

Spirituality; Connection & Covid-19

By Dr Chris Swift, Director of Chaplaincy & Spirituality at Methodist Homes (MHA) UK

It's early on a Sunday morning in York. Normally, even at the start of the day, the streets are populated with tourists; photographers; joggers. Today things are strangely quiet.

Already we understand that the Covid-19 pandemic is a defining moment in our history. It will be thought about, spoken about, written about and – no doubt – turned into multiple films and box sets, for the rest of my life. The consequences of an easily transmitted and debilitating virus, bringing a serious risk of critical illness and death, are profound. Our health, our economy, the taken-for-granted ease of travel, will all be changed for years to come by what is happening now.

Perhaps one of the last affects to be understood widely will be its spiritual impact. Recently I've been reviewing some training materials about spiritual care. Like every project in this field a key element of the work rests on the definition of spirituality. There are so many of these which, although similar, all have skilfully nuanced and context-specific differences. If there is one word more than any other to permeate these attempts at definition it is 'connection'. Whether to nature; to self; to others; to God – the idea of being linked to something or someone beyond ourselves is at the heart of our spirituality.

With the approach of Covid-19, slowly but surely, countries are battering down the hatches. Pubs, bars, churches, galleries, museums, restaurants and cafes are now closed in the UK. Any place likely to attract a large gathering has shut its doors. On Mothering Sunday people have been discouraged by the Prime Minister from visiting their mums. Family gatherings should not take place.

In The Guardian on Saturday 21 March 2020 the Poet Laureate Simon Armitage evoked the memory of Eyam in a poem written in the light of the pandemic. It is strange to think that only a few weeks ago Armitage was reading poems from his collection *Seeing Stars* at the York Theatre Royal. Now it feels like recalling a different world.

Yet even in the Great Plague, which began in 1665, the surviving villagers of Eyam were able to gather together – but apart – for Sunday services in a place called Cucklet Dell. Worship went on and people met at a distance. There was a feeling of connection and community, even in adversity. In 2020 we are facing a far less deadly contagion by remaining in our homes. Many people, but not all, have the benefit of being connected to loved ones through the internet – today we share an immense place of virtual meeting.

I wonder what the long-term toll will be on our sense of spirituality and spiritual wellbeing? There is something about physical presence, as Peter Speck put it in the 1980s, of simply 'being there'. It doesn't feel that communication at-a-distance can replace this personal proximity. In our homes and streets we will no doubt continue to wave at the people we know, but in all other respects we are living at a remove. This is expected to last for months.

Maintaining our spirituality must be a vital strand of our response to Covid-19. Given the requirement to distance ourselves socially we must do everything we can to sustain connections spiritually. Human life and wellbeing needs a sense of linking to the 'other', whoever or whatever that might be. If the fine web of our relationships begins to fray – if distance becomes the new normal – there will be serious consequences with lasting effects.

The role of chaplains and faith communities must be to bring renewed energy, vision and invention to the task of preserving spiritual connection. Streaming services and podcasting messages and music will go some way to achieve this, but more is needed. Our identities are developed and

defined in communities and every effort must be made to limit the harm that can follow isolation and disconnection. From lights in windows to personal messages and gifts that token our care, now more than ever we need to strengthen and sustain the bonds that keep us truly human.