

CHURCH HALL MEETING 25/03/2021 : CHANGES IN THE POST-COVID WORLD

SUMMARY

Our first Church Hall Meeting via Zoom was attended by 12 participants from our community and the wider Luxembourg - Notre-Dame parish.

It was our intention to keep the conversation as informal as possible; however, to provide some structure to the event, four questions were put to the group and the discussion occurred around them (furthermore, a number of pertinent articles had been posted previously on the Diakonia webpage).

Right at the start, we were reminded of the stark choice before the post-Covid world – whether to try to revert to “normal”, or to develop something new. We spent over an hour teasing out some of the implications of this choice, taking each of the four questions in turn.

1. Which of your activities, or those of others, cannot be carried out at the moment and should not be resumed in the future? (*Activities can be economic, social, cultural or spatial in nature and include those of companies, institutions, politics, etc. ...*)

Many participants put unnecessary long-distance air travel at the top of the list as being environmentally damaging. And, at the moment it is a matter of speculation whether low-cost short-haul air travel will in fact make a comeback after the pandemic is over, though there may well be a revival of long-distance international train travel. (We will very likely see a transitional increase in unemployment in the airline industry as these changes are worked through.) Other participants pointed to the fact that, prior to the pandemic, many tourist destinations were becoming overwhelmed by the influx of tourists – Venice was mentioned as an example of such unsustainable tourism. We should not return to that experience.

Among activities which should not be resumed, some participants placed the - presently common - home-working scenario. But others stressed the advantages of home-working and also our newly found ability to be in touch with ‘experts’ and like-minded people across the world. Certainly, at the moment there is a problem of social isolation for at least some of those home-working and mention was made of various on-line initiatives designed to alleviate such feelings of isolation.

2. What (new) activities could be taken up by people (e.g., workers, employees, civil servants, entrepreneurs, parents, students...) who are no longer able to do what they have done so far? Which activities could be invented?

Some participants emphasized the need to create new possibilities of employment more attuned to the earth and our environment (e.g., in horticulture). Equally we should encourage the trend towards increasing use of bicycles.

Similarly, emphasis was placed on the need for a more holistic approach to healthcare that would recognize our place as part of Creation/Nature and take a more spiritual approach to our bodies. Some felt there would be room to increase the use and benefits of “remote” medical care. The distinction in Biblical terminology between “curing” and “healing” was recalled in this context.

For Luxembourg, the need to create more training for healthcare personnel (doctors and nurses) and in education was highlighted. Where education is concerned, training would ideally move away from an excessively subject-oriented approach towards the inclusion of skills such as empathy, conflict avoidance, coping with bullying etc. so as to be able to better help young pupils who are suffering so much from this pandemic.

Pupil experience of the pandemic illustrates that not all teachers are able to cope to the same extent; motivation and an ability to think outside the box are essential qualities not possessed by all.

In spite of the difficulties associated with remote working/learning, we need to remember that technology has the capacity to be transformative, especially in remote regions.

3. What activities are now interrupted or impossible to resume and which you would like to take up?

Clearly, we all have a need to tightly hug our relatives and friends again. But in general, with this question, participants’ attention turned towards the Church. Relaunching our communities will not be easy, as the pandemic has had the effect of turning us in on ourselves and eroding our ability to feel at ease in large groups of people. Leadership, in finding new ways of ‘living life’, cannot be the sole responsibility of the clergy; lay people have an important role to play in the Church.

There was some discussion and different views on whether on-line, virtual services had actually reduced people’s participation in Mass ‘attendance’, though no one argued that on-line services were actually a desirable alternative to ‘real’ services. Yet, the way forward, it was agreed, cannot be by promoting purely liturgical activities. A community held together by the Mass alone cannot retain its young people for whom challenge and enjoyment are necessary ingredients for participation in a community. A need was felt for the Church to engage in new activities – as one participant put it: ‘taking the Church out of the church’ – more activity in the surrounding community and less in church buildings.

Recent positive examples of new activities in the Church in Luxembourg include videos of Church members involved in service to others explaining their reasons for doing so, and the successful creation of a series of meditations on the Sunday Gospel. In other words, given the climate of fear engendered by the pandemic, we should live and speak out a message of hope, as there is a deep need for it.

4. What are your fears, what are the challenges for the future?

The participants suggested the need to abandon mindless consumerism and return to the recognition of our place in Nature/Creation; to adopt a holistic and global approach (access to vaccines was seen as a marker of how far we are from this, although the COVAX programme is a small step in the right direction). We need to change lifestyle, not only at a personal level, but also in terms of our political and economic structures (and here, Luxembourg as a financial hub has a particular challenge to rise to).

In this respect, the idea of a universal (unconditional) basic income (UBI) was mooted as the kind of paradigm shift that is called for, not least because it would break the assumption, hitherto taken for granted, that only by engaging in paid work could we enjoy the benefits of the undoubted (though mal-distributed) abundance that our economies already enjoy.¹

Reference was also made to the enormous increase in online purchasing throughout the pandemic, with huge profits for the companies concerned accompanied by dehumanization of their employees' working conditions, plus the severe difficulties created for the retail sector. It was suggested that the State will have to take on a greater role in overseeing the shape of the future post-pandemic economy.

Conclusion

After more than an hour's conversation, we were left with a clear sense of challenge: to change our lifestyle as individuals and, as citizens, to try to ensure that our countries change their priorities.

¹ Anyone who wishes to support the campaign for a European Community Initiative on UBI can find the link here: <https://eci-ubi.eu/>