recommendations for change. The event was attended by key decision makers from Leeds City Council, West Yorkshire Police and Safer Leeds, who were asked by community leaders to commit to acting on the results

of 'Listening Well'. They gave clear public commitments to respond through policy changes and resources to the community's recommendations.

With the support of Leeds Citizens Community Organisers, the Voice of Holbeck had successfully used tried and tested community organising tools to bring together the Holbeck community for a new experience of people power. The event chimed clearly with the observations of Revd Johnny Youngblood, a veteran of church-led Community Organising campaigns in the USA, on the power of collective action:

"At its core, meaningful action is the collective equivalent of relating. Through action we relate to the other powers in the public world and we relate in both ways. We collectively tell or act out our story – who we are, and what we want and why we deserve recognition and respect – and we listen to the stories of others."

As I write, Holbeck groups are in the midst of planning and delivering their 'Listening Well' activities. Events are being held and conversations are ongoing. One group of parents, all migrants to the UK, are holding one-to-one conversations in their own languages whilst another community leader is endeavouring to draw out the voice of sex worker residents through face-to-face meetings.

'Listening Well' is built on broad-based community organising, a tool for change that draws heavily on the currency of power and relationships. Leeds Citizens uses broad based community organising to empower people to tell their own stories, and to use those stories to forge new, better ones for their communities and neighbourhoods.

All this happens through an alliance of civil society organisations across the city made up of schools, community centres, charities, churches, mosques and universities amongst others.

Professional Community Organisers support and develop leaders within the alliance through building relationships; forming, developing and training organisational core teams; identifying issues and working with members to take action.



The story of Holbeck is a story of what is possible when a neighbourhood comes together, and this is something that is happening in the north, south, east and west of the city as part of the Leeds Citizens develops local organising clusters. But the alliance has the potential to be at its most powerful at a citywide level. Leeds Citizens members have been acting together on the issue of mental health, telling the story of how difficult it can be to navigate through a labyrinthine system and how important it is to have locally accessible specialised mental health support. Their hard work and commitment has paid off, with members celebrating the recent announcement of a new citywide programme of mental health liaison practitioners in GP practices.

Stories such as the Leeds Citizens journey in campaigning around mental health support reflect the two critical elements for change that Walter Brueggemann writes about. Namely recognition of the world's pain and of the world's possibilities.

It's the combination of a critical eye and a hopeful heart that we need to uncover in our storytelling and in the action we take. If we recognize the change that needs to take place, but retain hope for the future, new, more positive stories will emerge.

Recommended reading

Walter Brueggemann *The Prophetic Imagination 40th Anniversary Edition* (Fortress Press, 2018)
 Marshall Ganz *Why Stories Matter* (Sojourners, 2009)
 Sam Wells *Incarnational Mission, being with the church* (Canterbury Press, 2018)
www.theology-centre.org

Leeds Church Institute is in partnership with Leeds Citizens supporting Becky's work in Leeds. We share a vision for action and reflection in Community Organising. This forms part of Leeds Church Institute's commitment to city engagement and working for the benefit of all.





Something Veiled

A prose poem written by **Deacon Merry Evans**, Methodist Representative on the Leeds Responsible Gaming Forum.

Leeds City Centre, Eastgate. The Victoria Gate Casino.

Truly, this grand foyer is a liminal space! Literally it is the space between two worlds. I cross the threshold leaving the everyday reality of the street. Ascending the escalator, I am transported into a differing reality, one harbouring the unknown. Here, it is comfortingly dark. Here, I feel the subtle warmth of décor. Here, safely enclosed, I feel like a child gently lifted from the floor and swung up high into the adult spaciousness of a grown-up world... I could lose myself within this cavernous embrace. This is like a church, a cathedral, and I feel a something here, a something hidden, a something I can't quite put my finger on, can't quite explain, a something beyond, a something veiled...

People are clustering in more intimate spaces, chapels maybe, or altars. Here, the games are played. Here, the classic rituals are re-enacted. Here, personal prayers and sacrifices are being offered to the god of chance. It is midday. Today there are few customers. It is a thin congregation.

Seeing this, suddenly the illusion is lost. No longer under enchantment I see business, simply business, big business plying its business game. Why am I here? Surely not to play?



respond to civil

the club of the 2000

Ushered through a door into yet another world: What do I feel? Excitement, Fear, Adventure? Here, we walk behind-the-scenes, cold concrete floors, bare breezeblock walls. Here, the glare of sparse fluorescent tubes light corridors and stairs which lead on through doors, and doors, more doors, each securely guarded by inevitable keypads (lights drowsily winking but they never sleep) and then on into the training room where our Responsible Gaming Forum meets. Here is another liminality, another transit into another world. Behold! Sandwiches, fruit, cake, and coffee are set before us. No one eats.

Who gathers in this space? Charities that treat addicted gamblers, Leeds City Council, the Licensing Authority, Leeds Credit Union, Financial Inclusion workers, Citizens Advice, Health workers, Homelessness workers, the Police, representatives from the Gaming Industry, the Gaming Commission and the Casino, academic researchers from the Universities, and myself, representing another voice (the churches, hmmm, or is it God?).

And as we gather at our table, what game is it we play today? What ritual re-enact? Our offerings are the commitments that we made - some in contract or in law; some in working lives committed to the 'poor'; some in numbers crunched in statistics and research trying to find the core, the truth, the solution to...? (Well... we could be in a meeting anywhere, 'finding solutions' is an addiction of our age.) In turn each present their story, each give witness or account, cast their contribution into the space between us. This feels real, but reality is veiled, I tell myself

For me, this table too is liminal space. A space between two worlds, or more. I guess it is for each of us. We float between considering the leisure, fun and pleasure of the game, the lure... and, the desperation of the loser, losing all and borrowing beyond the means of paying back... floating above our heads the arguments of economic gain and benefit, of harm and health and the merry hullabaloo of regeneration, of Leeds's needs, of Leeds's deeds and aspirations, for business, (for business produces commonwealth [sic]) ... and lurking there, beneath the veil, not quite hidden, not quite seen, the operation, the profits, the advertising, the investors, the balance between responsibilities and accountabilities, between those who keep their feet upon the ground and those who don't. Who here are the 'people of the peace', who here the doves, who here the serpents? What is the voice I bring?

Mentally I pick up imaginary dice – and make my throw. Cast the little insight that I have upon the table – risking all. Describe the Church's lobbying, reflect upon necessity of risk within society, relate the testimony of a recovering gambling addict from pastoral experience, paint the image of a spiritual malaise that once we all called sin. And having cast my throw, do I detect a win, a spanner in the works? Of course not! More a crumb within the gears. And I am left to play the Witness game again, as are we all, next time. A witnessing through years.

Leeds Church Institute Arts and Theology Bursary Scheme

In Collaboration with the Centre for Religion in Public Life

LCI is offering short term bursaries to a collaborative pairing of a Community Theologian and a Visual Artist.

Join us for the Launch Event on 22nd October, 6.30pm
at Claire Chapel, Emmanuel Centre,
University of Leeds, LS2 9JT

For more information about the bursary
contact administrator@leedschurchinstitute.org



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