

CITYtheology

THE MAGAZINE OF THE LEEDS CHURCH INSTITUTE

**WHAT DOES
THEOLOGY LOOK
LIKE IN THE CITY
OF LEEDS?
JESUS WITH LONG
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WHAT DOES THEOLOGY LOOK LIKE IN THE CITY OF LEEDS? JESUS WITH LONG COVID

Revd Dr Ericcson Mapfumo and **Revd Dr Carol Tomlin** of Kingdom School of Theology (Vice Principal and Principal) reflect together on the impact of the pandemic on our theology and mission.

At the heart of theology is our ability to reflect on our experiences and what it means for our communities. This is true especially given the past two years' experiences of Covid-19 and some of the challenges it has brought to our communities. In this article, we focus our attention on the experience of people with Global Majority Heritage (GMH), some of whom, such as undocumented migrants, do not feature in statistics. We thought such an exercise critical in terms of centring our theological attention on issues to do with social justice. The death of George Floyd opened wide the eyes of everyone regarding how the colour of one's skin can be used against people, leading to what others have termed racist attacks and so forth. While the purpose of this article is not to discuss racism, it seeks to use theological reflection as a way to be critical of society, as well as evaluating some of the strategies used by congregations to reach out to those under their care.

As a city, Leeds has lost many people from the Covid-19 pandemic, and during this time people have also died due to other causes as well. This combination of losses has taken a toll on people's mental health and raises concerns about how we cope with sustained negative experiences in our communities.

Additionally, some of us are still suffering from the impact of Long Covid, and with this experience has come shifts in family dynamics in terms of caring for our loved ones and being with them at the most vulnerable point in their life. This has provided us with a different "lens" by which we view life.

People continue to talk of the "new normal" and certainly we have been seeking to adjust from what has been the world as we knew it. A key part of this has been theological reflection on these experiences of Covid-19: of experiencing lockdowns; having to cope with increased pastoral care responsibilities; and dealing with some hard questions.

Such reflection is reminiscent of Musa Dube. She was reflecting from an African context where people were dying of HIV and AIDS, and those who had this disease were seen as outcasts. She theologised that God was HIV positive as well. This was an example of how "theology" can be used as a vehicle to understand society, or the context in which we find ourselves.

The theology we are learning about does not have to remain abstract, or an intellectual enterprise.

Rather we need people who are going to be "interlocutors" of this truth, who will be able to challenge those with power, or encourage the community of faith. This allows us to make a direct link with the city of Leeds and frame the challenges we are facing in the context of "Jesus with Long Covid". With this as our starting point for theological reflection and analysis, we can reflect on how the church and individuals respond if our Saviour had Long Covid.

Bearing in mind that the Church sees itself as the body of Jesus, then in some way we see each of us as a little 'Jesus', and see there is need to find creative ways of meeting people's needs. An example of this in practice is St Aidan's Parish Church in the inner city, which has for many years (pre and post pandemic) been a base for charities such as Positive Action for Refugees & Asylum Seekers (PAFRAS) and Harehills English Language Project (HELP). Despite the challenges migrants continue to face in our society, we are thankful for volunteers who have risen to the challenge to offer help, especially during times of lockdowns.

We need to hold fast to the knowledge that Jesus was also a migrant and that this is important, as in the city of Leeds there are many migrants.

St Aidan's actions through being home to this work

and supporting it, as well as running the Food Pantry, show they have perhaps managed to view Jesus as a “migrant” and have thought through the implications of what this means in practice. This reflection has led them to focus on their actions which have centred on the rights of the migrants, feeding the hungry and homeless, and also looking after their welfare.

In this work, they are alongside organisations which are not affiliated to the church yet the principles of love and care are still universal principles. Take for instance the parable of the Samaritan in Luke 10. It does not make a difference if the Samaritan feared God, the main thing is that he/she cared for the stranger. This is what is at the heart of theology in Leeds: that despite the different beliefs expressed in the city, people from different faiths and no religious faith are coming together for a common cause. The difference that Christians have is that whatever we do, we do it in the name of Jesus, and it is in that name that we have titled this reflection (“Jesus with Long Covid”). This means that our attitude will be framed in the realisation of the importance of what we are doing.

We can also notice that the health and care sector has been the predominant place of employment for migrant GMH residents of Leeds, and it is as if it is here that they find solace and a place of refuge. Moreover, many people who are business owners from this community tend to operate in this sector. To some extent this suggests that they have been successful due to their proximity to the people who are most in need of help, that is, the elderly and those in need of care. For many this is an example of the incarnational gospel, seeing Jesus in people who are vulnerable, and seeking to meet their needs.

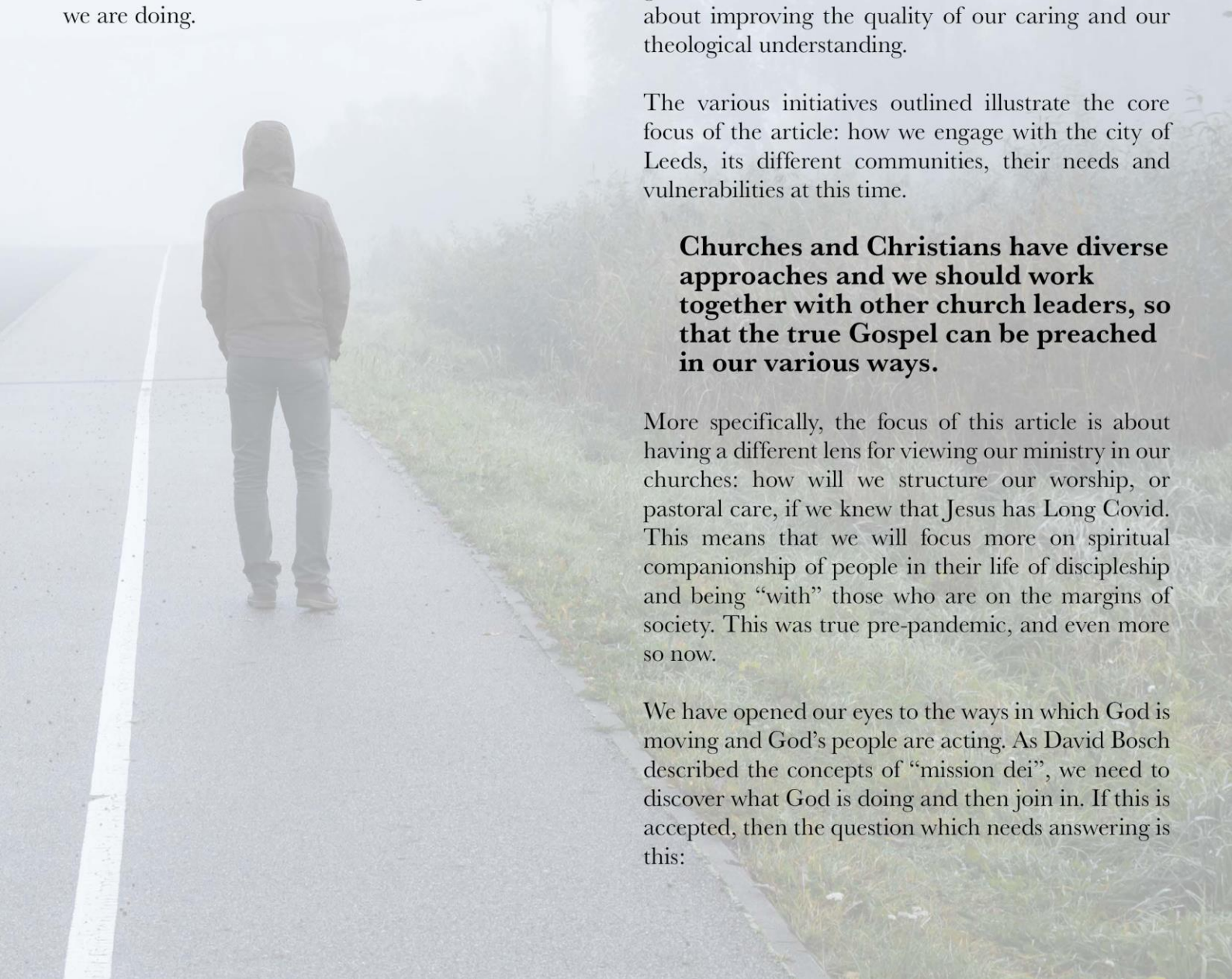
The efforts of some of the GMH churches has been seen in the way that they have been involved in street evangelism in which they proclaim the gospel to bystanders. This takes a lot of courage and is perhaps not something everyone can do. This was hugely impacted by Covid-19 restrictions but is once again becoming a feature of church life and outreach. Clearly, churches express our different personalities and theologies through what we are doing, to ensure that there is growth in the body of Christ. This growth does not have to be numerical, but can also be about improving the quality of our caring and our theological understanding.

The various initiatives outlined illustrate the core focus of the article: how we engage with the city of Leeds, its different communities, their needs and vulnerabilities at this time.

Churches and Christians have diverse approaches and we should work together with other church leaders, so that the true Gospel can be preached in our various ways.

More specifically, the focus of this article is about having a different lens for viewing our ministry in our churches: how will we structure our worship, or pastoral care, if we knew that Jesus has Long Covid. This means that we will focus more on spiritual companionship of people in their life of discipleship and being “with” those who are on the margins of society. This was true pre-pandemic, and even more so now.

We have opened our eyes to the ways in which God is moving and God’s people are acting. As David Bosch described the concepts of “mission dei”, we need to discover what God is doing and then join in. If this is accepted, then the question which needs answering is this:



Where is God when people are dying prematurely; carers are at the limits of what they can cope with; and when the pandemic has put lots of single parent households under strain?

These questions have to continue to be asked since they help us to be attentive to what the Spirit of God is saying in the city of Leeds, taking into account our demographics and social context.

It seems that theology in the city of Leeds has tended to be incarnational, of people coming to be close to those who they want to reach. We can see this from the work of St George's Crypt, of what is happening with Roscoe Methodist Church, of the Church of God of Prophecy, and the Street Pastor initiative. During the pandemic, the shape of ministry and how churches interacted with each other was quite different, and now we are through pandemic restrictions, things have had to keep changing. So there is now need for new imagination of what ministry will be like post Covid-19 lockdowns.

In such a situation what can we do as a church, given that ministry has always been incarnational and about being with those who are in need of our ministry? This poses some challenges, and the solution to this is really about continual reflection on what works in this new context. People are still encountering challenges due to the aftermath of this illness, and scientists are also coming up with different interpretations of the evidence, or symptoms to be on the lookout for.

As has been highlighted in another article of a previous edition of CITYtheology, hybrid church services now seem to be the norm as they meet the needs of different people. Those who can gather with others can meet in person, while those who are not in a position to meet in person can join via social media platforms that we have learnt about during this time. So if ministry in the city is about being with those who are suffering, we should let this further shape how we do theology in our local context. We need to continue to view Jesus as having Long Covid so that we can interpret the experiences of those we are looking after, and meet our calling of love and service in this city.



STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE: STRUGGLE, POVERTY AND THE CHURCH

By Leo Joslin, Member of Leeds Church Institute

“A compassionate and caring city with a strong economy”

These are the first words greeting visitors to the Leeds City Council website. Clicking on the economy section of the site brings up a list of impressive figures and statistics under the claim that Leeds is the fastest growing city in the UK: £7.3 billion of development either under construction

or being planned; 21% economic growth forecast; a £64.6 billion economy as a city region. This shows the image of Leeds the City Council wants to portray, one of a financial and business powerhouse that still looks after its own and is a place of prosperity for citizens as well as corporations.

175,000 people in Leeds live in poverty. 74,000 of those experience in-work poverty. 1 in 4 children live in relative poverty.



Those statistics come from Tom Riordan, Chief Executive of Leeds City Council, in conversation with former Bishop of Liverpool James Jones. Added to the earlier statistics, they give a fuller picture of the lives of the people of Leeds and the challenges faced here.

The conversation with Tom Riordan was one of a series of six podcasts produced for the William Temple Foundation's *Staying with the Trouble*. The podcasts offer a glimpse of the situation Leeds finds itself in. As a city of business, it is racing forward at a frantic pace, but as a city of people, many are separated from economic success. The six-part podcast series invited guests, ranging from clergy to activists, to discuss what 'Staying with the Trouble' means to them and how they see struggle in Leeds. The theme that emerges from most conversation is that poverty is the trouble.

Poverty is first and foremost a lack of the material and economic goods needed for someone to survive and flourish, but there are further and deeper aspects. Podcast guests speak of the isolation of poverty.

Poverty separates people from community and forces them to withdraw from wider life. Moreover, it can suppress their ability to express and explore themselves spiritually, meaning that people can be poor in spirit as well.

Such isolation and spiritual suppression needs to be considered at a societal level as well as the personal. It is not simply the responsibility of individuals to challenge this, but also wider society and its institutions. As the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez said, "poverty is not caused by fate; it is caused by the actions of those whom the prophet condemns".

Bad luck does not cause poverty but rather the current and created system which allows bad luck to lead to poverty is the cause. We have a neo-liberal and capitalist economy that values profit over people, and does not care if people are separated from their communities and slip into poverty. In fact, the system relies on this happening because it uses low wages, lack of means and societal division as its path to constant growth.



The Church – not as an institution but as the community of Christians – should care deeply that there are large chunks of people living in poverty and isolation. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it”. And so on a larger scale, if people in our city are living under the oppression of poverty, then we all suffer. We cannot call our communities, whether they are secular or Church, true and complete if neighbours are living in poverty.

The same goes for racism, which Carol Tomlin and Jamie-Jones Buchanan raise in the podcast series. Just as those in poverty are oppressed and marginalised at a systemic level, so are those who experience racism as a result of our white-centred society.

Just as we cannot be a community if members are isolated by poverty, we cannot be a community if members are isolated by racial discrimination.

James Cone, a pioneer of Black Theology, highlights the common struggle against oppression, be it by poverty or discrimination, as central to faith: “No one can be truly liberated until all are liberated”.

One has to ask if the Church – both as the body of believers and an institution – is doing everything within its power to bring about a true community, where all are free from oppression by the other. Or, are we so deeply entrenched in a neo-liberal worldview, of individuals rather than communities, that we no longer see ourselves as suffering when someone else is. Challenging oppression should be at the core of everything we do, in order to move beyond the contemporary system based on self-love and move to a new one based on mutual love.

To remain quiet or reserved regarding oppression merely sides with the system that oppresses and withholds the voice from the voiceless.

This may seem radical to some, but it is central to our faith and work. To quote Gutiérrez again, the presence of poverty is “incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of love and justice”. It is the mission of the Church to move towards the Kingdom, and as long as there are those in our city who are isolated from the rest – whether through poverty, racism or other marginalisation – that mission has stalled.

If you would like to listen to all the podcasts from the *Staying with the Trouble* series, please visit www.lcileeds.org/podcasts or you can listen on YouTube @Leeds Church Institute, LCI.

On a related theme, the Hook Lecture 2022 will be delivered by Revd. Professor Chris Baker, Director of the William Temple Foundation. Chris will be speaking on:

Partnerships for Real Change: Harnessing political and spiritual yearning in an age of uncertainty

You can attend the Lecture at Leeds Minster, Leeds, LS2 7DJ on 2nd November at 7:30pm or watch it live streamed on Facebook and YouTube. To book, please visit: www.LCILEeds.org



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THE WAY
UP IS
DOWN



In 2021, during the UK's third national lockdown, Hungarian artist **Leon Varga** was the recipient of a small bursary, awarded to him by Leeds Church Institute.

The Way Up Is Down is the product of that bursary - a kinetic sculptural installation which explores some of the ways in which our lived experience of the Covid pandemic has changed what Leon refers to as "the spatial architecture of our social interactions".

It is a work that invites us to reflect upon themes of absence and loss, and the ways in which family can both connect us to the past and elevate us into our future.

Si Smith is a Leeds-based artist, illustrator and curator, and he has been working alongside LCI and Leon throughout the bursary, to bring the project to fruition. CITYtheology asked him to reflect on Leon's sculpture for us.

Early in the bursary process, Leon told me that the work he was making would be about the way that the Covid pandemic had changed our perceptions of Time and Space.

That was intriguing, and clearly full of interesting possibilities, but my first real inkling of what he was constructing came during a workshop visit last summer, when I walked in to find the six long-case clocks that now form part of the finished sculpture standing arranged in a 2x3 grid on his studio floor.

These time pieces were all made in the 1920s and 30s and came from the homes of people who had died during the pandemic. They were donated by families who had no space for them.

They are made in a style that no longer fits; they're not fashionable now, analogue machines living in a digital world. Nobody really wants or needs them anymore, so, ironically, they're objects out of time.

Ordinarily, clocks like these are stoically solitary things – a home would rarely host more than one clock of this sort, so seeing them stood together in community was strangely poignant.

Their rigid and regular arrangement in the workshop spoke of social distancing and the lockdown-enforced formalities of the pandemic – of Time and of Space. Walking amongst them, I was reminded of drone footage of eerily empty city streets filmed during lockdown.

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As I've spent more time with the work I've developed a real affinity for these clocks.

They stand as representatives of their departed owners, and as such it's hard not to anthropomorphise them, and that's an idea which is present in the language we use around them; they have hands, and faces. They are grandfather, grandmother and grand-daughter clocks.

They speak to us of the hierarchies, continuities and absences that are inherent in our experience of family.

Meanwhile, each clock has its own little quirks and idiosyncrasies; its own individual personality.

Whilst none of them are still operational – one has even lost its hands – two of the clocks still have working chimes. With the smaller of these two, the tolling is inconsistent – sometimes it will emit a little cascading peal, other times it's resolutely silent. Whereas the larger clock is much more vocal – it chunters and grumbles as we've shifted it around during installs. It sings and chatters and clangs when people use or move the art piece.

There's a weight to these clocks – a physical heft, but there's also a weight in the meanings that they carry. But there's a joyfulness too, a sense of celebration. During the exhibition launch at Left Bank, someone told me that upon his retirement, their father had been gifted a clock just like one of these.

And in their own way, these unwanted heirlooms are now retired too – and in this artwork they have been gifted a life after their owners' deaths; repurposed, resurrected.

I've begun to feel quite protective of them – moving them from venue to venue has felt a bit like taking the old folk out on a day trip.

And when we brought them out onto the lawn before installation within Left Bank, I realised that these objects had spent their entire careers indoors. There was a delight in seeing them basking outside in the sunshine.

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Leon has mounted the timepieces onto three seesaws, which tilt to shift the clocks off their axis.

In making this work, Leon was particularly interested in the way that the pandemic has messed with our sense of time.

In lockdown – with routines on hold, events cancelled and no gatherings to mark the passage of the days and months – our perceptions of time were challenged. This idea of temporal disconnect is present in the piece – as we use the seesaws, time literally looms oppressively over us, but then in turn we rise above it.

Sitting on the seesaw and looking straight down the length of the seesaw's beam the clocks appear correct

and perpendicular – but then when you shift your point of view even slightly you have to engage with the strange visual dissonance of seeing these upright artefacts hanging angled in space. It's oddly disconcerting.

And then there's a little euphoric moment when you use this artwork – at the top of the upward swing and just before you fall back down, for a split second you're weightless, suspended in a tiny instant outside of time before gravity pulls you back down to earth.

For me, it's a throwback to something that I knew as a child; a sensation lost or forgotten or just misplaced, an ever-so-slightly giddy moment of playful abandon; an exhilarating defiance of the grown-up laws of gravity.

*

In deciding to build seesaws, Leon is referencing the rigid space that Covid regulations imposed between us.

The beams of the seesaws hold us apart, they fix us at a specified distance from each other and hold us there.



These mounted clocks obscure participants' views of each other; but still, this is a piece that only functions when we co-operate. It conspires to keep us separate and disconnected but together we make it work.

With that in mind, it's been interesting seeing how people interact with this artwork.

Some people are hesitant and reticent throughout; for most though, the experience begins tentatively, and as they gain confidence and relax into it, a rhythm is established, a balance is worked out. If you can trust yourself to the rise and fall, you can lose yourself in it for a short while.

*

The seats fixed at either end of each seesaw beam are repurposed from old church chairs. Sourced from a church in Dewsbury, they still carry plaques commemorating dead parishioners.

On a couple of the seats those plaques are missing – only their screw holes and a faint outline remain – again there's a theme of absence and loss.

When I spoke with Leon about these seats, he told me that he hoped that they might evoke a reflective response – they reference the act of kneeling to pray in church.

Interestingly, we also talked about the symbolism of the crosses which are cut into the back of each seat. In the context of this work, that's been potentially problematic – the Cross is a symbol which carries such weight, such a legacy of meaning and also misappropriation, that it can easily overpower all other readings of an artwork like this and get in the way of people's engagement with it.

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The materiality of **The Way Up Is Down** is interesting – there's a fascinating dialogue there, between the harsh and functional construction of the workshop-fabricated seesaw mechanism (bolts, welding, steel) and the softer and more decorative elements present in the repurposed seats and clocks (in the wood of those reclaimed items you can see their history – scratches, stains, blemishes; their lifetime of use elsewhere.)

Unlike most artworks, this is a piece that is made to be touched – to be sat on and used. In Leon's studio space in Armley there are some works painted in ink on canvases primed with marble dust – they're tactile

and he wants you to feel the surfaces of the things that he makes. Even Leon's paintings are sculptures.

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For a long time, I didn't know what this work was going to be called. My recollection is that it had at least a couple of working titles before Leon settled on The Way Up Is Down. From a faith perspective, it's a title that connects to the deliberate contrariness of many of Christ's teachings – all our preconceptions turned on their heads. It's quite beatitudinal.

And it's a very appropriate title for a work that asks us to dwell in many of the contradictions and paradoxes of our everyday lives, and which speaks to the confusion of the past few years and the heightened emotional states that many of us experienced through the pandemic.



In conclusion then, **The Way Up Is Down** is a rich and beautifully conceived artwork, which really rewards the time that you spend with it. It invites both playfulness and reflection, it is sombre and joyful – it invites us to sit with these contradictions, and to think about where we find balance.

We welcome your reaction to the exhibition, whether you attended in person or from anything you have seen or heard about the piece. You can share your comments either on our social media channels or by sending an email to Bronagh Daly, our new 'Faith and Creativity Lead' creativity@leedschurchinstitute.org



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Helen Reid, Director of Leeds Church Institute, asks for feedback on CITYtheology

Leeds Church Institute has been producing CITYtheology for eight years with the aim of stimulating theological thinking on issues affecting Leeds. It seeks to resource diverse Christians in their engagement with city life as we live faithfully, seeking justice and living relationally.

CITYtheology is a platform for local voices and includes a wide range of contributors. Contributors are encouraged to address questions rather than provide answers, to apply their thinking and learning directly to Leeds, and aim to inspire and resource readers to reflect and act. This means when you read it, you are part of a wider community with a commitment to 'learning for a faithful city'.

It is helpful when we hear from readers about articles or the magazine as a whole, and proposals for articles are also welcomed. Please do send in feedback or ideas to director@leedschurchinstitute.org. I would be delighted to hear from you.



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