



“If we are not the steward we are supposed to be, then eventually we are going to end up desolate and the land will take over the process of fixing itself.”

Rabbi Paul Moses Strasko

“To please our Lord and creator, we must convert our feelings of sorrow, anger and guilt into something more meaningful which brings about systemic change.”

Imam Qari Muhammad Asim MBE

Leeds Faith Leaders on Climate Change.



What is a poet theologian?

Hannah Stone reflects on poetry and theology during the pandemic.

Poetry is the spirit of peace and harmony

Black Walking: A Found Poem

2019 at The Leeds Church Institute: Infographics

What are Leeds Faith Leaders saying about Climate Change? What questions are they asking?



Earlier this year, the book *Time to Act. A Resource Book by the Christians in Extinction Rebellion* was published. It was edited by Jeremy Williams and included three chapters by Leeds Christian activists. Given the theme and the strong Leeds connection, it was clearly too good to skip over quickly. Leeds Church Institute worked with others in the Faith Leaders and Climate Change Group to run an online project including podcasts and discussions on zoom using some key questions arising from the book as our starting point.

- Does an acceptance of uncertainty in this life resonate with your faith?
- Does your faith promote or question the centrality of human life in creation?
- How do you experience the call to act for good in the face of climate catastrophe?
- Are you inspired by the example of other people? Certain scriptural texts? Particular beliefs?
- Are you inspired by hope and trust, or by need and injustice?

The articles below reflect the online resources.

Dr Helen Reid

Dr Stefan Skrimshire of the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science at the University of Leeds reflects on what we mean by “Is it too late?”

For decades environmental movements have focused on responding to scientific projections and taking into account how long we have to meet the targets necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change. Whilst the messages arising from this approach have a galvanising sense of urgency, there is also the danger that they can generate a narrative around it being too late, implying that nothing can be done. So, it is worth questioning what we mean about it being ‘too late’ and asking, ‘too late for what, and for whom?’

It is quite common to hear climate activists say that they are taking action for the survival of humanity. This really ignores the fact that for millions of both human and non-human lives across the planet, sea level rise and

droughts or fires have already posed huge challenges and brought many species to the brink of extinction. The sense of being ‘too late’ could legitimately be thought to have arrived.

Alongside this, it is important to remember that we don't know with certainty the result of any of our actions. As a theologian, I look for resources from religious traditions that teach us what it means to live ethically in a time of radical uncertainty. The critical question becomes, ‘Can we find grounds for acting in the here and now with justice and with love for our neighbour, without any certainty of what will survive?’

Expanding our concern beyond the survival of

humanity and living with uncertainty really requires an act of radical humility on the part of human beings. We must consider the fact that we are not the centre of the universe and we are not in control of our futures. It is commonly assumed that religions, certainly the Abrahamic faiths, place humanity at the pinnacle and the centre of creation, its history and its future.

We can find in the Book of Job a challenge to this assumption. I have been interested to see that is not just theologians but also environmental thinkers and philosophers who look to the Book of Job as a radical lesson for our time; a time of climate emergency and a time of the Anthropocene. God takes Job on a tour of creation, observing the wonder and the fearsome beauty completely outside the human. 'Have you visited the place where the snow is stored? Have you seen the stores of hail? Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning?' The Book of Job talks about visiting the

Abyss and the ocean, describing a fearsome nature that is above and beyond the human, that was there before the human and that will continue after the human.

There is something here that teaches us that we are not the pinnacle of all creation. We are only one part of a much more complex, fragile and uncertain web of life. This is the world we are aware we now inhabit and in which we make our actions. I think the Book of Job is a really powerful piece of Scripture to consider alongside the question of 'is it too late?' It raises a series of important questions:

What does it mean to have faith?

What does it mean to live ethically in the present when there are no guarantees about the future?

What does it mean to live passionately with this sense of uncertainty?

Rabbi Paul Moses Strasko of Sinai Synagogue in Leeds reflects on the ways that tradition guides Jewish communities to respond to climate change today.

Before I jump into what I think Judaism has to say about climate change, it is worth acknowledging the old maxim that we have one Torah, but if you have two rabbis, you will get three opinions. In other words, I am interpreting what I believe the texts say, but another rabbi might indeed have a completely different interpretation.

I believe that Jewish texts and the Jewish tradition approach the question of climate change and our responsibility within climate change through four different modalities. These are that which is implicit in our tradition; that which is explicit; that which addresses how we are to be stewards of the land as a reward and punishment; and then finally how we can understand this through an ethical consciousness.

Implicitly, Judaism traditionally has thought of its relationship with the environment through practical measures and within the Torah. In chapters 25 and 26 of the Book of Leviticus, and chapter 15 of Deuteronomy, we read about the shmita year. This is the idea that every seventh year we leave the land fallow to allow the land to rejuvenate itself. This shows that 2500 years ago, care for the environment was already a central part of life.

What is even more fascinating is when we get to the end of chapter 26 of Leviticus, we read, 'your land

shall not yield its produce, no more shall the trees of the land yield their fruit', and later we read, 'then shall the land make up for its Sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies. Then shall the land rest and make up for its Sabbath years'. This is a clear acknowledgement that if we are not the steward we are supposed to be, then eventually we are going to end up desolate and the land will take over the process of fixing itself.

A further way of looking at climate change is through reward and punishment. In Judaism one of our central prayers is the Shema which begins, 'Hear O Israel, the eternal is God and the eternal is one (or unity)'. When we read the Shema as part of our liturgy, there are three paragraphs that follow that: One, the responsibility of learning Torah; two, the responsibility of following God's commandments; and three, the responsibility of remembering the commandments via sacred clothing such as wearing a prayer shawl.

In modern times, a key part of the second paragraph of liturgy has been seen as problematic because it says, 'if you pray the rains will come, but if you don't pray the rains won't come'. This has been left out of many different reform prayer books because it is so difficult to align with modern reformed thinking. It is, however, in the UK prayer book, and I see this as incredibly important because it expresses the belief that if we do not understand ourselves as part of something larger, the

rains will not come. Moreover, if by our actions we understand that we are part of something greater than we are, then indeed the rains will come. This is a powerful way to look at ancient commandments in terms of what it means to be in a global village at a time of climate change today.

And finally, when we look at the prophet Isaiah in chapter one, there is an incredibly difficult message to hear. It is the eternal speaking through the prophet saying,

*'Bringing me oblations is futile; incense is offensive to me.
New Moon and Sabbath and proclaiming solemnities,
assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide'.*

Essentially this is saying that the way that you are fulfilling your obligations is an abomination to me. So what do we do?

A few verses later, we read, 'learn to do good, devote

yourself to justice, uphold the rights of the court, defend the cause of the widow'. We all tend to think that we need to do things the way that we have been taught ritually by our parents and grandparents. Within Judaism this is about lighting the Shabbat candles correctly, praying correctly and so on. But if these things are done in a way that is destroying something else, they are meaningless. This teaching brings us to the point of ethical consciousness.

It is a bit humbling to think that Judaism has been concerning itself with the earth, how we are to protect it, and how we protect each other through our actions, for so long. I would like to finish with a text that seems like it could have been written yesterday but was written probably around 1400 years ago. It is from a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes called Ecclesiasticus Rabbah. We read, 'Look at my works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I have created, I created for you. Take care not to damage and destroy my world, for if you destroy it, there is no one to repair it after you'.

Qari Muhammad Asim MBE, Senior Imam at Makkah Masjid in Leeds and Chair of the Mosques & Imams National Advisory Board, considers the question, 'Is the world set on a course for destruction and there is nothing we can do about it?'

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him, pbuh) said **"If the Hour [ie: the day of Resurrection] is about to be established and one of you was holding a seedling, let him take advantage of even one second before the Hour is established to plant it"**. (Ahmad)

This is a clear instruction from our Prophet (pbuh) that no matter what we think is about to happen we must continue to play our role and fulfil our duty. This narration can be used in many contexts but it is telling that the example from nature has been used and this is pertinent to today's climate problems. As Muslims, we never give up on life, no matter how fragile or short that life may be. We would always continue to provide a person with the best of care with the intention that he will get better. It should be no different with issues of the planet. This planet is an amanah (trust or obligation) of our Creator and we must continue to show care, compassion and fight for its justice.

In Surah Rum (30:41) Allah (the most glorified, the most high, swt) says **"Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done**

that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]".

The main point I take from this is that Allah swt is asking us to reflect and telling us that if we reflect on the consequences we are facing, we have the ability to change things and go back to better times. Reflection is best described as a process that helps turn experience into knowledge. This involves careful thought and the exploration of a concept or event. It is a form of problem solving that is used to resolve issues, and involves the careful consideration of a current practice, based on received knowledge and beliefs.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said **"When any of you sees an injustice/evil let him change it with his hand. If he is not able to do so, then let him change it with his tongue. And if he is not able to do so then let him hate it with his heart though that is the least of his faith"**. (Sahih Muslim).

Here we are clearly being told that it is incumbent upon Muslims to stand up against all forms of injustice and that includes standing up for climate justice. It is not enough for us to be sad about the devastation being caused. To please our Lord and creator, we must convert our feelings of sorrow, anger and guilt into something more meaningful which brings about systemic change.

What is a poet theologian?

Hannah Stone, Leeds Church Institute Poet Theologian in Virtual Residence, reflects on poetry and theology during the pandemic.

Poetry and theology are inextricably linked. Poetry uses metaphors and similes, ways of talking about things indirectly but in a powerfully present way. Christianity is full of poetic language. It is based on belief in Jesus, the Son of God, who is described by many different metaphors – the Light of the World, the True Vine, the Lamb of God. Many fine poets are and have been people of faith, a fair few also ordained: Rowan Williams, Gerald Manley Hopkins, R. S. Thomas spring to mind, also John Donne and George Herbert, two of the seventeenth century Metaphysical poets.

A fourth century deacon, St Ephrem lived and worked in what is now Turkey. He wrote thousands of verse homilies and hymns in exquisite poetry in his native tongue, Syriac, a language closely related to the Aramaic Jesus himself would have used. His poetry was his theology, and vice versa. Here is a short extract from St Ephrem's Hymn on the Faith number 31.

Let us give thanks to God

Who clothed himself in the names of the
body's various parts:

Scripture refers us to His 'ears'

To teach us that He listens to us;

It speaks of His 'eyes,'

To show that he sees us ...

'Blessed is He who has appeared to our
human race under so many metaphors'

As a poet theologian I use the medium of poetry to discuss theological ideas prompted by current events, including looking at how imagery can help make sense of government policy.

There's been talk recently about the principles behind relaxing lockdown needing to adhere to Five Pillars, an image which immediately reminded me of the Five Pillars that underpin the Muslim Faith. We've also heard the metaphor of fighting used to describe the attempt to get to grips with CV19, with 'front line staff' evoking the troops leading an army into battle. We are urged to continue to comply with the requirements of social distancing. Here's a prose poem I wrote early in lockdown, in which the metaphor of obedience presented itself.

Adapting

For five days I was frantic; my mind surging yet pulled back by the jesses of physical stasis. After ten days my thoughts were fluttering like trapped birds. Complaints were posted on a community website about people getting too close to each other on the bridal path. This felicitous homophone prompted a reflection on what poverty, chastity and obedience might mean under social distancing. Men in knotted ties promulgated a new triumvirate of vows for CV19 community. Stay Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives. After 15 days I switched off my phone and my words came home to roost.

Poverty, chastity and obedience are key principles by which Christian nuns and monks lead their lives; here I subverted the idea to apply it to the disciplines required of all citizens during lockdown.



The relationship between human and divine creation

The word 'poetry' comes from a Greek word meaning to make or create. And God is a creator; we only have to look at the start of Genesis to learn that.

At the start of lockdown I was full of plans for how I would use these differently structured days and (as it turned out) weeks, to good effect: I felt I should not waste the time and my social media feed flooded with images of clever things people were doing and making. Although I know algorithms govern these postings it was easy to feel left out of this flurry of activity. One set of social contacts, mostly early retirees living in rural north Yorkshire, seemed to have redecorated their entire houses and transformed their gardens. Other folk I knew were key workers, with no more spare time than usual. Others again were grappling with supporting the education of children unexpectedly marooned at home.

You will all have had your own experience of lockdown and the opportunities and challenges it provided. But I imagine you all saw evidence of creativity somewhere. Images of rainbows adorned windows or were chalked on pavements; hearts were hung on trees. A neighbour created a chain of teddies trying to escape out of the window. Making things, be it bread, facemasks, soft toys, flowerbeds, seems to have been a solace to some people, as well as a form of self-expression and a way to fill in time left unexpected vacant.

I wrote about this in one of my 'Covid Chronicle' prose poems:

We were urged to get creative; order a kit of 'seconds' cashmere wrist warmers, with handy tips on how to personalise your pair; embroider a heart over a hole. Applique a flower over a stain.

Within religious traditions there is often the sense of a Creator God, working in synergy with human endeavour. Maybe the 'new normal' will be a place of

greater creativity, be that physical, emotional or political transformation. Some lines from Mary Oliver's poem 'Franz Marc's Blue Horses' put this powerfully:

***Maybe our world will grow kinder eventually.
Maybe the desire to make something beautiful
is the piece of God that is inside each of us.***



At the start of Lockdown, Leeds Church Institute refocussed attention from in-person events to online work. As part of the planning for this, we asked members what kind of online resources would be appreciated. The request came back for resources that would be relevant to the Covid 19 crisis and also uplifting. One response to this was to create the role of Poet Theologian and Hannah writes weekly blogs that you can read on www.lcileeds.org. This article is based on two blog posts that are still available to read on our website.

Poetry is the spirit of peace and harmony

Awais Mughal, a CMS Mission Partner in Leeds, writes about what poetry means in her life and work.

For many centuries, Pakistani poetry has been used as an allegory to express joys, gratitude, fear of persecution, sufferings and hope. Poetry is central to faith and culture. Whether it is religious, mystical or romantic, poets have used their magical words to touch people's hearts.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Persian poetry was considered the epitome of high-class literature, cultivated across the eastern Islamic world. The patronage of the great emperors encouraged Persian poetry in India through immigrant and native-born poets. In the nineteenth century, when British colonial rule was extended across northern India, Urdu was increasingly used for written prose and also official bureaucratic writing. Muslim writers took advantage of this opportunity to produce textbooks, newspapers and varied prose writings.

This change made Urdu the lingua franca of the region. It empowered ordinary people to express their feelings, thoughts and experience, and also to voice hidden norms of injustice and discrimination.

Ghazals (a form of love poem originating in Arabic poetry) are regarded as the great classical form of Urdu poetry. Classical poetry was dominated by the poet Muhammad Iqbal (1879-1938) who is rightly remembered for using poetry to call for a Muslim renaissance and ignite the fight for independence.

The Urdu ghazal continued to be the favoured medium of expression among the next generation of Urdu writers. Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) was a poet famous for his unique ability to combine his idealistic socialism with a style of English Romantic poetry.

Poetry was also used as a medium for Asian women to empower themselves and make their voices heard. Fahmida Riaz (1946- 2018) will be remembered as a progressive Urdu writer and poet who raised awareness about human rights and feminism. She established new standards in Urdu literature by breaking social taboos.

Mr Mauj Firazi came to Bradford in 1963 and developed it into a central place for Urdu poetry in the UK. Urdu prose flourished when Mr & Mrs Maqsood Sheikh established the Pakistan Society, a literary society to

encourage and promote Urdu literature. Mr & Mrs Sheikh published the first Urdu newspaper called "Ravi" in 1976. This was particularly helpful for those who were not socially active due to the language barriers.

Interfaith Poetry and Social Cohesion

Like many first-generation immigrants, when I first moved to Bradford in August 2001, I did not know a single Asian family in the city. As my network grew, I learned about Urdu poetry events in Bradford and I saw the role poetry can play in bringing people from different faiths together.

I established a series of interfaith poetry events that were attended by more than thirty families. These events certainly opened doors for me, gave me an opportunity to make friends and work with people from all faiths and backgrounds.

Canon Mark Oakley wrote in CITYtheology (Issue18) that, "Poetry is the person of faith's native language". This is my experience as listening to various religious and mystic poetry, psalms and songs helped us celebrate our unity with our creator God and to appreciate God's gifts in different cultures.

I believe poetry contributes towards harmony and peace while reducing malicious feelings of racism. Bulleh Shah, a prominent mystic poet of Pakistan, expressed this as follows in an extract from a poem,

**Remove duality and do away with all disputes,
The Hindus and Muslims are not other than He.
Deem everyone virtuous, there are no thieves.
For within everybody He himself resides.
How the trickster has put on his mask!**

Eminent male and female poets and writers from the UK, Pakistan, India and the United States of America have played a dynamic role in supporting my interfaith work. After moving to Leeds and changing jobs, Leeds Church Institute is my only connection to enjoy literary events and CITYtheology has enabled me to continue to enjoy both poetry and prose.

Black Walking

A Found Poem by Jason Allen Paisant

In the mist I see
long lines of blacks walking
death walks to slave ships
black footprints
on cathedrals and monuments
of the city

I dream black immigrant feet
my family on the move working
second, third and fourth jobs

Is that why
hiking seems so strange us
walking without purpose
going up then down
arriving at the same spot

Or maybe there is
A purpose something
To find in the peaks

people who came here
long before
whose stories are in the land
they claim isn't yours

Is walking a reclamation
a moving slowly enough to say
this is a land you can take your time with
these peaks are safe I won't need to run



This found poem is based on the words of Testament, as reported in Bridget Minamore, 'Black Men Walking: A hilly hike through 500 years of Black British History', The Guardian, 23 January 2018. And you can read the article Black Men Walking about the play and a conversation with Testament in CITYtheology Winter 2017, available on our website.

This poem is published in the anthology *And the Stones Fell Open. A Leeds Poetry Anthology*
To purchase a copy, please visit our website www.lcileeds.org

2019 in infographics

6 Members of Staff



Signs by Si Smith



5 Publications

9 Council Members



Educational Themes and Topics



Environment & Theology



Ecumenical Mission



Poets, Prophets & Protestors



Pilgrimage



Creative Reflection



Dementia Awareness



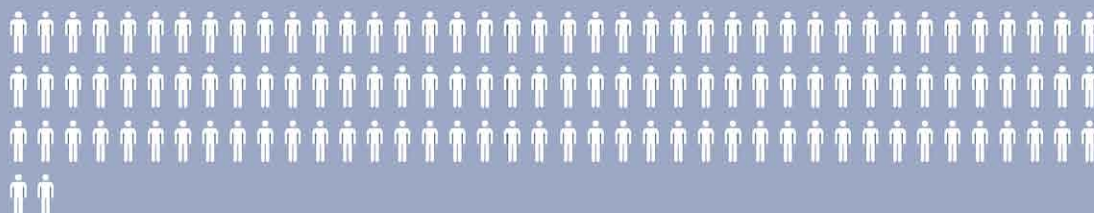
Book-based Events



Perspectives



Seeking Refuge



122 Members
42 New

Launch of the 2020 Bursary: House of Questions

A theologian and visual artist
partnership to create local church
resources



City Engagement



We worked with these and other organisations

Learning Centre

357



Days open

2,696



Meals

38,031



Visitors

11,969



Refreshments

Educational Programme

30



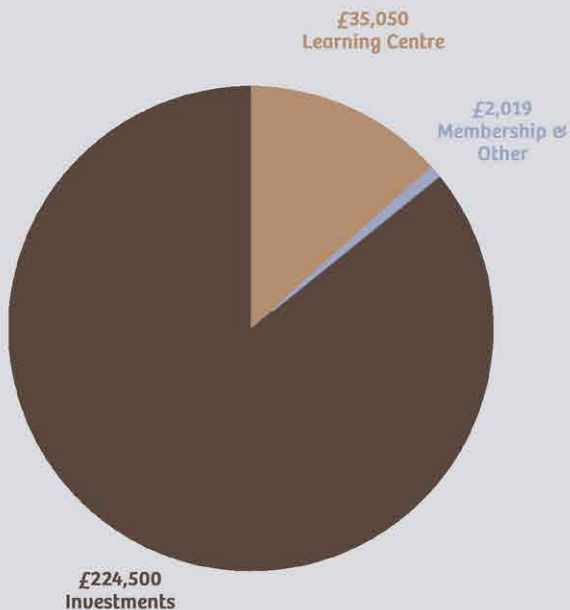
Events

1,421

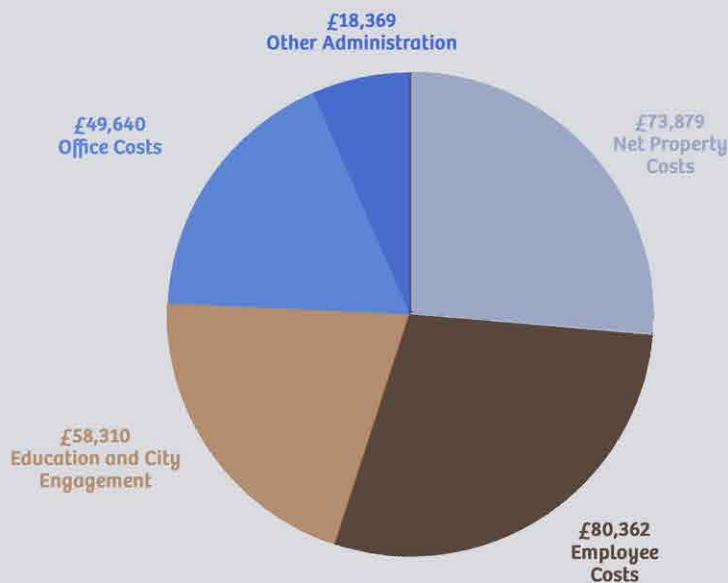
Attendees

Finance

INCOME £261,569




EXPENDITURE £280,524



Digital Engagement

	2018	2019
Twitter Followers	619	754
Website Views	10,907	13,369
Facebook Followers	201	264

Our most read blog post



Ten lessons learnt in Chaplaincy

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19 Oct, 2019

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Leeds Church Institute @LCILeeds · Jul 22, 2019
Poets, Prophets and Protestors the shape of things to come. A very timely topic for our 2019 Hook Lecture with @CanonOakley Book your free ticket via Eventbrite here. buff.ly/2Xevg35 #lecture #protest #Leeds #city #ExtinctionRebellion



Our most viewed Facebook post



Leeds Church Institute
Calling all Leeds theologians, thinkers, artists and creatives. You have until the 3rd December to send us an expression of interest for the Leeds Arts and Theology bursary. To find out more visit <https://buff.ly/0SEdc7> @leedschurchofengland @leedschurchofengland @TRSLeedsTrinity



Asylum in Art

October 13th – October 15th 2020



"You are not allowed to keep your phone if it has a camera"

A unique exhibition at Leeds Church Institute based on the testimonies of women who have experienced life inside a UK Immigration Removal Centre and beyond. This is an opportunity to hear what women seeking asylum in the city of Leeds have to say about their detention and community experiences and visualise them in photography for impact.

If you are interested in viewing this exhibition, either online or at LCI, please email events@leedschurchinstitute.org.



Leeds Church Institute works through educational events, media, city engagement and a Learning Centre.

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

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