

PASTORALLY CARING FOR AN UNDER-RESOURCED AND CHALLENGED COMMUNITY

Rev Gayle Hill

When N.T. Wright was asked to answer a question about God's absence in people's experience of suffering and everyday hardship he offered the following scripture as his "go to" text.

John 11: 32-36 *"When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"*

We know from this story that Jesus did indeed raise Lazarus from the dead and so performed a miraculous healing in front of the gathered community. If left without their brother's benefaction the sisters would have faced a life of hardship, lack of resources, challenges and poverty. But God made manifest in Jesus Christ demonstrates always, a deep compassion, alliance and empathy with his people even if suffering and hardship are not eradicated. And he perseveres.

My community where I gather and serve at Rise in Carlton in the social housing precinct, is comprised of people who also live under-resourced and challenged lives in many ways that I do not personally experience. Sometimes it's just little things like, "can I afford internet, or a phone plan for example"? Most of my community contend with pre-paid phone cards which, depending on whether it is pension week or not, will be connected.

I reflect on this in relation to our current crisis and our attempts to pastorally care for our people in a time when the primary conduit for this is digital – whether it be zoom, phone, messenger or possibly WhatsApp. In order to model Jesus' compassion and empathy for the people we love and serve in this unprecedented time of social isolation, we have been forced to innovate and turn to digital platforms we probably all thought would be a good idea - one day!

But how do we pastorally care for a community where there is a higher percentage of people who are not connected digitally, or are, but in very unpredictable and inconsistent ways? In other words, they really are an under-resourced and challenged community.

I suspect this is not only my experience but also that of several pastors serving older, regional, remote or under-resourced congregations. Sometimes some of the advice and suggestions from mainline church don't apply to everyone.

Last week we trialled gathering digitally and had a few on zoom, some on messenger, some on the phone, others unable to gather because their pre-paid wasn't up to date, some who only had landlines (older folk) and it became something I would have rather not repeated. Perhaps I have higher and loftier standards, but the fact that we gathered and had a go was deeply appreciated by the community and incredulously, they want to try again!

So, what have I taken away from these challenges at this time with people who are under-resourced?

1. It's better to try and to work with what you have than not to try.
2. There is always room for improvement and keep working on that – this might just result in a teaching moment (myself included).
3. I always remember John Smith of the God Squad saying, "If you want to treat people equally you have to treat them differently". That means that on Mondays I phone Dulcie, because she cannot make the meetings as the technology is just too much to cope with. The other group of people who don't have an email I have to call on Messenger. If we can group chat that would be a great way to connect people.
4. Continue to adapt and think outside the square. Some of the people are connecting with others in the precinct, even though relationships can be complex. Continue to gather in as many varied and multiple ways as possible because we are social people and not meant for isolation.
5. Don't compare yourself to churches that are resourced – Jesus (and perseverance) is sometimes enough.

