CITYtheology MAGAZINE OF LEEDS CHURCH INSTITUTE

ART AS SUSTENANCE

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS



BOOK REVIEW: THE CROSS AND THE OLIVE TREE IN GOOD FAITH

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Welcome to CITYtheology

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The theme running through this issue of CITYtheology is one of finding beauty, compassion, and hope in the darkest of times.

Alex Evans explores how Leeds Christians are non-violently resisting the rise of the far-right. Where some have responded with loud counter-protests, others choose the route of quiet but active peacemaking – seeking common humanity by sharing cake and conversation.

Sonia Kasibante shares how the beauty of art creates space for inner healing and peace in Leeds hospitals, where her role as chaplain has brought her into the paths of people during the most heartbreaking times of life.





This feels like an appropriate theme as we approach the Christmas season. The light of the world arrives in a borrowed cave among noisy livestock, through the pains and chaos of a labour far from home.

These reflections encourage us to look for the light in the darkest of shadows – not out of naive optimism, but in earnest hope of discovering again the gift of God with us.

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Blessed are the peacemakers





Alex Evans is executive director of Larger Us and author of The Good Apocalypse Guide on Substack.

'Christian nationalism' has arrived in the UK. Tommy Robinson's 'Unite the Kingdom' march had lots of crosses on display and recited the Lord's Prayer. Robinson himself claims to have been "led to Christ" in prison. The defection of Danny Kruger MP to Reform, meanwhile, will bring an overtly Christian tenor to a party that plans to deport the best part of a million people. All this raises big questions for Christians who feel deep unease about the increasing politicisation of our faith.

But there's also a more hopeful story here. Because churches and the people who belong to them are uniquely well placed to respond not just to the emergence of Christian nationalism in the UK, but also, more broadly, to wider trends of populism and division.

Churches have a clear mandate to speak to issues of identity and conflict, after all, at a point when we urgently need storytellers who can help bring us together.

They have vast reach: with nearly 5m members, they're effectively the UK's second largest membership body. They have on the ground presence all over the UK, including in places where tension is spiking. And they have an overriding concern for encounter, reconciliation, and welcoming the stranger — at a point when political division makes this more important than ever.

The them-and-us playbook

If you watch divisive leaders like Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, or Vladimir Putin, or extremist groups like the Proud Boys or the English Defence League, you soon notice that they all use the same 'them-and-us' playbook, which:



This playbook has real psychological depth. It speaks to existential fears during a time of interlocking crises, to our need to belong and our tendency to retreat into in-groups when we feel threatened, and to the fact that we make sense of the world primarily through stories.

So how can we counter it? Try flipping it on its head. Imagine if more of us were able to:

1. Steady ourselves in the face of things we find threatening, so that we can make conscious choices about how to respond rather than lurching automatically into fight-flight-freeze. 2. Feel like we belong and are valued in spite of our shortcomings, resist scapegoating by recognising what we share in spite of the things that make us different, and bridge divides through the power of curiosity and encounter. 3. Grieve for experiences of shared loss rather than seeing them as a source of grievance, and find agency, purpose, and hope amid the loss. 4. Share deep stories of who we are, where we are and where we're going, that help us expand how far our compassion extends and lean into connection, hope, and joy.

Across all four of these areas, churches and church groups have a potentially vital role.

Steadying ourselves

Tending to our mental and emotional states can seem like a luxury at a point when it seems like everything's on fire. It's not. What goes on in our heads is the front line of polarisation and populism — and as we keep seeing, it's the hard right who understand this best.

Being able to make conscious decisions about how to respond to things that make us feel anxious or scared is ground zero for building resilience in polarised times — resilience not only to overwhelm, burnout, and compassion fatigue, but also to scapegoating and othering.

This is a skill that can be learned. It's routinely trained for in emergency responders, for example – essentially through meditation techniques. Want to know who's been practising this skill longer than anyone in our society? Churches. From Celtic island monasteries in the 5th century, up to today.

Contemplative Christianity is a treasure trove of techniques for steadying ourselves, whether through formal approaches like centring prayer, or through creating spaces where people can fall silent together. It's also clear that there's huge appetite for it today, as seen for instance in the immense popularity of Christian contemplatives like Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, or Thomas Keating.

Which makes it all the more puzzling that contemplative approaches can be quite hard to find on the ground, in parishes. But if churches decided to change that, then they'd be making a big contribution not only to our peace of mind, but also to the peace of our societies.

Building belonging, bridging divides

Churches are by definition supposed to be places where all of us are welcome in spite of our shortcomings, and where we're invited to recognise that we have more in common than that which divides us — both factors that matter more than ever amid our so-called culture wars.

And their emphasis on encounter, reconciliation and peacebuilding also makes them uniquely well placed to do the work of building bridges to

people who are at risk of drifting towards the hard right, and using curious conversations to subvert and defuse the scapegoating dynamics that can draw people into extremism.

This is exactly what's been happening in the Seacroft area of Leeds, where a hotel housing asylum seekers has become the site of weekly protests and counter-protests. People from local churches, with leaders including Revd Anne Russell, Revd Heston Groenewald, and Bishop Arun Arora, have started showing up with cake to talk to people on both sides to make them feel heard, and help to dial down the temperature and build empathy.



By staying in relationship with everyone and refusing to 'other' anyone, they're doing something subversive, transformational and wholly in line with Christian teachings: which is trying to end culture wars rather than win them. It's politically vital and spiritually inspiring work, and an approach that has the potential to be replicated much more widely.

Grieving shared loss

Experiences of shared loss can easily become the basis of tribal group identity, especially when manipulated by political leaders who excel at funnelling people along the 'grief to grievance pipeline': just look at Donald Trump's narrative of 'Make America Great Again'.

Psychiatrist and conflict mediator Vamik Volkan argues that the way to prevent this is through collective mourning for shared loss, whether in communities (dying industries, closed down high streets, the effects of drugs and crime) or whole nations (as when people feel a deep sense of national decline or loss of status).

Few political or civil society leaders are willing or able to talk about grief. But when space is made for grief, it can be extraordinarily powerful.

And churches are well placed to do this kind of work, if they want to.

They have profound experience of lamentation — the Bible includes a Book of Lamentations, after all — and as the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann observed, lament is, along with confronting reality and maintaining hope for the future, one of three essential prophetic tasks during times of crisis and upheaval.

Sharing deep stories

Finally, what about churches' role in providing deep stories that can help us to find our way during times of crisis and upheaval?

Part of the reason the hard right has been able to flourish is our contemporary lack of deep shared stories, which has left the way open for extremists to fill the void with darkly resonant narratives of them-and-us.

But churches are well placed to do something about this. To start with, they have a key role in contesting Christian nationalism. The open letter by church leaders earlier this year (Rowan Williams, numerous Church of England bishops, and senior Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Evangelical leaders), which criticised the "misuse" of Christian symbols at the Unite the Kingdom march, is a great start — especially its clear statement that:



The cross is the ultimate sign of sacrifice for the other. Jesus calls us to love both our neighbours and our enemies and to welcome the stranger. Any co-opting or corrupting of the Christian faith to exclude others is unacceptable.



Christian theology also has much to say about all of the themes explored above — steadying ourselves, bridging divides, grieving loss. Above all, there's the explicit emphasis on welcoming and loving the stranger, particularly in the story of the Good Samaritan — a parable that Pope Francis drew on to correct JD Vance's invocation of the theological idea of 'Ordo Amoris' as an argument against welcoming refugees.

In England's green and pleasant land

Church groups have much to contribute right now, whether on helping us to steady ourselves, encouraging us to bridge divides, supporting us as we grieve shared loss, or offering deep stories. In some areas, above all contesting the Christian nationalists' interpretation of theology, they

may be the only ones that can do it.

There are already bright spots, like the uplifting bridge building work taking place in Leeds. But there's also so much more that churches all over the country could do. It's a big moment for us. I hope we step up.



Bishop Arun, church leaders, and Christians in Leeds offer cakes to protestors in Seacroft

Art As Sustenance

Revd Sonia Kasibante served as Trust Chaplain at the Leeds Teaching Hospitals from January 2020 to August 2025. She is now vicar at St Martin's Church Potternewton and All Souls' Blackman Lane.



I am writing this piece in the middle of August, two weeks before I finish my role as chaplain at the Leeds Teaching Hospitals. As the news of my appointment as vicar spread, someone at church said to me this morning, "You're brave, going back into the parish." Later, as I related the conversation to a companion, their response was, "And does that person think that chaplaincy is easy then?" Perhaps it is not what the person at church meant,

but this has taken me back to the beginning of my time as chaplain, just over five and a half years ago.

As I embarked on my stint as a hospital chaplain, I found that there seemed to be a common belief among my fellow clergy that chaplaincy was the "easy option".

It has truly baffled me throughout this time that anyone could believe this and could engage in constructing some kind of hierarchy of ministry. Our gospels and the letters of the New Testament have thoroughly addressed this issue.

There is an intensity to ministry as a hospital chaplain that, arguably, cannot be understood unless you are immersed in it.

Chaplains are there for patients, visitors and staff, so it is not unusual for a chaplain to attend to a sad and shocking loss of, say, a baby and on the way back to the office, stop to hear the latest news which may be good or bad from a member of staff, or to summon a smile for a visitor when the said chaplain is feeling heartbroken and close to tears. It is not uncommon for a chaplain to have a substantial list of patients to see, all of whom wish to engage in deep talk of suffering, one after another, all in a day. Chaplaincy also

provides an overnight on-call service for emergencies and so it is not uncommon for a chaplain to work a full day and have several calls overnight after which the chaplain reports for another day at work at 8am the following day. No, chaplaincy is not the "easy option." It is, rather, a privilege and a blessing for the church to have a presence in this most diverse place, where profound questions about life and death are wrestled with daily.

This blessed option has served to open my eyes to the way God's gracious gifts are used to sustain those who find themselves in the hospitals for one reason or another. It would be entirely fair if what comes to mind immediately when we speak of gifts in the hospitals, are the gifts of care from the nursing staff, the gifts of doctors and surgeons, the gifts of cooks and cleaners and porters, the gifts of physiotherapists and occupational therapists, the gifts of psychologists and social workers, the gifts of pharmacists and laboratory technicians, the gifts of ward clerks and many other staff who keep the hospitals ticking over seven days a week, 24/7. These are all acknowledged.

Here, in this piece, however, I wish to highlight the gift of art in its many forms: paintings, pictures, sculptures, gardening, music and poetry.

That Which Is Given

It has been said that when ordinary human language falls short of expressing what we feel, we turn to art.

This is why a piece of music can move us to tears, why we say, "A picture speaks a thousand words", why a painting can keep us transfixed for ages, why a poem can simultaneously mystify and penetrate the depths of our being. The folk responsible for designing, building and decorating hospitals in our culture must have long recognised the power of art to express, inspire and heal. A few years ago, at the Hepworth Gallery I spotted this insightful note, "In 1953 Hepworth gave a lecture to a group of surgeons in which she outlined a connection between the work of doctors and artists:

The medical profession...seeks to restore and maintain the beauty and grace of the human mind and body;...The artist, in his sphere, seeks to make concrete ideas of beauty which are spiritually affirmative, and which, if he succeeds, become a link in the long chain of human endeavour which enriches man's vitality and understanding, helping him to surmount his difficulties and gain a deeper respect for life.'1

Here in Leeds, you cannot miss works of art all around the hospitals. Walk along the long corridors of the Leeds General Infirmary (LGI) and you will see a variety of exhibits: paintings of local buildings, floral depictions, fabric collages, portraits of people who have been involved in development or have benefited from treatment, wall paintings of sea creatures, extinct, fabled and fun creatures. Waiting for a lift in the same hospital on most of the levels, you will be treated to some fascinating mirror images on the floor and ceiling that can lift a person outside oneself to the universe of stars, sun and beyond.

Just recently, a patient excitedly pointed to a picture above her bed. "Look!" she said, "That's

near where I live!" She could hardly believe the coincidence one that brought joy that shone in her face. It was a demonstration of how art made a difference to an individual who found herself in an alien environment where many feel disoriented, frightened and sad. St Luke's Chapel has a particularly special place at the heart of the hospital, drawing a steady stream of visitors who cover the prayer tree with their prayer cards. The Chapel is often identified as a place of peace and calm, an oasis, at the centre of what can be, for many, a very difficult place to be. With its stained-glass windows portraying aspects of Christ's healing ministry and aspects of his life, its walls soaked in prayers of many generations, the gift of another place that speaks through the beauty of its art is truly a blessing for all who use it on behalf of themselves and others.

There is much more to see around the LGI as well as at St James' Hospital (Jimmy's) and Chapel Allerton Hospital (CAH) – too much to cover in this piece. However, I cannot not mention, however briefly, some more of the incredible artwork. At Jimmy's, note the regular

exhibitions from local artists. and the regular presence of a pianist in the Bexley Wing Atrium, the memory walk and gardens around the historic Workhouse Chapel, and developing gardens, sponsored by the RHS around the Trust Headquarters - all in aid of contributing towards the wellbeing of all who come to the hospital - patients, staff and visitors. At CAH, a garden transplanted from the Chelsea Flower Show has been added with stroke patients in mind and as I write other gardens are being developed on site as well. The art of gardens and gardening, and their place in wellbeing and healing are now a firm fixture at the heart of our hospitals.

What Chaplains Offer

Of course, where possible, we make use of all the above-mentioned gifts. But our unique contributions include music, pictures, and poetry (including prayer). Chaplaincy regularly facilitates visiting choirs at Christmas, and it is very moving to observe the positive effects on both staff and patients as people's demeanours are transformed before our eyes as they hear a

choir singing carols. I have also sung for and with patients at the bedside, hymns and worship songs when these are known to lift their spirits. (Though it might be a stretch to call my singing art!)

Significantly, I have found myself using the poetry of the Psalms more than I ever have – both as an offering that speaks into the situation and in response to direct requests.

I recall a few years ago, sitting with someone approaching the end of her life for whom the Psalms made it all bearable. As I finished reading one, she'd say, "Read me another". I read from the Psalms for three hours as we waited for someone to arrive.

I have often found that a chaplaincy card offered opens up a good conversation, and brings the beauty of the outside world into a sterile or alien space. The cards bear pictures of beautiful scenery or a flower, and sometimes also include a poem or prayer. The pictures

facilitate recollection of gardens, or memories from another time, while prayers remind people of their faith whether that be strong, residual, something they are struggling with or something they feel they've lost. Conversations may be brief and light or long and very deep. Arguably, more than anywhere else, the deepest conversations of people's lives and their faith happen in hospital, when confronted with illness, particularly serious illness.

What We Receive

I can tell you that patients have made their own offerings in return - of artwork in the Bexley Wing Atrium, of music on the wards - there was one who brought her guitar in at Christmas, another who brought her ukelele and played for us, and yet another who shared gospel music from YouTube that was special to him. And then there was one who wrote copious amounts of poetry, beautiful verses, affirming everyone around her and changing lives. Here are a couple, included with her permission.

The Quiet Guardians by Essoung Sandrine

The Imaging Team, so patient and strong, Capturing life in each sound of my song. With steady hands and hearts so kind, they bring clarity when answers are hard to find. Through x-rays, scans, and gentle light, they reveal the truth, dispelling the night. With every image, every view, they guide the way with what's so true. No dancers, no tricks, just skill and care, they've given me answers, beyond compare. In quiet rooms where shadows may fall, The Imaging Team answers the call.

Merci pour votre cœur si grand, Votre amour, un cadeau éclatant.



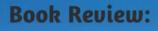
The Daughters of Sion: A Prayerful Embrace by Essoung Sandrine

The Chaplains, in gentle prayer, Whisper peace upon the breath of air. Their presence soft, yet deeply profound, Faith a balm when fear resounds. With hearts of mercy, hands that heal, they guide with love, with faith, with zeal. In shadows deep where hope may sway, the daughters of Sion stand, lighting the way. Like Christ, their Master, ever near, their prayers, like whispers, quell all fear. Even in absence, their love endures, in sacred silence, their grace ensures. Their hearts, a river of boundless care, a beacon of faith, beyond compare. Les urais disciples de lésus Christ, Au service d'une nation, in love's light. May the Lord bestow grace ever more, and favor upon them, as hearts implore. Their hearts guide us, through night and day, in their light, our spirits find their wau.

Merci pour votre cœur si grand, Votre amour, un cadeau éclatant.

No, I cannot put into words all that I have received in my experience as a hospital chaplain. Maybe one day I will paint a picture or write a poem. For now, I say, "Thanks be to God for the gift of art with its power to give expression, to sustain and to encourage in the toughest of circumstances."

¹This note was beside 'Prelude I, 1948 – Oil and pencil on gesso ground board' which was part of a series of Hospital Drawings by Barbara Hepworth at the Hepworth Gallery, Wakefield, lent by Birmingham Museums Trust on behalf of Birmingham City Council



The Cross and the Olive Tree

John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer

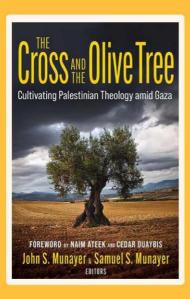
Reviewed by Kathy Shaw, Project Manager at SPARK Social Justice. Working in the voluntary sector for the last forty years, Kathy is enjoying combining her passion for social justice in a faith-based organisation.



The Cross and the Olive Tree is a slim volume, which boldly tackles the armed conflict in Gaza through a collection of eight essays by young Palestinian Christians. These reflect on themes of identity, resistance and solidarity and how this shapes Palestinian liberation theology. A perceptive introduction from

the editors Samuel Munayer and his brother John describe a spirituality that transcends the self and is rooted in community, a 'communal covenant', connected to the land and to God. The theology offered by the writers deliberately moves away from the academic, using language and insight to expose Western

Christians to Palestinian heritage and voices. Their final chapter places martyrdom at the heart of Palestinian theological reflection.



The deep Christian history in Gaza is described as a microcosm of the broader Palestinian struggle, calling us to recognise 'how the biblical justification for forced displacement has uprooted their theological foundations' and threatens the very survival of Christianity in these territories. Overall, these essays challenge Western concepts of reconciliation and Palestinian ideals of uncompromising justice. The book is inspired by other

liberation theologies, acknowledging the uncomfortable truths of white supremacy and how postcolonial Christian theology must return to scripture if it is to stand in solidarity with the oppressed.

Perhaps the question this poses is whether people of faith have moral duties beyond the tradition of speaking truth to power, especially when it is evident that those in power know the truth, but choose to ignore it.

For me, the chapters written from a feminist and womanist tradition particularly resonate. The stories of grandmothers, teitas in Arabic, introduced storytellers carrying their oral history of faith and family values. Teitas faith rejects passivity, describing 'faith that inspires action and action that is fuelled by faith'. Marah Sarji looks at the interconnections of gendered and sexual violence reported in places of displacement, aid centres and in conflict zones. In Palestine,

silence is exacerbated by a patriarchal culture and the legal impunity given to perpetrators. As a result, women's testimonies are rarely communicated in public, but in private they reflect a deep awareness of their vulnerability. Lamma Mansour writes in the final months of 2024, when the scale of destruction in Gaza is beyond comprehension. Using imagination to reclaim a vision of the possible, she asks, 'In a Christ centred imagination, how would the Lord's Prayer "Your kingdom come, your will be done" materialise in the context of Israel-Palestine." From this perspective, the author highlights the humanising capacity of imagination as a catalyst for change.

There is space for further insights on the failures of theology in the face of the war on Gaza, and the implications for the research of religion in general from a postcolonial perspective. This is particularly relevant when the current peace proposals potentially

offer a continuation of Western colonial practices through indirect means.

These testimonies from diverse perspectives compel the reader to be engaged and see theology as a transformative force, rather than an abstract or academic concept.

We are asked to find hope in Christ's victory over injustice; 'resurrection, love and compassion are more enduring than injustice and bigotry'. If we are to believe that peace and reconciliation are achievable, then the final message of The Cross and the Olive Tree is one of connection; 'their witness will endure, a courageous declaration that life, truth and liberation triumph even in the shadow of death.'



It is good practice for all organisations to review their mission and vision. This is no less true for LCI and, during 2025, we have been thinking afresh about our purpose and priorities. We have been assisted in this by David Saint from the organisation Action Planning. David has worked with both staff and Trustees to keep us focused on what matters and where LCI should be heading. When it has been needed, David has also been gently determined in pushing us off the fence!

The results have been received and agreed by the LCI Trustees in a meeting held on 12 November. The following summarises the expression of our current commitments:

Vision

Our vision is that the churches of Leeds will be increasingly confident and courageous in their ministry and mission, contributing to a just and compassionate city.

Mission

Our mission is to provide theological support and resources, working in dialogue and partnership with churches, to embolden their people to live out faith in a thoughtful and effective way.

Values

Dignity

In everything we do, we seek to honour the diverse expressions of God's image in everyone

Justice

We seek the common good and work towards a city where all can flourish

Service

We work in partnership with churches and in dialogue with the needs of the city

Faith

All our work is inspired by the God of justice who creates us, calls us, and sustains us

The new vision and mission reflect our founding purpose and the ways in which LCI was tasked to provide its services. This year in particular, on the 150th anniversary of his death, we have revisited the legacy of Revd Walter Hook, who took seriously the call of his faith to advocate for social reform and to build a city where all could thrive in a rapidly changing world.

The new strategy will draw on models of practice linked to liberation theology. LCI will walk beside different churches and seek to understand how best our resources can be used to develop theologies that lead to a more just and compassionate society. By building stronger relationships with church communities, we hope to ensure that LCI is more closely aware of the

needs and concerns of Christians in the city.

This work of supporting churches in Leeds will require a new way of operating – now that the Trustees have agreed this mission and its associated values, a strategy is being created to use LCI's resources effectively in delivering the Trustees' vision.

While it isn't possible to go into all the details of this ahead of the Trustees' decision, the planned outcomes will be an LCI more directly connected to churches; resources shaped and shared through our parish links; and different churches meeting together to discuss and debate issues of common concern.

We are placing the churches of Leeds at the centre of our approach. We hope that this approach to partnership working will maintain the vision of our founder and enable opportunities for learning and development to be available for Christians across the city.

Stay in touch for all the latest news and events:

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