


# CITYtheology

The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

Summer 2018  
Issue 14



“Communities must imitate life and nature by being cooperative, locally rooted, self-organising, and balancing individual and group needs. In this way, communities provide an alternative to the huge political and economic systems that have created vast urban areas of the dispossessed and fuel our journey of degrading the planet.”

**Dr Helen Reid** discovers hope from faith lived out in Smokey Mountain, a vast rubbish dump in Manila in the Philippines.



## Co-creating with God

Theologian and photographer **Thomas Jay Oord** invites us to a visual theology.

**Confessions of a 60 year old sinner: Anita Shaw** shares her Plastic-Less Lent challenge.

**Loving in Absence: Lawrence Cockrill** learns from a Mexican memorial tradition.

**Hook Lecture 2018** announced.



# Loving in Absence

By **Lawrence Cockrill**, Media and Events Coordinator at the Leeds Church Institute

The saying goes 'the only things that are guaranteed in life are death and taxes'. Indeed, loss and grief are near universal experiences and there are few of us who have not lost a friend or loved one at some time. In Leeds, and in Britain as a whole, we share many traditions around loss and most of these tend towards the quiet, the understated and the contemplative. We wear black at funerals, for example, decorate with white lilies and hold moments of silence.

There are exceptions of course. At last year's Hook Lecture, Linda Woodhead talked about how traditions have changed, citing the death of Princess Diana and the very public outpouring of grief as a turning point in the way we remember the dead. As society becomes more secular and the role of the Church less central, so modern funerals have less input from clergy and more from relatives. So, popular music will be played, poems read at funerals and decorations for graves may include a football scarf for the deceased's favourite team.

And some of our 'old' traditions, aren't actually as old as we think they are. Alan Wilkinson in his classic study, *The Church of England and the First World War* says "In 1914 public prayer for the dead was uncommon in the Church of England; by the end of the war it had become widespread".

But grief is still often treated as something that should be kept private, death is seen as an ending and, after a reasonable amount of time it seems to be expected that the grief associated with that person should also come to an end.

We've recently been looking at the Mexican tradition of building Ofrendas at the Leeds Church Institute, with the help of Ellie Harrison from The Grief Series and her friend Valdy from Mexico. Ofrendas are memorials, built once a year as part of the Day of the Dead celebrations, to remember those who have died. These large displays include pictures, poems, decorations of marigolds and sugar skulls, and food and drink that the person being remembered used to enjoy.

Mexican celebrations, unlike many of our own acts of remembrance are full of colour and noise. Orange marigolds are everywhere, multi-coloured paper chains hang across

streets, mariachi bands play, skulls are painted in bright colours and the whole approach has an attitude that is playful without being disrespectful or dismissive. Some of our group commented on how much healthier this seemed to us compared to our own experiences of quiet, reserved and private mourning.

One of the traditions in Mexico is to place loaves of spicy bread, similar to hot cross buns, but without the dried fruit, on ofrendas and on graves. As families enjoy eating this special once a year bread, so it is believed the visiting souls of the dead can enjoy the essence of the bread that is left for them on the altar. In this way families can spend time with and share a meal with their departed (and temporarily returned) loved ones.

As we thought about how we could interpret the day of the dead celebrations for ourselves and for Leeds we also wondered what the local equivalent of the *pan de muelto* for a Leeds ofrenda could be. Perhaps a Leeds ofrenda should have Yorkshire puddings or a Greggs Pasty. But as we thought about how we would interpret these celebrations for the city, we also found ourselves discussing what they would mean for us personally. What food and drink did our own departed enjoy?

In my own experience, it can often be easier to discuss important things when you have a job to do and ofrenda building serves this purpose well. As families share the act of planning and assembling their ofrenda, they inevitably think, talk and reminisce about their loved ones. Together they will remember happy times that were spent together, what their loved one enjoyed, and how they are going to make them feel welcome.

But those discussions and memories will change over time. Each year ofrendas are rebuilt, and those discussions take place again. Some things will remain the same each time the ofrenda is rebuilt, but some objects will be added, some taken away. Pictures of loved ones may be added to or replaced by new others that become more important. Those memories that are important to a young child, may not be as important as that child matures.

The lives of the people building their ofrendas will not remain static in between because memories are not static. We gain new insights,

some things are remembered, other things are forgotten, memories become more or less important as our experiences shape them and we may discover things about our loved ones that we never knew before.

These Mexican traditions reflect the reality that while our loved one's may be absent, our relationship with them in many ways continues, and in a way that develops and grows as we grow. We continue to remember them, to think of them as we grow and change, and we may even continue talking to them.

For the first disciples the act of sharing bread and wine during the Eucharist may have been a very similar experience to the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations. For those who had known Jesus personally the act of sharing bread and wine would have been a way of once again sharing a meal with a departed friend, of remembering and talking together about their memories.

The same may happen as we share the Eucharist together, our memories, our understanding and knowledge and our life experience keeps changing. Our theology and our relationship with God will be shifting and evolving as we grow and think. At one time the breaking of bread may be a time of celebration of God's victory over death, but at other times our thoughts may turn towards repentance, sacrifice or loss.

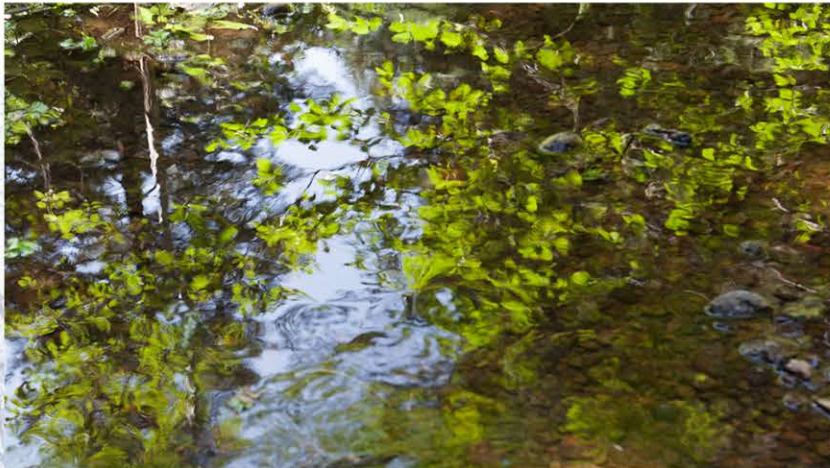
To many of us, the idea of souls returning to the living world will be theologically problematic, but there are several examples of an ongoing connection with the dead in the New Testament. Paul talks about the great cloud of witnesses, not necessarily as a cloud that witnesses us as much as those that witness to us. So while we may not want to go as far as to suggest that those who have died return to us in a literal sense, the memories and influences of those people can be very much present in our daily lives.

The Leeds ofrenda that we have built alongside Ellie and Vlady will continue to develop, and it will be interesting to see how it incorporates Leeds experiences and what we as Leeds folk learn from the experience. For myself I will try to continue seeing death not as an end to a relationship, but as an ongoing and developing relationship, a switch from a loving in presence to a loving in absence.

# Co-creating with God

Thomas Jay Oord, Theologian and Photographer from Idaho, USA

When Tom hikes through rural Idaho, he hikes with a purpose; to observe nature, to learn about God through God's creation, and to make photographs which convey his theology. It is an approach to photography and theology that has borne fruit in the city of Chicago too. What follows is a visual theology, an invitation to consider God the Creator and also ourselves as creatures and co-creators.



Seen indirectly  
through creation

Immensity

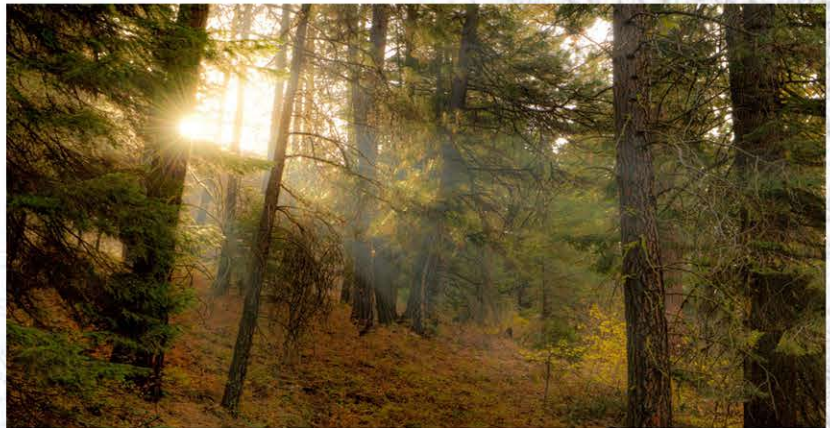


In the smaller  
places



**Not proof of  
existence, but  
evidence of God's  
nature**

**Spirit**



**Creation  
contributing to  
God's creating**

**Death,  
ugliness and  
the problem of  
evil**

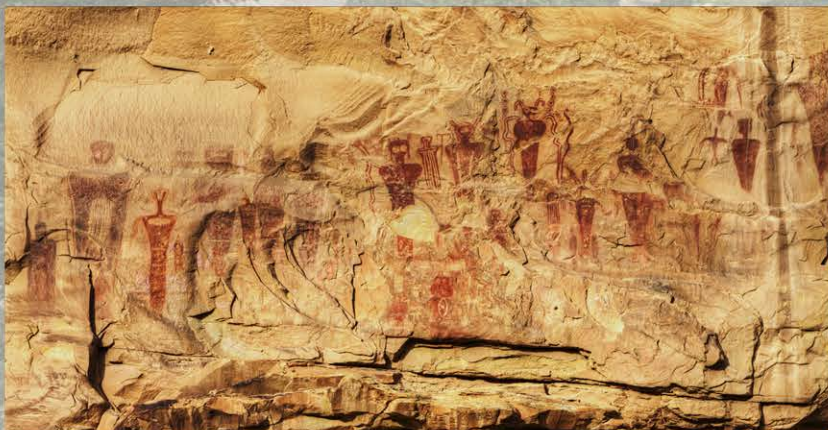


**What is power?**



**Wonder**

**Becoming  
enlightened**



**Those who  
have gone  
before**



**“Hello friend”**



**In the city**

At our informal reflective meeting, Cake Coffee and Conversation, we looked at a slideshow of Tom's photos and were guided in our reflections by the points he raised in his afternoon seminar on Photography and Spirituality at St Chad's Parish Centre (audio on our blogsite). After this, we looked at a slideshow of photos we use when we go into High Schools to talk about life in Leeds. The photos are of key Leeds landmarks and scenes from various local areas of the city. After seeing the light-filled, thought-provoking photos from rural Idaho we were more aware of the sky and the light in our Leeds photos; noticed where trees are planted in the city and how many people there were around; and thought how unappealing the indoors pictures looked. It brought a fresh perspective on our view of familiar photos and our city.

Helen Reid

# A city of our dreams?

By Helen Reid  
Director of the Leeds Church Institute



It is estimated that globally over one billion people and rising are living in 'shanty town' contexts. As Mike Davis writes:

**[R]ather than being made of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, [twenty-first century cities] are instead largely constructed out of crude bricks, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood.**

Living in these cities means that people are effectively exiled from the formal economy with no obvious route into industrialisation and economic growth opportunities. The intense challenges of their lives are not just in the present, but also in envisioning and creating a better future.

The environment of these cities seems worlds away from life in Leeds. What do we have in common? What can we learn? Do we share dreams of the ideal city? Where is God in our envisioning cities of the future?

The book *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain* is set in one such place, a vast rubbish dump in Manila in the Philippines. It is not an easy read and does not propose easy hope. It tells the story of one individual's faith journey; and also the story of an impoverished and disregarded community seeking survival and justice. It is a story of people and the environment, the specific and the global. It is theological reflection meeting religious experience and scientific study.

The author, Benigno Beltran, is a Divine Word Missionary who chose to live at the dump for 30 years, seeking his own salvation and the opportunity to listen to and serve the poor. He recalls that at night, he felt that the dump was 'a malignant being tightening barbed wires round my heart to see if I would run away'. He stayed, 'as a stranger in a strange land'. During this time, he learnt much, struggled alongside others, and found some peace with God, himself and with others.

Beltran writes of the physicality of the rubbish dump. Residents in Manila throw away more than three times their weight in garbage each year. While thirty percent of waste rots in the



streets uncollected, the rest goes to the garbage dump. Here it decomposes, smells, pollutes, combusts and burns. A community of 25,000 people live there, recycling what they can to eke out a living. These people are the *basureros* – scavengers. They don't create the waste but they fulfil a vital social function by recycling. Their drive to survive through this work means that they serve society. Yet they are poor and endure persecution, they live and work at risk of illness, injury and death. Life is hard and this is especially so for the women and children. And they all live with an acute awareness that this toxic waste is poisoning and destroying the planet.

Living on Smokey Mountain, Beltran learnt that while, as it is classically defined, theology is 'faith seeking understanding', it is also

**Faith seeking justice**  
**Faith seeking peace**  
**Faith seeking life**

This approach to theology means developing the awareness to choose to live according to the hope we have. Hope is a choice, a moral imperative, and it is the force that enables the poor to give themselves to the future. It is an intrinsic part of the struggle for life. In Romans, groaning with longing is the language of hope (Rom 8: 18-25).

**For in this hope we were saved. .... Who hopes for what they already have?**

The book tells the story of the faith community of scavengers on Smokey Mountain collectively choosing hope and imagining better worlds. Beginning in the 1980s, the scavengers actively developed social and political consciousness. At the time, local government was relocating families to empty land far from the dump, so they had to build new homes and travel to work and earn money. The scavengers moved back to Smokey Mountain and demanded the right to live there in formally constructed housing. With the support of the church locally, they employed Community Organising to challenge their housing situation; and achieved many successes including the construction of some medium rise housing.

In the longer term, the scavengers agreed long term objectives for their community so that people could live full lives, in peace with others, creating a better world. They spearheaded a campaign to educate people in ecological

responsibility, and established a parish cooperative to separate non-recyclable and recyclable rubbish.

Thirty years on, life is still incredibly hard for people living on Smokey Mountain. People have an urgent priority to ensure their survival and the survival of their families. They see their needs in this order:

**Survival**  
**Solidarity**  
**Security**  
**Sustainability**  
**Spiritual Growth**

Given these needs, Beltran writes, *The small victories the scavengers have achieved actualise the radiant hope that human beings will wake up from this ecological nightmare, from this unjust society and constant conflict.*

The book's subtitle is *Hope for a Planet in Peril*. We are offered a framework of theology and hope that is grounded in religious experience and community life. We can see God is truly present in all our cities, in the dirt, conflict and despair, as well as the hope, community life and striving. We can accept that the preferential option for the poor includes all those marginalised by the global economy, including those born in poverty, people with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, victims of injustice and oppression. This addresses the whole person including social, political and economic dimensions of humanity.

In response, communities must imitate life and nature by being cooperative, locally rooted, self-organising, and balancing individual and group needs. In this way, communities provide an alternative to the huge political and economic systems that have created vast urban areas of the dispossessed and fuel our journey of degrading the planet.

The book *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain* can help us talk about what this means in Leeds. We share the same planet, and can choose to live out the hope we have as a community of faith. In our theology, we can learn more about what faith seeking understanding, justice, peace and life looks like in Leeds.

Benigno P. Beltran (2012) *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain. Hope for a Planet in Peril*  
Orbis books

Mike Davis (2006) *Planet of Slums Verso*



## Confessions of a 60 year old sinner:

By **Anita Shaw** Environment Champion for the Leeds Area of the Anglican Diocese and Member of LCI

**The challenge was laid down by the Anglican Church to give up single-use plastics for Lent.** I was familiar with suggestions such as bringing your own reusable bags when out shopping and taking reusable cups into coffee shops, so I began the challenge feeling reasonably confident. I was also aware of the Fifth Mark of Mission as laid down by the Anglican Church: 'To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth'. The Plastic-Less Lent challenge seemed to dovetail well with Christian environmental stewardship.

What came as a greater challenge was to put the theory of living a plastic-less life into practice. A simple trip to the supermarket became a headache of negotiation and compromise. Almost every

item for sale seemed to be wrapped in plastic of some form or other. Now that the over use of plastic had been highlighted it was as if I had received a new pair of spectacles and could see more clearly than ever before. I felt very embarrassed at the supermarket knowing that I was struggling to break free from all plastic and my shopping basket reflected that I was all too human struggling to give it up entirely.

Shower gel was perhaps the first item in the bathroom which needed replenishing; a bar of soap was rescued from a drawer where it had been serving to scent the socks! It had been years since I had used a bar of soap but this was followed by the purchase of bars of shampoo and conditioner (news to me as I was unaware of such things before the challenge began).

The next step was to reflect on the nature of each item made from plastic which I would regularly throw away and replace. Such items as washing up brushes, toothbrushes and bin liners each now required careful thought. I was encouraged to reflect on the use of language such as 'throw away' and 'disposable' realising that there is no magical heavenly recycling place called 'Away' and that all recycling takes energy.

I followed with interest the Facebook group, 'Plastic-Less Lent', learning new ways to manage life without such heavy dependency on plastic but it was not an easy journey. Many of the ideas shared by the group were returning to basics with a commitment to live more simply. Reconnecting with some simple pleasures such as baking bread and re-using everyday items proved a joy but also took more time.

**I found that I was questioning the current western way of life and this became part of my Lenten journey.**

There were busy days when I would succumb to the temptation of a microwaveable meal and those days when, for the sake of convenience, I would dash into the supermarket to pick up soft fruit or vegetables wrapped in plastic. Yes, I felt sinful but I know that I need to keep trying and to keep challenging myself even now, long after Lent has finished.

David Attenborough had spoken out during the TV programme Blue Planet 2, when the BBC was at its best utilising stunning photography to convey a message of urgency in order to save our wonderful yet fragile planet. In response, children and those in later years in particular were making a huge difference and so the flames of hope were fanned and

awareness raised to a new and more urgent level.

Social pressure was building and an incredible force for good came to the fore. We have seen public water fountains opening up in London, a new rise in demand for doorstep deliveries of milk and the government has banned microbeads in cosmetics. As I write this, news is breaking of a bottle deposit scheme to be introduced in England. In addition McDonalds are to ditch plastic straws, Starbucks are to fund a multimillion pound research programme to produce a fully recyclable cup and Waitrose will phase out disposable cups by autumn 2018.

The 'Plastic-Less Lent Group' (on Facebook) has been renamed the 'Plastic-Less Living Group', it seems only natural to support one another and to share ideas and good practice as we journey on.

**No one person has all the answers but we can take small positive steps in the right direction and keep our hearts and minds open.**

Plastic generally does not need to be a dirty word. I have a box of plastic "play food" which generations of children have happily played with in our home. It is good to reflect on the next generation as I draw this article to a close. Lent has been a challenge, I am acutely aware of how sinful I am but my eyes have been opened to the Good News that whilst I personally failed on my Lenten journey I have hope that we can as a community be a sign of the Resurrection by living a life less plastic and that we can aim to be better stewards of the Earth to which God has called us.



We are pleased to invite Jonathan Bartley, Co-leader of the Green Party of England and Wales to talk about cities, the environment and hope for the future.

In addition to his work for the Green Party, Jonathan Bartley is also the founder of Ekklesia, an independent think tank looking at the role of religion in public life. He appears regularly on UK radio and television programmes.

The Hook Lecture is an annual event which aims to stimulate debate around an issue of faith in the context of the city, shaping discussion and dialogue throughout the coming year. High profile speakers launch the conversation, drawing different communities together in Leeds Minster. The event is organised jointly by LCI, Leeds Minster and Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds.

# Jonathan Bartley

## HOOK LECTURE 2018

### Working For The Peace Of The City

The Co-leader of the Green Party of England and Wales talks about cities, the environment and hope for the future.



**Wednesday 12th September**

Jointly organised by:  
Leeds Church Institute, Leeds Minster and  
Theology and Religious Studies at the  
University of Leeds

**7.30pm at Leeds Minster, LS2 7DJ**

Admission is FREE but by ticket only. To reserve one,  
please contact LCI at  
[events@leedschurchinstitute.org](mailto:events@leedschurchinstitute.org)  
or 0113 391 7928



The Leeds Church Institute is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers life long learning through events, publications & social media.



[www.facebook.com/LCILEeds](http://www.facebook.com/LCILEeds)



[www.twitter.com/LCILEeds](http://www.twitter.com/LCILEeds)

Email: [events@leedschurchinstitute.org](mailto:events@leedschurchinstitute.org)

Phone: 0113 391 7928

Address: 20 New Market Street, Leeds, LS1 6DG

For more articles, and information about events, visit [www.LCILEeds.org](http://www.LCILEeds.org)

Images:

Adobe stock images: Plastic in the sea (front cover) © aryfahmed, Mexican Ofrenda © leonardogonzalez, rubbish dump © vchalup, plastic bottle © chones

Co-creating with God images: © Thomas Jay Oord

Shutterstock.com images: Leeds Bridge © Alistair Wallace