

## **Integrating creation care into mission planning in a post-Covid urban setting**

by

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This paper will explore some of the ways in which creation care might be integrated into the mission planning of local churches in a post-Covid world. It will focus on the issues that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed for urban and suburban communities, both negative, for example inequalities in access to nature and green spaces, and positive, such as an increased awareness of the wildlife on our doorsteps. The pause provided by the pandemic gives churches time to refocus and rethink their mission plans and the ways in which they can most usefully show the love of God to their communities; as James Jones puts it, ‘Local mission is the earthing of heaven locally.’<sup>1</sup> If Christianity speaks into culture, times and places then a post-Covid future will be a new context for mission, a new context into which to earth heaven locally. This paper will ask what that context looks like, how, in practical terms, the Kingdom of God might be earthed locally, and suggests two frameworks that churches might use to integrate creation care with Covid-19 learnings and holistic mission.

### **Integrated mission**

Integrated mission seeks to place creation care within the whole mission of the church, rather than seeing it as a stand-alone project. One model for integrated mission is the Anglican Church’s Five Marks of Mission. The fifth Mark, “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth” is the Mark concerned with creation care. It sits alongside Marks which call for the church to proclaim the Gospel, to nurture new believers, to respond to human need and to seek to transform unjust structures of society. The authors of *Mission in the 21st Century. Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* helpfully identify three Biblical commissions or commandments from which the Marks could be said to spring.<sup>2</sup> These are the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) which covers Marks 1 and 2 through the command to make disciples, baptise and teach; the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40) where the call to love our neighbours is set



*Noticing nature - spring*

alongside the command to love God, and this can be seen reflected in Marks 3 and 4; and what has been called the ‘first Great Commission’, Genesis 1:26-28, which is a call to look after the Earth and its creatures. Christians looking to connect the fifth Mark with Christ may also find Colossians 1:15-23 helpful, speaking as it does of all things being created for Christ and through Christ (v16) and, that “in him all things hold together” (v17). An integrated vision of mission therefore draws on the whole Bible. The Marks of Mission bring together different elements of Biblical teaching and, as Dave Bookless writes, “if we emphasise only one or two of these, we will always present a less than complete gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Covid-19**

Churches seeking to present a complete gospel do not do this in a vacuum but do so in particular places at particular times. There are three issues that were thrown into relief by the Covid-19 pandemic that are worth exploring in the context of English urban and suburban mission.

Firstly, the pandemic brought into focus the stark inequalities in access to green spaces. Studies showed that there was a clear link between poor access and economic deprivation. Links were also found between ethnicity and access to green space.<sup>4</sup> This lack of access has a knock on effect on people’s physical and mental health, their ability to connect to creation and the likelihood of them showing pro-conservation or pro-environmental behaviours.<sup>5</sup>

A second result was an increased awareness of the impacts of human activity. This included litter (including PPE), crowding in popular parks and beauty spots, traffic pollution, noise pollution (for example from flight paths and roads with high traffic volumes), and the impact on farmland and emerging wild flowers when winter mud made designated paths difficult to use.<sup>6</sup>



*Noticing nature - winter*

Thirdly, there was an increased awareness of the nature on our doorsteps. Research by CPRE, the countryside charity, and the WI showed that two thirds of respondents thought that protecting and enhancing green spaces should be a higher priority for the government after lockdown.<sup>7</sup> While travel was restricted many people found new walks close to home and paid closer attention to the changing of the seasons and the wildlife they saw.

Many of the issues raised here are not new, but have been brought into sharper focus by recent events. Paul Ede, writing on urban eco-mission in 2013, recognised the link between poverty and a lack of access to green space as an issue of injustice: “This disconnection from nature is a rarely discussed but significant index of deprivation that affects our poorest communities”.<sup>8</sup>

## Case study: A Rocha UK, Southall - London<sup>9</sup>

The transformation of a derelict wasteland into Minet Country Park was a practical project started by A Rocha UK in the early 2000s. An economically deprived and culturally diverse area was suffering from a lack of green space, clean air and chances for people and nature to interact. Dave Bookless cites a lack of connection to land, the seasons and God's creation as leading to "both psychological and spiritual poverty" in the area. Renewing and transforming the environment and the community went hand in hand. Environmental education, practical conservation and community projects were developed, with A Rocha UK working in partnership with other community and faith groups. The park became a symbol of hope, giving local people more confidence in what they could achieve. The building of strong relationships, the prayerful and practical support of local churches and the signs of ecological renewal are all part of an integrated mission which has provided glimpses of a Christian vision of the Kingdom to the community.



*Minet Country Park, Southall, in 2003<sup>9</sup>*

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A Rocha UK have noted that lockdown showed "the injustice that so many people in poorer urban areas are deprived of easy access to nature", their response is a plan to transform the impact of their reserves to show what can be achieved and inspire Christians, churches and others to develop similar projects in their area.<sup>10</sup> A Rocha UK are also supporting the *A More Natural Capital* manifesto, drawn up by a broad coalition of charities and conservation bodies. This calls for better access to green and blue spaces, access to affordable food via community growing schemes, nature rich spaces and action to tackle pollution and waste. Other issues that were highlighted by the pandemic, such as noise pollution are being tackled by groups like CPRE London and the Tranquil City project.<sup>11</sup>

At a time of change and upheaval, local churches may feel overwhelmed and unsure how to begin to respond. Major projects such as those described above, facilitated by groups like A Rocha UK, can be seen as out of reach, and London often feels like a special case. What follows will suggest two frameworks or starting points onto which Covid-19 learnings could be mapped at a local level.

### **Mission action planning and community audits<sup>12</sup>**

Churches engaged in mission action planning or the revision of mission action plans are encouraged to undertake community audits. The Diocese of St Albans describes the process of mission action planning as seeking 'a vision that is based on God's call' and suggests a community audit process. This begins with data gathering, for example using the parish profiles created by the Church Urban Fund which focus on deprivation and wealth, other population and demographic statistics and

Church of England parish data sets. The data can then be fleshed out through the gathering of local stories and looking at areas such as contact points between church and community. The Five Marks of Mission are referenced in the introduction to mission planning but are not explored further in the context of the community audit.

By contrast, the *Methodist Church Mission Planning Workbook* groups questions for the community audit into sections that reflect the ‘Our Calling’ framework (Worship, Learning and Caring, Service, Evangelism). The questions require a mix of research and community conversation and, as with the Diocese of St Albans, there is a sense that this element of the planning process is about place knowing and discerning the needs of the local community. This points towards mission as a relational activity, one best undertaken by churches who are willing to take time building relationships and working in partnership. The authors of *Being Interrupted* talk about needing to understand the gifts of place and appreciating that place is where the story begins. Our understanding of those gifts and stories is enriched by seeing our places through the eyes of others.<sup>13</sup> In describing a mission plan as a way of articulating what a church will do to ‘reach their community with God’s love’, the Methodist Church explicitly extend this sense of being in relationship to include God.

As we have seen, there are links between access to green space and factors like poverty or ethnicity. Research undertaken as part of a community audit could include looking at proximity to green space alongside other indicators such as car ownership or income and responding to need through practical projects and / or campaigning and advocacy. This might use publicly available interactive mapping tools (see box below) or locally held information about assets like Public Rights of Way or nature reserves. A related element could be considering disability and access. Are there enough level, well maintained footpaths for example? Informally, it might involve understanding which green spaces were valuable to people during lockdown, especially if those places were previously overlooked. An example of this can be found in the discussion of how a small patch of local woodland in the middle of the Firs and Bromford Estate in Birmingham came to emerge as a breathing space for the community in *Being Interrupted*.<sup>14</sup> These spaces might provide focal points for future local conservation work.



*Signpost showing Public Rights of Way*

Intertwined with considerations of access are issues of justice, care for our neighbours and care for creation. Micah 6:8 encapsulates this sense of holistic discipleship, inviting us to the practical action of doing justice, mercy (or kindness in the NRSV translation) towards our neighbours and walking humbly with God by following the clear command to care for creation.

## Mapping tools

Friends of the Earth – enter your postcode for a green space rating from A-E

<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/access-green-space-england-are-you-missing-out>

Forest Research – UK urban tree canopy cover by council ward

<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/i-tree-eco/urban-canopy-cover/>

Night Blight – searchable dark sky maps from CPRE showing levels of light pollution

<https://www.nightblight.cpre.org.uk/>

Natural England – search by postcode for local open access land

<http://www.openaccess.naturalengland.org.uk/wps/portal/oasys/maps/MapSearch>

Go Jauntly – app that allows users to create and share walking routes, includes tools to help users connect with nature <https://www.gojauntly.com/>

The community audit process could also be used to help churches understand which environmental issues were important to people during lockdown. Communities might have experienced particular problems with litter in local parks or have been dismayed when traffic pollution began to rise again. Listening to these stories can help churches find common ground from which to work with their communities, perhaps by helping to co-ordinate litter picks or campaigning for low traffic areas to be created. Churches could also think about how they can help their community reduce waste more widely, by introducing recycling hubs for harder to recycle items or providing communal compost bins. Increased awareness of human impacts on the environment could in this way be a springboard for encouraging changes in behaviour beyond those which offer a solution to immediate concerns. Understanding people's experiences of lockdown will also allow churches to understand if their communities have become more attentive to nature and where they might like to see green spaces enhanced. Examples which churches could support might include an increase in approval for wilder unowned areas in council run parks or urban tree planting initiatives.

To understand how these learnings might be viewed as a part of holistic mission, the results of listening and research can be mapped back to the Five Marks of Mission or the Methodist *Our Calling* framework. For example, a Methodist church that found that a strong connection between people and nature had been forged during the pandemic, might find the question 'when did you last experience hope?' helpful. This question is listed under the heading of Evangelism and may suggest that exploring the question of hope through nature and the seasons could be a helpful way into evangelism. Similarly, the question 'what would you like to change about our area, if you could?' under Service might prompt thinking about practical projects that spring from concerns about the environment or social justice. In this way it is possible to see that environmental learnings from the Covid-19 pandemic can be threaded through the different elements of mission and that mission action planning might provide a useful structure for this thinking.

## Eco Church

Eco Church<sup>15</sup> is designed as a holistic programme which seeks to integrate creation care across church life and the lives of church members. The survey questions show where learnings from Covid-19 might be applicable. A church looking to improve their score in the Land category might develop a new understanding of the importance of churchyards as urban green spaces and



undertake conservation work on their own land. Churches interested in worship that taps into a new appreciation for creation might look at initiatives such as Forest Church or Fresh Expressions.<sup>16</sup> In the Community and Global Engagement category community litter picks or walking groups which help people appreciate creation or discover new local walks away from crowded parks or beauty spots might emerge as priorities.

Additionally, an Eco Church registered church with a mission plan in development or under review could look at how the mission plan and Eco Church might work together by considering where the priorities of the mission plan overlap with Eco Church actions. The following case study offers an example of what this might look like in practice. Putnoe Heights Church is a Methodist Church in a suburban context in north Bedford. It has the opportunity to rethink the use of some of its outside space, an area which had, until recently, been exclusively used by a now closed pre-school.



*Putnoe Heights Church, Bedford*

The emerging mission plan identifies a priority to have space that is always available for prayer or quiet reflection. The church is also working towards a silver Eco Church award and is aware that the Land category is a weak area. The potential of the newly available space and the mission plan priority might therefore connect with the Eco Church Land targets relating to encouraging the use of church land by the congregation and wider community for recreation and contemplation. The area is already relatively well supplied with green space, with a public park close to the church itself. However, a nature rich space in the heart of the community and / or a place where people know that they can come and be quiet, away from the more multi-use spaces nearby, might meet post-Covid needs. A planned community audit will help the church identify what local people might find most attractive.

## **Conclusion**

Many Christian writers have spoken about the opportunity to imagine a different kind of world in the aftermath of Covid-19.<sup>17</sup> The vision is one of strong relationships, social justice and ecological renewal, drawing on teaching from across the whole Bible, from prophetic visions in Isaiah and Ezekiel to Jesus' parables. Integrating creation care into mission planning at this time is therefore, in part, an act of imagination. It asks churches to learn from their communities and use the stories they hear to inform their vision for the future of their church and local area. At an unsettling point in our history, it is profoundly relational, seeking to listen to needs and build relationships. It is also practical, and suggestions for projects have been offered in the later section of this paper. The quote from James Jones cited in the introduction uses the word 'earthing' to remind us of the embodied, hands-on nature of the Christian faith via the incarnation and the advantages of being rooted in a particular place. Finally, the imaginative leap needs to be holistic, meeting needs alongside taking opportunities to share faith; placing visible demonstrations of practising creation care alongside Christian teaching on creation. In imagining and articulating a different, more Kingdom-like, future,

Churches have an opportunity to show the love of God and the hope inherent in their faith, remembering the last words of the Great Commission, after the call for evangelism and discipleship, ‘And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’

## Biography



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<sup>1</sup> p 20 Jones, J. (2003) *Jesus and the Earth*, SPCK, London

<sup>2</sup> See essays by Egbunu, E., Maggay, M. and Bookless, D. in Walls, A & Ross, C. (2008) *Mission in the 21st Century. Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York

<sup>3</sup> p137, Bookless, D. (2008) *Planetwise. Dare to Care for God’s World*, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham

<sup>4</sup> <https://greenallianceblog.org.uk/2020/12/21/our-health-depends-on-nature-but-this-year-showed-that-access-to-green-spaces-isnt-equal/> (accessed 27/02/2021) and <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery> (accessed 27/02/2021)

<sup>5</sup> <https://findingnature.org.uk/2020/07/08/pro-nature-behaviours/> (accessed 27/02/2021)

<sup>6</sup> pp11-13, Hodson, M.R. in Valerio, R., Hodson, M.J., Hodson, M.R. & Howles, T. (2020) *Covid-19. Environment, Justice and the Future*, Grove Books Limited, Cambridge. For a comprehensive litter study see Chapman, C. & Bomford, K. (2020) *Litter in Lockdown - A study of litter in the time of coronavirus*, CPRE, London (available as a PDF <https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Litter-in-lockdown-full-report-December-2020.pdf> – accessed 24/02/2021)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/how-lockdown-has-brought-us-closer/> (accessed 27/02/2021)

<sup>8</sup> p7 Ede, P. (2013), *Urban Eco-mission. Healing the Land in the Post-industrial City*, Grove Books Limited, Cambridge

<sup>9</sup> This section is based on p103 Bookless, D. in Walls, A & Ross, C. (2008) *Mission in the 21st Century. Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York

<sup>10</sup> p19 A Rocha UK (Autumn / Winter 2020) *Root & Branch. The Magazine of A Rocha UK*, London

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.cprelondon.org.uk/news/tranquil-london/> (accessed 27/02/2021) and <https://tranquilitycity.co.uk/> (accessed 27/02/2021)

<sup>12</sup> This section draws on mission planning material from the Diocese of St Albans (Diocese of St Albans (2019), *Planning For Mission*, PDF download via <https://www.stalbans.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/1-Planning-for-Mission-2019.pdf> – accessed 24/02/2021) and The Methodist Church (The Methodist Church (2020), *Mission Planning Workbook*, London (available as a PDF <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18460/mission-planning-workbook.pdf> – accessed 24/02/2021))

<sup>13</sup> pp133-4 Barrett, A. & Harley, R. (2020) *Being Interrupted. Re-imagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In*, SCM Press, London

<sup>14</sup> pp222-3 Barrett, A. & Harley, R. (2020) *Being Interrupted. Re-imagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In*, SCM Press, London

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<sup>16</sup> Examples can be found in Williams, C. (2019) *Forest Church. Earthed Perspectives on the Gospel*, Grove Books Limited, Cambridge and <https://allthingslawfulandhonest.wordpress.com/2020/12/10/marked-for-mission/> (accessed 24/02/2021)

<sup>17</sup> See for example Ruth Valerio in Valerio, R., Hodson, M.J., Hodson, M.R. & Howles, T. (2020) *Covid-19. Environment, Justice and the Future*, Grove Books Limited, Cambridge and p244 Barrett, A. & Harley, R. (2020) *Being Interrupted. Re-imagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In*, SCM Press, London

## Photograph

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pond,\\_Minet\\_Country\\_Park\\_-\\_geograph.org.uk\\_-\\_93303.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pond,_Minet_Country_Park_-_geograph.org.uk_-_93303.jpg)

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