



WEBINAR- RENEWING THE COVENANT: CHURCHES AND THE BUILDING OF LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Video 0 min - 2 min

Martin Robinson opened the webinar, setting it in the context of an ongoing conversation between [Journal of Missional Practice](#) (Martin Robinson, Alan Roxburgh and Sara Jane Walker), [Together for the Common Good](#) (Jenny Sinclair) and the [Common Good Foundation](#) (Lord Maurice Glasman). These panelists were joined by two storytellers, Father William Taylor, an Anglican priest in Hackney, London and Fred Liggin, a minister of a church in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA. This online event was shared on 10th September 2020 and church leaders from many traditions participated via Zoom and Facebook. The webinar interacted with a document [Renewing the Covenant: Churches and the Building of Local](#)

[Relationships](#) just published by the three host organisations.

Video 2 min- 12 min

We paused for prayer, and then Alan Roxburgh and Maurice Glasman reflected on the grief of this time and the failed stories which contribute to our sense of loss and confusion. The progressive story of globalization has been exposed as questionable, for we have discovered that nation state, locality and labour, the essential workforce, still matter to us. In lockdown we experienced the value and the vulnerability of our neighbourhood relationships. The only stories available to us in our culture, a hope in science, hope in Government and in the market, have been exposed as inadequate. According to Maurice and Alan we have become aware that we are a society shaped by individualism, relating in ways that are often transactional rather than relational. We quickly default to a language of outcomes in our dealings with one another. For Maurice and Alan these ways of relating could be characterized as *contract*. They wonder, in this context, with this limitation and loss, how may we recover a sense of the sanctity of human life and relationships.

Video 12 min- 33 min

Jenny Sinclair introduced Father William Taylor and invited him to share the story of a particular response to this sense of grief.^[1] Father William described his context, a parish of five housing estates, public housing, surrounding central common land near his church, St Thomas Clapton in Hackney. There are many migrants, often West African, and many Ultra-Orthodox Jews. This community had worked together to create a community hall on the common, and the hoardings surrounding the building work had already been used to express gratitude for the project. Father William described how his own grief at the loss of a significant local friend, Rabbi Pinter, led him to instead offer the hoardings as a place for communal grief. Father William, in cassock and staff, has enabled a small, weekly, socially distanced gathering where the names of people who have died have been pasted onto the hoarding. Thus, in Father William's view, the Common became sacred land and this diverse community had the opportunity to lament in the context of faith, a refuge from exhausting anxiety and rage.

Video 33 min- 41 min

After sharing some liturgy to honour this sense of lament, Sara Jane Walker went on to introduce Fred Liggin, a pastor of Williamsburg Christian Church in Virginia.^[2] This church is multi-ethnic and includes people living with intellectual disability and also people who are experiencing homelessness. For this church, hospitality is a core organizing principle of the gospel and thus they seek solidarity with their suffering neighbours and to be a faithful, a reliable presence in the city. This sensitivity to struggle and sorrow extends to recognition and encouragement for the men and women of the city authorities who administer care for these vulnerable populations.

Video 41 min- 50 min

Maurice and Alan used these examples and participant interactions to explore an alternative to contract, a way of relating best described as *covenant*. They clarify that a contract is a one-off exchange for mutual advantage which takes no account of power differences. As a way of relating it has been embedded in our ways of life for the last forty years. No alternative has been in view. By contrast

covenant is about long-term faithful relationships, intergenerational, rooted in place and trusting of land. It may include the forgiveness of debts. It asks the same commitment as Ruth to Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17) in the building of a common life over a long time.

Video 50 min to 1h 6 min

Alan Roxburgh asked the webinar participants how they might lead this kind of covenant life where they are. One participant was concerned about the threat from national politics. Maurice responded that there are evil powers at work through national and structural procedures, but while we may have little influence on national politics, we can have a conception of the Kingdom of God where we are and build defensive political relationships locally. Covenant requires investment in faithful public relationships through one-to-one meetings. These are not the same as business meetings. Their primary goal is relationship and they require vulnerability. Maurice suggested making a central practice of one-to-one conversations, sharing grief with others and exploring together what you could do together in the place where you are.

Video 1h 6 min- 1h 11 min.

Alan wondered how as leaders we invite congregations to see their vocations in their neighbourhoods and create these relationships? A Webinar participant pointed out that this is not the same as acting as a service provider, it is not just giving. It will necessarily involve eye to eye contact. It is a humble church, building companionship, nurturing love, seeking mutual support out of its own vulnerability. Jenny suggested that churches could simply make a shift in what they already do in their neighbourhoods, incorporating more one-to-one conversations. To support this the panel offered a resource: . Our civic immune systems are weak, there is significant economic challenge and a desperate need for a new story. Churches can offer resistance with their neighbours from the ground up. So the panel sent out a challenge: have ten one-to-one conversations in your neighbourhood, then let us know how this went.[3]

Video 1h 11 min- end

In concluding remarks Father William suggested that this work should be in the context of contemplative prayer. For him lockdown was a time of deep, silent prayer and in that he experienced something of the abundance that is available in community. Alan wondered, for all of us in our communities, in our places, how do we dig into this? It is a huge ask and calling for us. Fred asked that we seek solidarity and let ourselves be affected by the joys and hurts of others. One-to-one conversations are ordinary, but there is a hunger for the ordinary. For Maurice too, the sublime is in the mundane. We need not get caught up in the negative dialectic of apathy and outrage or escape into a story of individual redemption. We will find love where we are as we build covenantal faithfulness.

[1] You can read more of the story on Father William's Blog *Hackney Preacher* '[Still We Grieve](#)'.

[2] Fred describes his church in more detail in this journal in a conversation '[Following the Spirit, Finding Life, Sharing Bread](#)', Winter 2018. He compares notes about hearing God with another pastor in the conversation: '[Two Pastors Talking: So How do you Hear God?](#)' , Winter 2019.

[3] Jenny provided a contact for feedback: annette@togetherforthecommongood.co.uk