

CITYtheology

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“Art talks about the deep stuff, the ‘below the surface’ narrative. Generally, as artists we like to explore what is happening around us but maybe in a more reflective manner rather than a reactionary way and I see faith in a similar way.”

Shaeron Caton Rose,
Christian artist and retreat facilitator, reflects on faith, art and the media during the pandemic



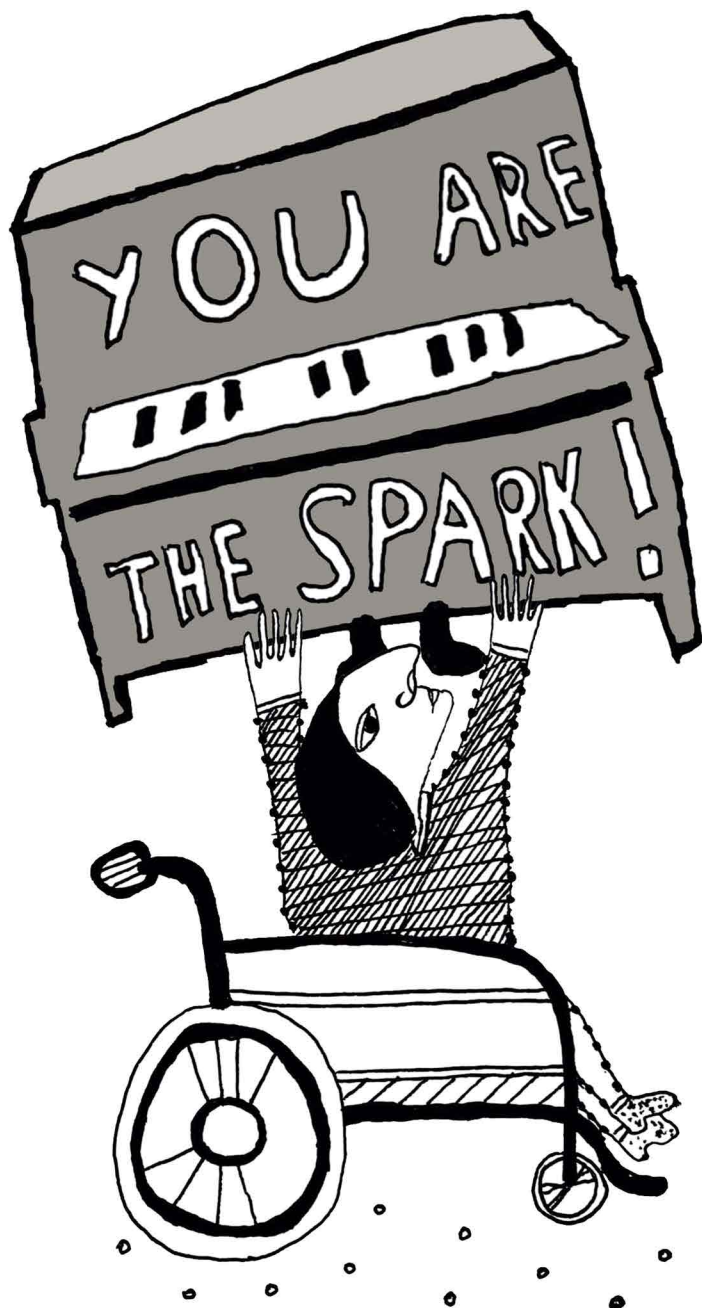
Do you know how to tell a good story?

Dr Helen Reid reviews the book *The Ungrateful Refugee* by Dina Nayeri.

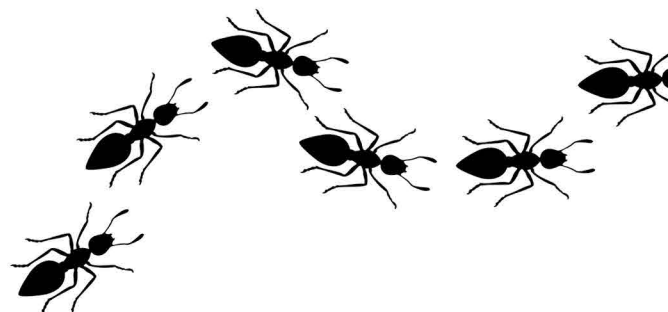
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Power to the People: Pianos, Poetry and 'Plork.'



A reflection on empowerment and the Leeds Piano Trail by **Hannah Stone**, Poet Theologian for Leeds Church Institute

It was a great pleasure to be invited back in my capacity as Poet-Theologian to reflect on the contribution made by LCI to the Leeds Piano Trail 2021, an innovative creative offshoot of the long established Leeds International Piano Competition. The theme of 'power to the people' quickly emerged as the key message to – and from – the citizens of Leeds, as we began to stretch our wings after the confinement of lockdown. The Bible speaks powerfully of empowerment. At one level, empowering is so much what the Holy Spirit does, in the lives of Christians, eloquently expressed in Philippians 4:13: 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me.' At other level, there are great stories about individual examples of empowerment, be it David facing Goliath (a favourite source of inspiration for Rachel Flint, one of the poets who contributed to the project); or Daniel, gifted with an ability to interpret dreams which changed the course

of history; or from the New Testament, Mary accepting God's call to bear His Son. Her words, captured in the words of Luke's Magnificat, speak of the social justice required by genuine empowerment – re-crafting society so that the lowly are raised and the hungry fed.

Empowerment acts at the personal, societal and global level, and its challenge offers opportunities for us all to live out the belief in a fairer world, where there is no east nor west, no Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3.28).

So how can this be lived out and articulated through slogans on pianos, located round the city of Leeds during the summer and autumn of 2021?

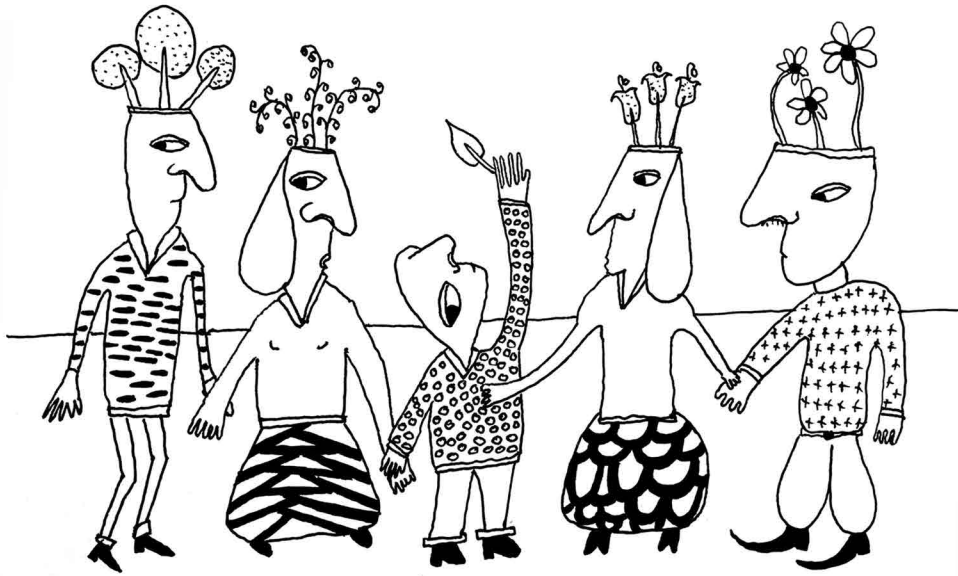
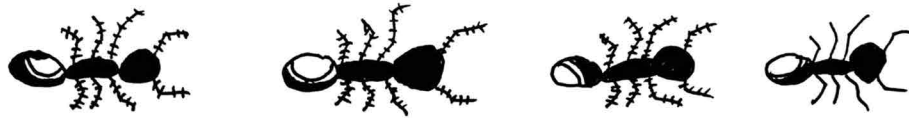
As one way of involving the people of Leeds in creative engagement with the Leeds Piano Trail, three workshops were held, convened by the collaboration of LCI, Leeds Methodist Mission, and Leeds Citizens. These were designed to engender the physical transformation of several donated pianos, part of a much wider 'trail' throughout Leeds, including the Musical Night Walk. Two of the workshops took place on the familiar zoom online platform, during the spring and summer of 2021, hosted by Creative Director of the Leeds Piano Trail, Dave Cartwright, and Visual Artist Rosie Vohra, and the third (a tentative but very welcome venture into the now less familiar world of face to face gathering), hosted kindly by the Jamyang Buddhist Centre.

Rosie introduced us to the concept of 'plork' as an amalgam of 'work' and 'play', the intersection of two different modes of being which can engender the free thinking and energy to release creative responses to situations.

The 'plork' led to the theme 'power to the people' being expressed through two performances of dance, poetry and music. Some people who were involved had never previously had their poetry read out loud to people they didn't know; others had not performed in public before. The participants represented diverse minority communities, representing people with a variety of gender identities, physical abilities, and mental health states.

Also from the workshops, the group created a bright red backdrop for the actual physical piano which sojourned in the Mandela Gardens in the centre of Leeds. The red of the piece represented the righteous anger the group felt about injustice and oppression. The presence of ants on the piece arose from the first workshop when we were asked to think of an animal which represented our sense of community in Leeds. The humbly sized and powerfully organised ant presented itself to several participants as a brilliant image of community-focused activists. Their intelligent methods of collaborative working to preserve and protect their communities, their vulnerability to larger life forms, their resilience and resourcefulness, made them an ideal 'mascot' for the project.





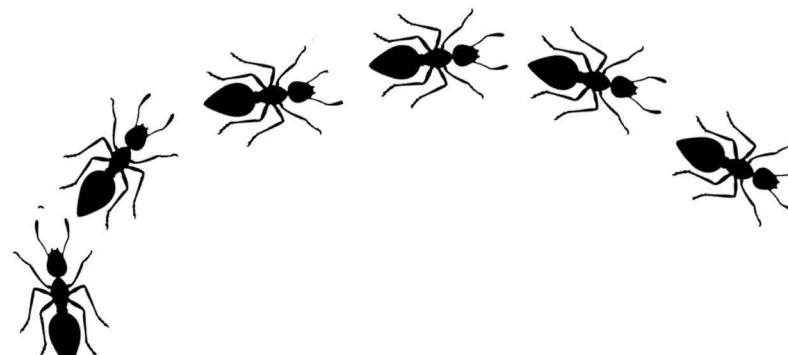
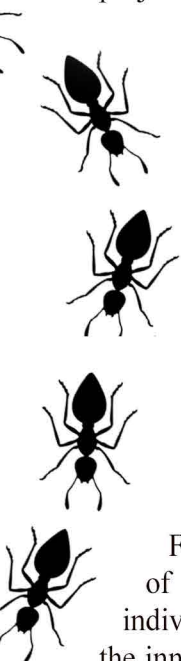
Visual art is always a powerful thread in LCI creative projects, and we were honoured to be able to commission original art work from Jenya Stashkov, who is seeking his own 'empowerment' through exploring re-location to Britain from his native Russia. Jenya engaged enthusiastically with the brief, and has captured some of the words of these poems in his images, as well as providing his own take on the project.

former MP John Battle. Fuelled by food, reading and sharing familiar poetry, and responding to prompts for new writing, this group is extremely active in writing its life stories which often speak of individual empowerment in the face of challenging circumstances. The adversity suffered disproportionately by some sections of society during Lockdown came out strongly – alongside hope and gratitude for the small every day acts of kindness which, to quote the late MP for Batley and Spen Jo Cox, show that there is more that connects us than divides us.

Other examples from the poems, a response to one of the piano recitals, performances and profiles of some of the participants can be found in my series of blogs already on the LCI website, and forthcoming until the end of the year. When asking my interviewees what they understood by empowerment I was struck by how often it related to not just personal circumstances but to mutual support, and the building and sustaining of communities, across apparent divides of class, age, gender and politics.

The Power to the People project spoke loudly of the creativity of the people of Leeds in finding new ways to connect, stronger ways to express feelings and ambitions, and hope and compassion as well as a desire to 'speak truth to power.'

Faith clearly also nourishes Leeds citizens' sense of empowerment. As well as chatting with individual poets and performers, I enjoyed a visit to the innovative Poetry and Pizza project hosted in New Wortley Community Centre under the auspices of



Do you know how to tell a good story?

Dr Helen Reid, Director of Leeds Institute reviews the book *The Ungrateful Refugee* by Dina Nayeri

You can't help but be struck by the title which suggests this is a book that will speak plainly about the experience of refugees. It lives up to the title and is an inspiring read. The book itself is complex and, in fact, reads like three books woven into one.

One thread is the story of the author's life. Dina Nayeri was born in Iran in 1979 and has vivid memories of life in the Islamic People's Republic. Aged nine she escaped the country with her mother and younger brother; and they sought asylum as Christian refugees fleeing for their lives. The story that follows includes three decades of citizenship and life in North America and Europe that encompass stages of assimilation and cultural repatriation. The latter is a term she uses for the process of embracing the good memories from your home country and living with the joy and the tension that brings to you with your status in your present home.

Dina Nayeri doesn't tell her story chronologically, but rather passes forwards and backwards in order to aid reflection on two themes that are of central importance to *The Ungrateful Refugee*. These two themes of storytelling and universal refugee realities form the second thread of the book. The articulation of the themes begins in the first chapter which condenses what the author has learnt, researched and reflected on over the last thirty years into a series of succinct and powerful paragraphs. So much directly hits the spot such that if you were looking for quotable quotes, you find them in every paragraph. You feel sure the book can't keep up this pace.

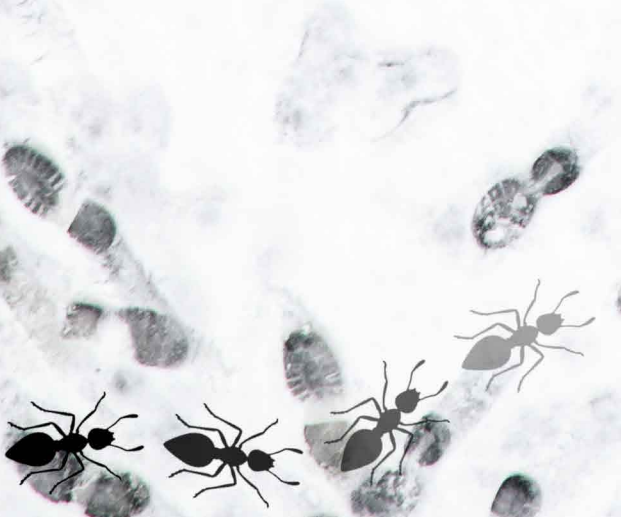
In fact, Nayeri slows the pace right down at times by telling in agonising detail and with pathos the stories that refugees have shared with her over the years. These individual's and family's stories are told throughout the book. They are told with a tenderness and care for the characters in the story and do not shy away from telling the tragedy and abuse. Other people's stories are the third thread of the book.

My favourite section of the book was the section on 'Asylum – on truth and alchemy'.

Nayeri remembers from her childhood that her mother often retold their story of escape and asylum at church meetings. Retelling her story was costly in a personal sense and Dina was clear that they learned what their audience wanted and told their story this way. Her mother told the story as one of escaping danger, experiencing miracles and receiving acts of kindness. As an adult, Dina chose not to tell the story this way. She claimed the right to tell her own story in her own way.

As an adult, Dina Nayeri studied to become a writer. She writes that she learnt to ask two key questions of a story, 'What makes a story true?' and 'What makes a story important?' She reflects that in real life, stories have gaps and coincidences but that if a storyteller includes these, then readers (or asylum officials) may not find the story believable. Moreover, the key point of a story that makes it important will vary from different perspectives. Significantly, there can be a world of difference between a refugee's perspective of the important pivot of their story and an asylum official's perspective. In conclusion, she notes that 'to satisfy an asylum officer takes the same narrative sophistication it takes to please book critics'. What a challenge for a refugee.

This book comes as highly recommended reading as it challenges readers to enter into the complexity of refugee realities and develop their compassion and understanding.



Invisible Pathways

by Diane Pacitti

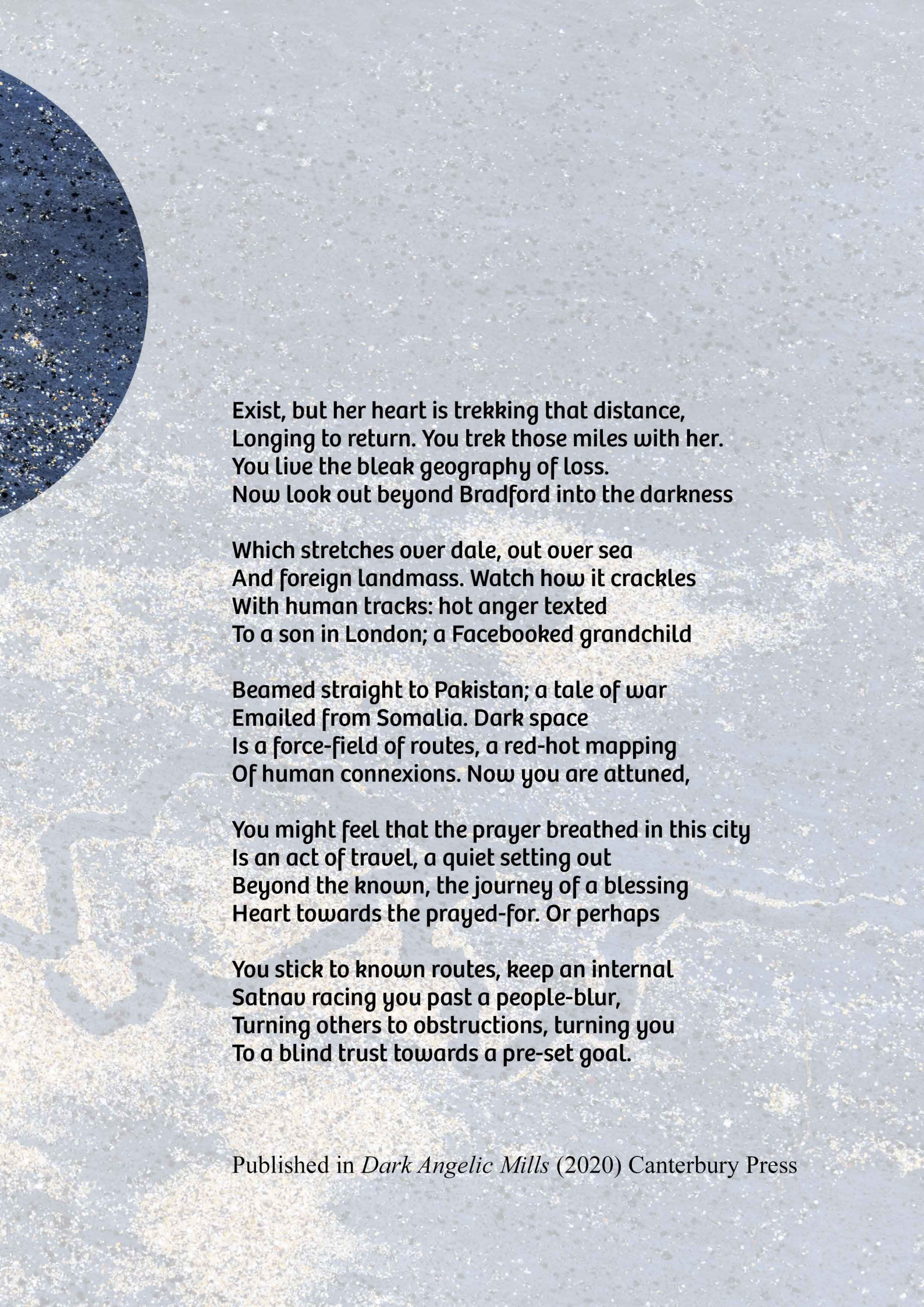
Reading *The Ungrateful Refugee*, I was moved and upset by the hurt that refugees found when the host country wouldn't believe that there were lots of wonderful things about the country they came from and equally hurt when I read about the total lack of imagination and understanding from immigration officials. I offer this poem alongside Dina Nayeri's book as a plea that we should decentralise ourselves and, moreover, we should not construct the neat little map that's focussed on us but rather we should open our hearts to invisible pathways.



If the sun does not glint on its silver, you might miss
A snail's journey written across your step;
That hole burrowing under your fence is a clue
To the dig of claws, the white stretching of belly

That makes the path of a fox. High in the air
Is a criss-cross of wings, millennia of birds
Making their flight paths over the routed city.
Already your human mind-map is opening out,

Losing its self-centre. In Buttershaw,
Alone in a bedroom, a girl rolls back her journey,
Undoes the jolting continents, nauseous seas,
To reach a Syrian home which may not now



Exist, but her heart is trekking that distance,
Longing to return. You trek those miles with her.
You live the bleak geography of loss.
Now look out beyond Bradford into the darkness

Which stretches over dale, out over sea
And foreign landmass. Watch how it crackles
With human tracks: hot anger texted
To a son in London; a Facebooked grandchild

Beamed straight to Pakistan; a tale of war
Emailed from Somalia. Dark space
Is a force-field of routes, a red-hot mapping
Of human connexions. Now you are attuned,

You might feel that the prayer breathed in this city
Is an act of travel, a quiet setting out
Beyond the known, the journey of a blessing
Heart towards the prayed-for. Or perhaps

You stick to known routes, keep an internal
Satnav racing you past a people-blur,
Turning others to obstructions, turning you
To a blind trust towards a pre-set goal.

Published in *Dark Angelic Mills* (2020) Canterbury Press



Shaeron Caton Rose, Christian artist and retreat facilitator, reflects on faith, art and the media during the pandemic



This piece was made in 2015 in response to residency at a monastery. The aim was to create a portrait of the community there. So I spent half an hour with each of the 14 brothers, and sketched their hands in prayer. The images have been displayed as a group; this is just one of them. Each pair of hands in prayer is unique but when they are displayed together, there is a strong sense of unity.

It feels appropriate to show this after we spent a year not touching one another during covid restrictions.

This year has been a lesson, I hope, in the importance of community, our need for each other and the power of appropriate and caring touch.

As well as relating to this on a personal level, the sense of isolation and reaching out to one another and to God in prayer has resonance with the church experience of covid restrictions. Although churches have adapted to an online presence over the last year or so, there is a recognition that nothing replaces face to face meeting.

The parish system has worked effectively during covid though. Churches are usually embedded in their communities, they are on the frontline for working with people who otherwise do not have much of a support

structure. They have been there during the whole of the pandemic. I work with a community charity based in an inner-city church and as well as to-be-expected food provision and emergency help, we offered art activities throughout Lockdown, giving out creative packs with ideas and materials alongside food, as we recognise the huge benefit of art to wellbeing.

Many churches are realising this and working closely with artists to offer creative spaces. I am currently working closely with Leeds Sanctuary offering an online art meditation, and I and fellow artist Linda Baines have set up ReCreate, a small organisation which aims to offer art and wellbeing retreats to inner city groups for free. So far, we have worked with the Crypt and Leeds Refugee Council as well as All Hallows Church Burley. There are many other such stories across our communities as faith and creativity is engaged for the building up of individuals and communities.

During the first Lockdown, many people remarked on a sense of grief that they were unable to access church buildings. There's something about a beautiful space that enables quiet reflection, whether you are a Christian or not. Some of this is down to the artworks you traditionally find in such spaces, and church buildings also offer temporary art exhibition spaces for contemporary artists, for example, the House of Questions exhibition at Epiphany Church, Gipton.

While faith communities have weathered the pandemic reasonably well, indeed in some cases, attendance at religious events has increased, the arts have really suffered, with many artists on their beam ends with lack of support and work. Yet I think this time has shown us the importance of creative expression and the joy it brings, for example, Grayson Perry's art club. There is an increasing recognition of this in things like social prescribing for mental wellbeing. As we also saw in Grayson Perry, art enables communities and individuals who otherwise might struggle to explore and express their experiences, to do so with profundity.

Art is about having a conversation, there's a give and take between viewer and artist. Religious art does not necessarily talk only to people of faith. My current exhibition *Then I'll Begin* uses visual references from both the Jewish and Christian traditions but visitors, including a humanist celebrant and several atheists, have told me that they are profoundly affected by the issues it raises because they are universal themes.

Art talks about the deep stuff, the 'below the surface' narrative. Generally, as artists we like to explore what is happening around us but maybe in a more reflective manner rather than a reactionary way and I see faith in a similar way. Sometimes this makes art (and faith) feel

a little distant from the instantaneity of the press, perhaps that's why the media outlets often do not cover either. It would be great if, as well as bad news, the media covered good news stories such as creativity, faith and hope – there's a lot of it out there.

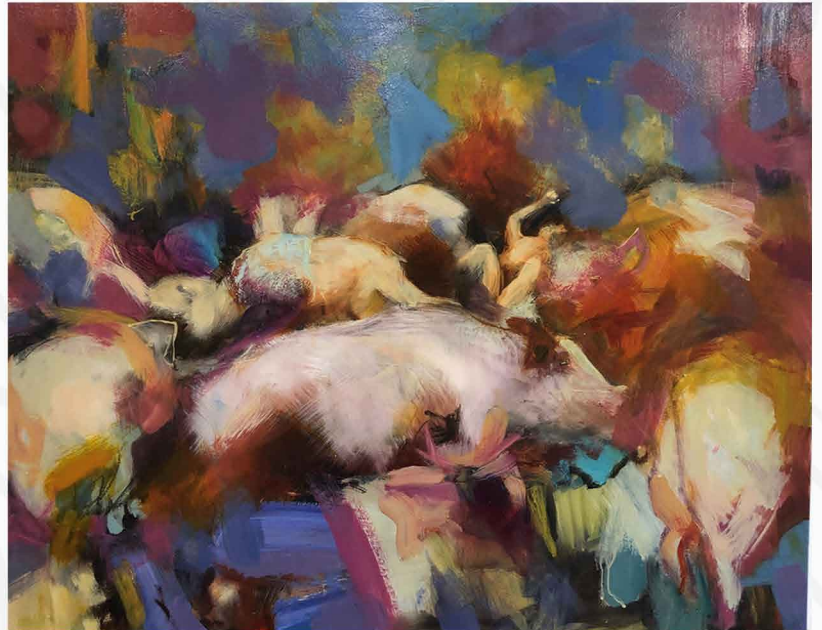
Gillian Holding, artist and member of Sinai Synagogue, writes about what it means to her to be a Jewish artist and what she hopes art can be for others.

I took two paintings to the Faith and Media day run by the Religion and Media Centre and hosted at the Banqueting Suite at Leeds City Hall. I chose the two paintings because each illustrate an important element of my own practice as an expression of my Jewish identity and experience. They are **not** Jewish art, but Jewish thinking, teaching and practices unquestionably informs my art making.

The first piece expressed the thematic concerns of the everyday, the overlooked, the mundane. It was a large painted sketch that was a preparatory piece for an installation in St Edmund's Roundhay. It was titled *Celestial Suburbia* and was effectively sanctifying the ordinary, the overlooked.

In the Torah, we find many examples of sanctifying the mundane, the ordinary. Those parts of Leviticus dealing with the priestly, shows extraordinary attention to detail about cleaning, removal of ashes, how it's done, how to dress: and this is the epitome of sanctifying the mundane. Why? Jewish teaching over and over emphasises the importance of *kavanah* (intentionality). Observing ritual is pointless without intending to sanctify and recognise it in a commandment. And so, honouring the everyday is a huge part of my practice.

Turning to my second painting *Thé Baroque Ruin* shown in my New York show earlier this year (and here), relates to my second overarching conceptual concern: our fractured, broken world. My job description as a human being is to be holy, but the task of all humanity, all beings from a Jewish perspective, is much bigger. We have a concept of *Tikkun Olam*, repair of the world. Our world right now is fractured, broken, ripped apart, uncertain. For me, this painting expresses all of that. I began with a white canvas, with no idea where it might lead at all.




It was a surprise to me where it went and when it was done.

Does this painting move me to being a better human? Or lead me to a better world? Not in itself, but the process matters and art matters. A language which is not verbal, which communicates urgency, crisis, climate change – whatever you see – is process.

And note the pig, I use pigs a lot. Does that change your view of the painting? Now you know I'm Jewish? For me, that pig is the ultimate ambiguous symbol. Clean, unclean? Stupid or intelligent? Lazy or industrious?

We can't read this painting with certainty, and we can't live with certainty in this world. For many, all we can do is move through the world grounded by our faith.

In conclusion, how would I like the media to engage with faith and art? This painting sums it up. Don't assume. Ask questions. Probe. Look beyond the surface and generalisations to individuals. People.

An abstract graphic on the left side of the page consists of a complex network of interconnected nodes and lines. The nodes are represented by circles of varying sizes and colors, including dark blue, light blue, and grey. The lines connecting them are thin and light blue, creating a web-like structure that fills the left half of the page.

What's distinctive about the faith experience of young adults?

Written by **Leo Joslin**, local theologian and writer who attended the Faith and Media event

It doesn't require one to be either religious or a journalist to know that the way religion and religious groups are portrayed in the media is sometimes skewed. The obvious example, especially in the UK, is the way Muslims have been portrayed since the Rushdie affair in 1989, with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq only adding to the validity that some national media outlets seem to hold when homogenising and othering Muslims. This misportrayal of religious groups goes the other way sometimes too, oversimplifying and almost romanticising some non-Western religions. Examples include the way that Native American beliefs are oversimplified to disconnect them from their social and cultural aspects, or the environmental aspects of some Buddhist movements are removed from their contexts.

On the 14th October, Leeds hosted the first of five events run by the Religion and Media Centre, aimed at creating a dialogue between journalists and media groups, and the faith communities of the city. Guests and speakers from the media, academic institutions and local faith leaders gathered to talk about their stories, their relationships with Leeds and opened up their experiences to others present.

Although the focus of the event was on the way that religion is portrayed in the media and improving dialogue and access between the two groups, something I have been thinking about since is the way that media, especially social media and the accessibility it brings, has altered the face of religion, and changed how religious groups interact and exist. In particular, the focus here is on young people in their teens and twenties who are moving away from traditional forms of media and instead using online and social media to source information and connect. It is with this demographic that we have seen the biggest shift in religiosity for a very long time, possibly in the history of Western religion. It is the first generation where to be religious is not the social norm.

A religious young person is in a minority. This is especially the case when it comes to organised religion: according to the Guardian, less than 2% of young people identify as being part of the Church of England, with far fewer than that attending regular services, and a decline of over 50% since the turn of the century.

It should be mentioned that this decline is only really visible in Christianity in the UK. Looking at the 2001 and 2011 censuses, the number of Muslims is actually rising, with a population percentage increase of 27% over the decade (Christianity declined by 28% in the same time). This is partly due to younger adults seeking to discover an Islam different from the Islam of their parents that was infused with South Asian or Middle Eastern culture, one more rooted in their British identity. Aside from Islam, there is not much of a difference between generations when one looks at other religions. Overall, the national picture seems to be pointing to Christianity becoming a minority belief along with other religions, and as non-religion becomes the standard for young people.

But what about the role that media plays in the religion of our younger generations? As mentioned, young people are the first generation to grow up in an environment where non-religion is the majority belief. They are also the first to grow up in a society connected by the internet and social media, to have a world's worth of knowledge a Google search away, and to have access to the experiences and beliefs of people around the globe.

The Times published an article over lockdown that was titled 'Teenagers turn to God during pandemic' and looked at how a combination of the pandemic and the majority of worship moving online had led to an increase in the number of young people praying or identifying as religious compared to the generation of millennials before them. Online access allows people to enter communities and form bonds that they wouldn't otherwise be able to in the physical landscape. A 2013 paper published after a study of undergraduate students in the UK showed that although less than a third of students identified as being very spiritual, nearly half said they were trying to be or exploring it more. This again points to young people as being a generation where, although most grow up outside a religious community, some are asking questions about their faith and belief, and using the tools of modernity to answer these.

The most important aspect in the way young people are using technology and media to connect and explore religion for me is that it offers a community, something I firmly believe is at the heart of Christianity and most other religions I have studied. The Church at its core is the community of Christians, but as the traditional institutions of religion in this country fall out of popularity and no longer answer the religious needs of young people, an alternative must be present. These new, online communities are found on forums and social media platforms, allowing young peers to meet and then discuss their faiths uninfluenced by traditional institutions or values.

It would be easy for the religiosity of young people, away from the physical institutions of previous generations, to be individual and isolated, but through use of modern media and ways of communicating, young people can explore and develop their religion in a non-physical community.

So that is the role that media plays in helping young people discover their religion and refine their faith, but what about the role that the religious community then plays in their lives? The current generation of young people is incredibly diverse, and one should steer well clear of generalisations, but there are a few factors or themes that are common across most young people: there is a mental health epidemic that often goes unmentioned by the wider public, there's widespread concern and apprehension about the effects climate change will have on the future, job and housing insecurity make stable living increasing more elusive. All these play out in the background of a neoliberal society that pulls its participants in the direction of individualism, consumerism and materialism.

By the media allowing young people to be separate from the traditional religious institutions that no longer represent them, but still engage in religious community and exist in relationship with others, it counters the danger of young people being religiously isolated. It also allows young people to enter into communication with those outside of their normal spheres, be they generational, social or geographical. These new, modern religious communities allow the young person to combat the struggles of youth whilst at the same time entering a religious community that is necessary for them to grow in their faith.

I am wary of this coming off as either an advert for religion or as a message that young people should seek religious community as a tool to help with the issues and struggles that so many face. Ultimately, faith should be something internal that then manifests and blooms in a religious community; the initial seed is individual and emotional. All young people need some form of community and relationship to help them in modernity. The religious community should not be pushed as the answer or way for all, but for those that it is, it can offer a valuable and essential means for living as a young person in the 21st Century.

'This girl can'

Hannah Stone

Shared at the Power to the People event

wear jeans or heels,
shades or a scarf,
drive, unchaperoned,
to a polling station.
Pray or curse.
Tweet or hold her tongue.
Choose from twenty blends of coffee,
buy a Primark tee-shirt to wear twice,
buy a Gucci handbag.
Study, lobby, vote; debate, argue.
Love whoever she loves.
Run for a bus, run a marathon,
run her own business,
run for president.

This girl stands on the shoulders
of women burned at the stake,
ducked as witches,
women who bled to death
shedding unwanted children.
Women who threw themselves under horses
because they could not make their mark.
This girl can stand beside her sisters
who leave school when puberty shows up.
This girl can breed and rear
the next generation, teach them
to honour this girl.



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