

Opening Reflection by the Revd Geoffrey Clarke

Moderator of the East Midlands Synod

Container or Content?



*Unfortunately, most people get so preoccupied with their stable,
and whether their stable is better than your stable,
and whether their stable is the only “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” stable,
that they never get to the birth of God in the soul.*

(Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*. Published by SPCK. ISBN 978-0-281-06891-3)

I am conscious that some of our churches have re-opened for public worship, others are in the process of discerning and planning to do so and some have concluded that it still feels a fair way off before they can do so. And whether reopening is current, future or even unlikely there is a recognition that worship will “feel” quite different to that to which we are accustomed. Depending upon your preferences and convictions, it will be a cause for either relief or disappointment that there will be no congregational hymn-singing and services and sermons shorter in length. Similarly, by temperament or conviction, maintaining “physical distance” and minimising socialising before, during or after worship will be a gain or loss. This unasked-for situation enables us to reconsider *what is essential for us – as individuals and as worshipping communities*.

And this is where I found **Richard Rohr**'s words so helpful. He urges us to distinguish between "the stable" and "Jesus" and highlights the very real risk that we can be so distracted with the former that we overlook the latter. In our current challenge we need to discern whether the sanctuaries of our church buildings and the full content of our liturgies are "the stable" and where and what might suffice for, and I quote, "Christ (to) be born". Rohr continues, *"There is no indication in the text* that Jesus demanded ideal stable conditions; in fact, you could say that the specific mentioning of his birth in a "manger" is making the exact opposite point. Animals at least had room for him, while there was "no room for him in the inn" (Luke 2:8) where humans dwelled."* (*The best biblical scholars will, of course, point out that there is no reference to "stable" in the texts either. Our use of it – and Rohr's – is itself highlighting what we superimpose on to the basics of the gospel!)



Speaking personally, I have been both impressed by and grateful to all whose skills and creativity have enabled worship to be sustained throughout the period of church buildings being locked. I know that some have had a "crash course" in livestreaming, creating videos, using **Zoom** et al. Hours have been devoted to creating and circulating worship resources for those who don't use the internet. I have shared in the challenge and experience of preaching and leading worship that has been recorded and shared as well as "live" via Zoom. (I must be the first East Midlands Synod Moderator able to preach at both Matlock in Derbyshire and Harrold in Buckinghamshire at the same time!) Rohr helps us assess what is stable-focused and what is Jesus-focused. In short, what is "container" and what is "content".

I was also challenged by **Dr Sara Parvis**, one of the contributors to the Webinar hosted by the Society for Ecumenical Studies on "**Communion in the Light of Covid-19**" (sponsored by Reform and The Tablet). Dr Parvis is Senior Lecturer in Patristics at the University of Edinburgh and a practising Roman Catholic. Responding to the criticism of some that churches had been closed and people prevented from attending Mass – labelled by some as "the eucharistic fast scandal" – she suggested that lockdown had "stripped down for us as disciples" the question as to where we receive Christ and where we serve him. She proposed that "laying down the life of the church" to go into lockdown (Roman Catholics depriving themselves of the presence of Christ in Holy Communion) was akin to Jesus' challenge, *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"* (John 15: 13). "Church services with singing and Communion are super-spreading occasions," she said. Remaining closed, therefore, is a sacrificial act, laying down the Church's life for the good of others. Her words might be of consolation to those of our own churches who as yet do not feel it is safe to open their doors.

May God guide our thinking and decision-making – and be praised in our worship and living, however different that might be in content.

Practical Guidance for Churches

Procedure for reopening churches

The Synod's **Ordained Ministries & Churches Group (OMCG)** has laid out its recommended steps for reopening church buildings. Please note the following stipulations **before** reopening:

1. The Elders are the “**venue managers**” and have responsibility for the decisions regarding reopening of church premises.
2. The Elders should consider the guidance in the URC's “**[Emerging into the New Normal](https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/docs/Emerging_into_the_new_normal.pdf)**” on the National website (https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/docs/Emerging_into_the_new_normal.pdf), together with any additional information such as the **[Use of Face Coverings](#)** added on 16 July (*see below*).
3. The Elders should carry out a **Risk Assessment** using the form on the National website: https://urc.org.uk/images/images/URC_Risk_Assessment_Template_Updated.pdf
4. The Elders should then consider what **new signage** is needed and what **new policies** need to be in place to safeguard all users of the premises.
5. **All users** of the premises need to be informed of these new policies and the need to conform to them.
6. Once satisfied that the premises are safe to reopen the Elders then **sign the form** in the National guidance and **record the decision** in the Minutes of the Elders Meeting.
7. This may be a **phased return** to use, with opening for private prayer and worship the priority.
8. Once the decision has been made for reopening **the Synod Property Officer should be informed** of the relevant date. In the East Midlands Synod, please contact **Mr Geoff Milnes** on property@urc5.org.uk.

Making a Personal Risk Assessment



The URC's **[Facebook page](#)** has shared a useful video explainer, in which the **Revd Angela Rigby** takes church members and friends through how to complete the **Personal Risk Assessment** before returning to church. This can be viewed at: <https://www.facebook.com/TheUnitedReformedChurch/videos/313111633068871/>.

Updated URC guidance around face coverings



In light of evolving government guidance, the **Synod Moderators** have updated their advice to encourage the use of face coverings for all people attending worship and any other face-to-face events within the URC. Their guidance includes:

- alternative suggestions for those leading worship
- other possible exclusions and suggestions for providing masks where appropriate
- the avoidance of removing or otherwise touching face coverings during worship

John Proctor, who retires as General Secretary in August, writes: *“It is surely a sign of loving one another that we put up with a little personal inconvenience rather than jeopardising the health and wellbeing of others whom we meet in the name of Christ.”*

The full guidance can be found on the URC website:

<https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3535-coronavirus-urc-guidance-around-face-coverings>

Severn Trent Recovery Fund

Severn Trent has this week announced a new **£500,000 recovery fund** to support charities and non-profit organisations around the Midlands which have lost income through the Covid-19 pandemic:

<https://www.stwater.co.uk/news/news-releases/severn-trent-opens-p500-000-covid-recovery-fund/>

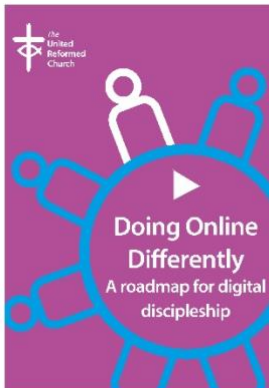
Organisations may apply to receive grants of up to £20,000 if they are focused on **improving community wellbeing**, either by promoting healthy lives and new skills, providing space for community use, or helping to look after the natural environment. Applications are via a simple expression of interest and will be reviewed on receipt until the full £500,000 has been allocated: to apply, visit <https://www.stwater.co.uk/get-in-touch/recovery-fund/>

Security Funding Scheme

Churches are reminded that applications to the government’s **Places of Worship (POW): protective security funding scheme** close on Sunday 9 August 2020. This is designed for places of worship and associated community centres etc who may be vulnerable to vandalism or other hate crimes. To date 180 places of worship around the UK have been awarded grants to install measures such as protective alarms, security lighting and access controls.

For further details visit <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/places-of-worship-security-funding-scheme#history>

Doing online differently



This latest free guide from the URC is subtitled “A roadmap for digital discipleship.” Lockdown has shown us that our online life as churches is neither second-best nor an afterthought: it is now a vital part of how we live, worship and engage in mission – and the place where we can ensure full **inclusion, fellowship and connection**.

The guide, which encompasses streaming worship, using Zoom, social media and church websites, is available at:

<https://urc.org.uk/church-information-guides/3533-doing-online-differently-a-roadmap-for-digital-discipleship.html>

Resources for Creation Time 2020

Creation Time or **The Season of Creation** runs from **1st September to 4th October** each year.



This is rapidly becoming established as a special period for prayer, reflection and action in the church calendar and there is a wealth of material available on-line to help us to care more responsibly for God’s wonderful but fragile Creation.

If you are interested (as I hope you are!), I particularly recommend reading the inspiring ecumenical guide for Creation Time 2020, ‘**Jubilee for the Earth**’: <https://seasonofcreation.org/guide/>

This is produced by ‘**Season of Creation**’, whose impressive ecumenical Advisory Group includes **Dr Ruth Valerio** of Tearfund. I think that the guide will inspire us to mark the Season, even with the current restrictions on meeting for worship.

Of special note this year is the call for all churches to hold a special **Climate Sunday** service at any time during the year-long period commencing 6th September. This will link up with a national **Climate Sunday** on 5th September 2021, prior to **COP26** (the international conference to be hosted by the UK government next year).

For details please follow this link to the **Churches Together in Britain and Ireland** website:

<https://ctbi.org.uk/climate-sunday/>



Charles Jolly, Green Apostle and on behalf of the JPIC Group.

Personal news

It is with sadness that we report the death of a retired minister, **Brian Hudson Bailey**, who died earlier this week.

Brian's ministry was at Edgeley Road, Stockport 1957-63; CWM in Botswana 1963-84, Augustine Edinburgh 1984-92 and Augustine United 1992-1996. Brian served as President of the Congregational Union of Scotland from 1992-93. He and his wife Anne had retired to Macclesfield.

A family-only funeral is provisionally set for 2.00pm on 10 August 2020, and there is the hope of a Thanksgiving Service in due time. Our thoughts are with Anne and the family at this sad time.

Around the East Midlands

Stepwise in South Wigston

***Stepwise** – the URC's new discipleship development programme – has been pioneered in the East Midlands Synod by a group from **South Wigston URC**. The group has recently completed the **Faith-filled Life** stream and we are delighted to send them our congratulations. The following account of their Stepwise journey is shared by the church's Secretary **Di Statham**.*



When **South Wigston URC** received the initial "leaflets" publicising the **Stepwise** course we were not sure if it was for us. For all of us it was "a few years" since we had been involved in any serious study or learning. Could our brains cope with something which would take months to complete? But we thought and prayed about it and invited **Jane Henderson** to come and talk to us face to face. After much thought (and encouragement from our Minister **Revd Richard Eastman**) we agreed to go ahead with Revd Eastman as our Facilitator. We knew that with just 4 of us plus Richard taking part it would be a small group but that also meant that it was easier to arrange our Group Sessions on a date when we could all attend. So we registered our interest and received our login details so that we could access the course material.

Despite receiving all of the information I do not think that initially any of us really understood what the course entailed and what was expected of us. Our first meeting with our Mentor, **Revd Samuel Silungwe**, after Group Sessions 1 & 2 made us realise that we were not getting as much as we could from the personal study and group sessions. So we decided to go back and start again with a renewed understanding on all of our parts. Each session gave us something to look at and study for ourselves and then bring to our Group Sessions. I admit that sometimes I had to "force myself" to sit down and look at the readings or video for a session but once I had taken that step I felt ready to go to the Group Session with "something to say". It may have been because we were a small group or because we already knew and felt comfortable with each other but we all joined in with the discussions and were happy to put forward our ideas, even if they were

different to those of somebody else in the group. As a result we all learnt more about ourselves and each other.

Throughout the course we received support from our Facilitator (Revd Richard Eastman) and our Mentor (Revd Samuel Silungwe) and we were encouraged to think for ourselves. Now we have completed all six sessions we need to think about the future. At the moment we are not sure about our next step but this first stage has given us all an opportunity to look at our own discipleship and our place in the community around our church. I am sure that the work we have done so far will be valuable to us as we move forward. Thank you to all of those who have been involved with our Stepwise Group for their participation, support and guidance.

Di Statham, South Wigston URC.

*A **South Nottingham** Stepwise group is now engaging in **Faith-Filled Life** on a wholly virtual basis and we will bring you news of its progress in a future e-letter. If you would like to know more about embarking on **Stepwise** please email the **Revd Samuel Silungwe**, our Synod Stepwise Co-ordinator on s.silungwe@yahoo.com or **Derek Graham**, Training & Development Officer on training@urc5.org.uk.*

Virtually cycling to Dublin



*The **Revd Jenny Mills** of **Newport Pagnell URC** writes:*

During lockdown our Church Secretary **Eva Bangle** has enjoyed cycling round our lovely town and neighbouring villages. She thought about how she might raise much needed funds for the **Mead Centre**.

Eva hails from Dublin and was missing family and friends there, so decided she would cycle, virtually, to see them. Door to door the trip amounts to 320 miles, and despite only having three gears, slow, slower and slowest, she has reached the halfway point. If you would like to help her reach her target of £640 which includes the return trip, although she doesn't intend to cycle back, please visit her **JustGiving** page:

<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/eva-bangle>

Sowing in concrete: New Lubbesthorpe

At Mission Council earlier this month, the **New Lubbesthorpe Project** was formally recognised as a Mission Project of the URC.

The July edition of **CTe-News**, published by Churches Together in England, includes a major feature on the project – an innovative venture of **Churches Together in Leicestershire** in collaboration with the local council and the housing developer of this major new settlement of over 4,000 new homes, to the west of Leicester.



Entitled **Sowing in Concrete**, the article by Revd Dr Ben Aldous details the birth and development of the project as well as the continuing work of its pioneer minister the **Revd Sue Steer**. **CTe-News** can be downloaded at:

[https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/207196/Home/News/CTe News/CTe News sign/CTe News sign.aspx](https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/207196/Home/News/CTe%20News/CTe%20News%20sign/CTe%20News%20sign.aspx)

Mission Council round-up

The United Reformed Church held a unique digital version of **Mission Council**, the executive body of General Assembly, on Friday 10 July.

The decision to recognise the **New Lubbesthorpe Project** as a congregation of the URC was one of the numerous resolutions carried at this meeting. **Church Without Walls**, the new ecumenical congregation in Milton Keynes, was also celebrated and received as a congregation of the URC. Both mark significant new developments in the life of the East Midlands Synod and we pray for their future growth.



A full round-up from Mission Council can be found at: <https://urc.org.uk/news/3530-mission-council-round-up-10-july-2020>

Churches should take particular note of the new **provisions for virtual meetings** (Resolutions 32 and 33). These add new material to the United Reformed Church's **Rules of Procedure** to distinguish between physical and virtual meetings, setting out new Standing Orders for virtual meetings and allowing for decisions to be taken in this manner.

Survey: Rural Isolation Support



Arthur Rank
Centre

CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS

The [Arthur Rank Centre](#) is working with the **University of Exeter**, in order to understand the impact of Covid-19 on church organisations providing rural isolation support.

The **Revd Elizabeth Clark**, National Rural Officer for the Methodist Church and URC, asks for our support in sharing and completing the online survey at:

<https://exeter.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/arthur-rank-centre-survey-covid-19-well-being-and-the-c-5>

The survey is not exclusively for rural churches: even if your church is not specifically involved in rural isolation work, or located in a rural area, the general information you can give will be very useful.

URC Youth Escape Room Event

Following their successful Youth Quiz, **URC Youth** in the East Midlands and West Midlands Synods have joined forces once again to offer young people aged 11-25 an **Escape Room Evening**, to be held via Zoom on **Friday 31 July** at 7.30pm.

The evening will offer a fun-filled opportunity to work as part of a team with other young people to answer the riddles, solve the puzzles and find the clues. It's your time to discover if you have what it takes to make it out in time!

East Midlands Synod Youth Rep **Ella Lemon** will be one of the hosts, alongside her West Midlands counterpart **Esme Ramsden** and CYDO **Richard Knott**.

To register to take part and receive the joining instructions, please email:

cydo@urcwestmidlands.org.uk .

(Participants under 18 may be asked to submit a permission form.)

Joint Midlands Synod URC Youth

ESCAPE ROOM EVENING

Do you have what it takes to answer the riddles, solve the puzzles and find all the clues to make it out in time?

JULY 31ST | 2020 | 7.30-9PM
ONLINE EVENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
Register your interest to cydo@urcwestmidlands.org.uk

The Methodist Church

Vacancy: Synod Clerk

Applications are welcome for the role of **EAST MIDLANDS SYNOD CLERK**.

The Synod Council is looking to recruit a new **Synod Clerk** to start during the autumn of 2020 in a voluntary capacity for, on average, 10 hrs per week.

The role holder is required to spend time in the Synod office in Nottingham but will be mainly home-based with travel across the geography of the EM Synod.

Applications are welcome from URC elders, members, retired ministers and ministers, including non-stipendiary ministers.

The role of the Synod Clerk in the East Midlands Synod has four principal elements:

- To serve as Clerk to the Synod and Synod Council
- To be responsible for enabling Synod engagement with General Assembly
- To provide advice, guidance and support on the structure, governance and procedures of the United Reformed Church
- To serve as one of the Synod Officers alongside the Moderator and Treasurer.

The role description, person specification and application forms are available from the Synod office or from the website www.urb5.org.uk. To arrange an informal discussion with the Moderator and/or current Clerk please contact the EM Synod Office: admin@urb5.org.uk or **0115 960 9241**.

Closing date for applications: Monday 17th August

Interview date: 7th September 2020 in the Synod Office or via video conference.

East Midlands Synod contacts

Please remember these recent updates to contact details at East Midlands Synod:

CONTACT DETAILS FOR THE NEW SYNOD PERSONNEL OFFICER

Robert White has now assumed this role: please email robertbwhite80@gmail.com

CONTACT DETAILS FOR OUR MODERATOR

The email address and mobile phone number for the **Revd Geoffrey Clarke** are:

Email: mod@urb5.org.uk

Mobile: 07544 959976

Synod Office: 0115 960 9241

CONTACT DETAILS FOR TRAINING

Hannah Holmes, PA to the TDO and CYDO, is currently on maternity leave.

For all training enquiries and bookings please contact **Derek Graham**, TDO in the first instance on:

Email: training@urb5.org.uk

Find us on Facebook

Our [East Midlands Synod Facebook Page](#) is a place of sharing, which continues to host the Evening Prayers led by our Moderator the **Revd Geoffrey Clarke** during the health crisis. Arrangements are currently being made for others to continue Evening Prayers during the Moderator's annual leave in August. If you are a Facebook user, please consider **Liking** and **Sharing** this Page and its posts.

We also invite you to follow the [Synod Youth and Children's Facebook Page](#), which shares news and ideas related to our work with young people.

Office closure: please note

The **Synod Office** remains closed at present as we adapt to government guidelines relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. **We continue to review this situation on a month-by-month basis, as guidance changes.**

All members of staff are working from home: please e-mail them in the usual way. Contact details can be found at: <https://www.urch5.org.uk/synodstaff>. Telephone calls are forwarded, so to speak to a member of staff simply the usual office number of **0115 960 9241** between Monday-Thursday, 9am-3pm.

We regret we are unable to send out group emails or to mail newsletters during the office closure: please keep checking our website and the National URC website for the most recent information.

This E-letter is produced on behalf of:

The URC East Midlands Synod, 1 Edwards Lane, Sherwood, Nottingham, NG5 3AA.
Telephone: 0115 960 9241

Free-to-use images sourced on Unsplash.com:
empty church by Debby Hudson, church seats by Serge le Strat, facemasks by Mika Baumeister.

Next edition: Thursday 03 September 2020

Please send all material for this E-Letter to both: modpa@urch5.org.uk and training@urch5.org.uk

Copy Date for next edition: 12 noon on Tuesday 01 September 2020