

Love for the Future

Website Text

What *Love for the Future* is about

We face nothing less than an environmental crisis. Climate change, pollution and diminishing resources mean that the future will be difficult for life on earth.

Clearly we need technological solutions to some of the problems, and appropriate political and social programmes. But to meet the challenge we also need to change ourselves.

We need the courage to face up to what is happening, the determination to work at the problems and the freedom to let go of the old ways of living which are causing such damage to the earth.

And that is hard. The scale of the problem can seem overwhelming. We may be drained by fear or worn down by lack of progress. We may be swept along by the cynics who tell us there is not really a problem so we should just enjoy relax and go with the consumerist crowd.

Love for the Future explores the spiritual resources that are available to us as we face up to the environmental crisis. And it suggests how these can help us open ourselves to the energy of the Creator and work for the healing of the world.

We need a sense of wonder, a rooted humility and simplicity. We need compassion, a willingness to change and also to act for the good of those who suffer. We need faith, hope and wisdom, and holding it all together we need love.

The spiritual practices which the course explores are drawn mostly from the Christian tradition. They do not require special equipment, apps, or visits to special places. They can all be practised during a normal week of life. They require only a willingness to give time to allowing ourselves to be changed.

But we cannot go it alone. There are other people out there who are also concerned about what is happening to the earth. You can study the course with other people, meeting from time to time to discuss what you are exploring. Or you can follow the course with a work group, doing things together. Or you can follow the course on your own, in which case you will sometimes find yourself noticing, thinking about or doing things with other people as time goes on.

Browse the site to find out more of what is involved and work out the best way for you to use it to help you develop more love for the future.

The Book

Love for the Future: A Journey was written by David Osborne and published by Wild Goose in 2013.

It is available as a paperback (Link to <http://www.ionabooks.com/love-for-the-future.html>) or a download (Link to <http://www.ionabooks.com/love-for-the-future-downloadable-book.html>)

Reviewers said:

'I would recommend this book heartily as one of the best and most accessible pieces of spiritual writing I have encountered for a long while. Buy it, spend time with it, return to it and then share it with others.'
Revd Dr John Reader, William Temple Foundation in *Crucible*.

'Using the thread of a long walk from Shropshire to Iona, David Osborne weaves together autobiography, spiritual reflection, and passionate concern for the future of the earth threatened by irreversible climate change. A rare resource for all those struggling to keep faith and hope going in the face of what seem like insuperable odds.' Prof Timothy Gorringer, Exeter University.

'In David Osborne's quest theological reflection is central... Each movement of Osborne's journey is accompanied by a rich resource section, providing scriptural references, the writings of theologians, questions for personal reflection or group discussion, and suggested actions and further reading.... A deeply spiritual approach.' Revd Dr James Currall in *Church Times*.

'This is not a book explicitly about ecology or climate change – there are many of these – it is a meditation, based on a lived-out pilgrimage, on the values that underpin the Christian way and that can and should energise us to work for a better and safer world.' Dr Stuart Hannabuss, University of Aberdeen.

The Author

David Osborne grew up in Sussex and Surrey and when he was seventeen moved to Edinburgh where he began working in the construction industry. After completing a degree in civil engineering at Birmingham University he studied theology in Nottingham and then education in Bristol. He then taught secondary school religious education, environmental studies and physics in Somerset and Nigeria.

Returning from Nigeria he trained as an Anglican minister and worked in parishes in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Somerset, where he lives now. He holds a masters degree in the theology of education and served on the Church of England's General Synod as well as various diocesan bodies. He became a Member of the Iona Community in 1996.

Love for the Future: a Journey is his third book. His first book was *The Owl and the Stereo: an introduction to radical Christianity* which was published by Wild Goose in 1996. *The Country Vicar*, which provided a new model for rural ministry in Britain, was published by DLT in 2004. He has also published numerous articles and poetry.

Love for the Future developed out of work he was doing to encourage and help the Diocese of Bath and Wells develop an environment policy. He produced a short course with a DVD for the diocese and also ran courses on the subject at Iona Abbey and other venues. *Love for the Future: a Journey* drew on this work and combined it with reflections on a walking pilgrimage to Iona some years before.

Pilgrimage has been one of David's interests for many years, as has music and birdwatching. He is a member of Green Christian and is the local organiser for Christian Aid.

Love for the Future: Three Courses

There are 3 ways of following the course *Love for the Future*:

- (a) **Working alone** with the book *Love for the Future: a Journey*
- (b) in a **discussion group** - reading the book *Love for the Future: a Journey* and talking about it, a chapter or two at a time;
- (c) in a **working group** - doing a preparation exercise and then joining in an activity together.

Choose the method that suits you best.

(a) Working Alone

Get the book as a download or hard copy. The true story of a pilgrimage to Iona gives rise to reflections about the world and about the kind of character we need to develop for living in a time of ecological crisis.

At the end of each chapter there is a short story about an iconic person of the past, suggestions for reflection or group discussion, some Bible passages which are relevant to the theme, recommended action and further reading.

You can read the story straight through and leave out the rest, possibly returning to it later, or work your way through it steadily, perhaps a chapter and theme a week. The resource material is like a restaurant menu. Pick and choose what you want to do, and what suits you at this point in time.

The course gives things to do which can help open you up to developing what the author believes we need in order to live with love for the world in a time of crisis: wonder, humility, simplicity, community, compassion, active justice, change, faith, fellowship, hope, wisdom and love.

It is like working in a gym or practising music. The benefit comes slowly. And you can't try to do everything at once. You do what you can considering your own opportunities, abilities and interests. But in time, with practice, change happens.

(b) Discussion Groups

Find or form a small group to work through the book together. You might like to read the whole book first then discuss it, like any other book group. But you can get more by reading through it slowly and discussing the issues that arise, using the suggestions at the end of each chapter.

Your venue might be a cafe, a pub, someone's home or a church room. If you are reading two chapters at a time you'll need eight sessions.

We suggest:

1. Before the first session read the introduction.
2. In the first session work out who's going to join in, where you'll meet, and talk about the introduction to the book:
 - Why are you interested in reading and discussing the book?
 - What was there in the introduction that you could identify with?
 - What, for you, causes the most anxiety about the future?
 - Have you made any journeys which have affected how you see, think or feel about things?
3. In following sessions either take one chapter at a time or two.

If you are using two chapters at a time, chapters 1 & 2, 3 & 4, 5 & 6, 7 & 8, 9 & 10, and 11 & 12 go together well.

At the end of each chapter there are:

- questions for personal reflection or for a group to discuss,
- references to relevant Bible passages together with brief notes about the theme of the passage or its context ,
- some suggestions of things for people to do following the session,
- suggested further reading.

4. At the end of the course have a **final session**. We suggest that you have a meal together, discuss the Conclusion of the book and decide where you go from there.

Each person may wish to think beforehand about the following questions and share their answer with the rest of the group:

- What have you got from the course?
- Are there any ways that the course has affected how you see, think or feel about your life and the world we are part of?
- Are there any forms of spiritual practice that the course has introduced you to which you are going to continue to do after the course is finished?
- Are there any particular things that you are going to follow up: finding out more? Joining with other people? Or, taking action about?

Method (c) A Working Group

As a working group you may discuss the book but you will principally be doing things together. There are seven sessions: the first one to get you going and then six which follow different themes. Having a copy of the book is not essential but could be helpful.

Who and Where?

Form a group which will meet for seven sessions, perhaps for an hour and a half each week or once a fortnight.

Ideally there would be 6 to 8 people.

The best venue would be a flat, a house, or a common room with a kitchen and a degree of privacy. People wandering into the room are not likely to be a problem but sometimes you probably don't want spectators.

Time and Space

A phone or laptop may be useful for part of a session but it would be best if you were not dealing with texts, e-mails or calls during sessions. Give yourself a break. Take some time out for the course and let the others in the group have your full attention.

For each session there will be some preparation to do, perhaps 15 minutes a day. You can often do this on a bus or train, or sitting in a park or station. You don't need to be shut away. But you do need to give yourself the time. The more you can do the preparation, the more you will get from the whole course.

Course materials

The course can be done using this material online. The book *Love for the Future: a Journey* is recommended as it has a lot more suggested material and is clearly reckoned to be a good read.

Other books and web links will be suggested on the way.

INTRODUCTION SESSION

Find out **who's who** and why each person is interested in doing the course.

Decide **where** you are going to meet.

You'll need to contact each other as the course goes on, if only because someone may be late for a session and needs to let the others know, a venue needs changing or something else needs to be altered. Will you do this by text, phone, or e-mail? Make sure you have each other's **contact details**.

For **session 1** you have a choice of what you do together. Have a look at it and decide between you which option you are going to choose. And if any preparation is needed, say bringing food for a meal, decide who's going to do it.

Have a look at the preparation material for the first session: what everyone is going to be doing between now and then. Check out that you are agreed on what is involved. You are not going to be checking up on each other but it will be most helpful if you all understand the instructions the same way.

SESSION 1: TOUCHING THE EARTH

Wonder and Humility

We all spend a lot of time planning, rehearsing, and running through possible scenarios for some future time. We think about what might happen in ten minutes time, or the next evening, or on a future holiday. Or our mind drifts into remembering what's happened already and reminiscing. We don't actually spend much time in the present moment.

Nor do we spend much time being where we are. We are engaged with ideas in conversations or discussions, or are lost in what we are writing or reading. We work with spreadsheets and formulae, statistics and graphs, words on the screen or in our heads.

But we are concerned about the world. Because we are part of the world. We are creatures on this small blue planet and life on the planet is in danger. Ecosystems are being irrevocably damaged.

The first thing for us to do is to get back in touch with the earth; with this thing we care about and which we are part of.

Our ideas, concepts, schemes, campaigns and plans are valuable. We cannot work for the earth's health without them. But they remain nothing more than mindgames and become detached from reality if we are not ourselves in touch with the earth.

And when we do touch the earth we open ourselves to two possibilities. One is wonder: that sense which is beyond words of the world in all its mystery, power, beauty and intricacy being there before us, around us, despite us, and beyond us.

We might say, 'Wow!' We might stay silent. We have probably all had such moments of wonder. Perhaps we had many of them when we were very young. We can open ourselves now to the possibility of wonder, and we need to do so.

Without wonder our actions are likely to be misguided, like a development worker who doesn't listen to the locals, or a carer who pays no attention to their client.

So the first movement in this course is to open ourselves through contemplation to the possibility of wonder. Contemplation is not an esoteric practice. It is something we probably all do occasionally. Contemplation involves looking, or touching, or smelling, or listening attentively to what is before us. Not thinking about it, or trying to alter it, or making plans for it, but just attending to it.

Then the second movement is to engage with the earth with our hands and our senses. Feeling and working with matter, be it wood, clay, soil or food, reminds us that we are not disembodied minds, detached from the earth, but are a part of the earth.

It also reminds us that we are not able to control the earth. We can only influence what happens by working with the earth rather than by overpowering it: by 'going with the grain' of the earth.

Engaging with matter with our hands and senses can give us humility, which means fundamentally, being 'earthed', from the Latin word for soil: *humus*.

So the second movement in the course is to engage in some small way with real matter: soil, plants, food, rain, wind or the warmth of the sun.

Other Reading

David Osborne, *Love for the Future: a journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) chapters 1 and 2

Anne Richards *Sense Making Faith: Body, Spirit, Journey* (London: CTBI, 2007)

Any book about the natural world which will help you appreciate its variety, complexity and interconnection; *or* a book on painting, photography or architecture which will help you see what is in front of you; *or* a book on gardening, walking, sailing, cooking, or anything else which will help you be in touch with the world you are part of.

Preparation

Each day find a place to sit where you can see something of the living world and the sky: a park, a hillside, beside a window, beside a river or the sea. Give yourself a period of time in which to do this: say, ten or fifteen minutes. Do not talk or listen to music. First listen to what you can hear, perhaps with your eyes closed. Then open your eyes and pay attention to what you can see. Then what you can feel on your skin. Then what you can smell. When you find yourself thinking about other things (and you will) gently bring your mind back to what you have set out to do: hearing, seeing, feeling and smelling, and carry on where you left off before your mind went off elsewhere.

Group Meeting

When the group meets do any one of four things, as you decided in the introductory session:

(a) **prepare & eat a meal together.** Make sure that everyone in the group has some hands-on task to do in the preparation and the clearing up afterwards. As you are preparing the food notice the colours, textures and smells of the ingredients. It doesn't need to be anything grand. A pizza or a salad would do, though you might like to have something special to eat or to drink. When the food is served have a moment of silence before you start eating, to look at and to smell the food. And when you are eating pay attention to the smell, the textures and the tastes, not as food critics but to simply appreciate what you have.

After the meal discuss the possible truth of the statement, 'You are what you eat.'

Find out what you can about the Slow Food Movement.

(b) **do some work together in a garden.** Find someone who would like you to do some gardening. It could be some delicate work, involving planting out or pruning, or it could be some heavy digging or cutting back of undergrowth: whatever this person needs and also gets you in touch with the soil and what grows in it. If you can manage without wearing gloves, do. And if it rains, don't let that put you off. Without rain we would not be alive!

Then, afterwards, over a drink or a coffee discuss the possible truth of the statement, 'from dust you were made and to dust you will return'.

(c) **make some bread by hand.** (i.e. not with a bread making machine!) Find a recipe and make bread together. Make sure everyone has a chance to do some mixing and kneading. And if you have a chance to eat some of it over coffee or tea afterwards, do. Try it on its own, as well as with margarine or butter. Taste and smell the bread itself, not just what's on it.

Bread features a lot in the Bible. As a group try to remember phrases or stories you have heard from the Bible which involve bread. What was the significance of the bread in each of these?

(d) **go for a walk together** . And for part of the time don't talk. Look, smell, listen, feel the wind or the rain, and pay attention to what is around you.

After the walk have a drink together and tell each other of one particular image, or sound, or event from the walk that sticks in your mind. There is no need to explain why it was significant. Just share the memory.

Discuss together: walking can be contemplative, engaging and healthy; why do we not do it more?

For the Next Session

Have a look at what you will each be asked to do in preparation for the next session. Check out that you all understand what is involved.

Individual Reflection after the session

On your own think about which you are most inclined to neglect in your life: contemplation or engagement.

Do you need to make time or rules to ensure you have more time for this?

If so, how can you do that?

Session 2: TRAVELLING LIGHT

Simplicity and Community

It would be interesting to know how many times in a day someone tries to persuade each of us to do something. It would also be impossible to work out.

There are obvious times at work when someone wants us to act in a particular way, or at home, if we live with someone else. Friends, family or neighbours might straightforwardly tell us what they think we ought to do or make subtle suggestions.

But then there are the adverts. They come at us on the TV or radio, they follow us around on the computer and surround us on hoardings, trains, buses, and the tube. And there are articles which aren't actually adverts but strongly suggest how we ought to look, or spend our time, or where we ought to go, or what we should do with our money.

It's like a flood that sweeps us along and living can easily be like thrashing in white water, trying not to go under. And as we and billions of others are swept into doing more and more and having more and more the earth suffers.

Many teachers and writers in the past have spoken about simplicity. Simplicity is not naivety. A person who is being swept along by the currents of consumerism but thinks they are choosing their own lifestyle is being naive. A person who believes everything they read or hear is being naive. The word 'simplicity' has been used in the past to describe a way of life that is centred and not weighed down by unnecessary trappings, striving or guilt.

Simplicity is not something we can strive for. It is a gift. But we can do things which help us be open to receiving the gift. These involve stopping, and being where we are. Still. In the present moment and present to the world.

In preparation for the second session of this course there is a kind of exercise which many people find helps them to stop, and to be still. In recent years mindful meditation, or mindfulness, has helped many people to do this. It has come into the West from Buddhist practice and been adopted by many Christians as well as people of no religious tradition. But many of the practices are not unique to Buddhism and the aim of simplicity has long been considered a Christian virtue.

A short time of stillness, and of awareness of what our minds as well as our bodies are doing, is like a pause for breath. We cannot remain for ever, or even for long, in a state of isolated stillness. We also exist in a matrix of relationships with other people and with the whole living world. Our breath, which we might pay attention to in a period of meditation, is the air of the earth's atmosphere coming into us and the oxygen in it becoming a part of us. What we breathe out becomes a part of the atmosphere and then perhaps for a while a part of another living being. We are part of the living whole in the most basic way, through our breathing.

We are also linked with other people emotionally and mentally. We talk, we listen, we read, we text, we exchange ideas and information. Our moods are affected by what happens to them. There is no getting out of the stream.

But taking pauses, short times of stillness, can perhaps help us be aware of how we are influenced, and assessing the influences on us. And so, in the group work of this session we will think and talk about people that we reckon have influenced us for good.

Other Reading

David Osborne, *Love for the Future: a journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) chapters 3 and 4

Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The freedom of letting go* (New York: Crossroad, 2003)

Mark Williams and Danny Penman, *Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world* (London: Piatkus, 2011)

Eric Fromm, *To Have or to Be* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978)

Preparation

Find a place to sit where you will not be disturbed for ten minutes or so. Sit upright and comfortably. This probably means having your feet squarely on the ground, your hands in your lap, and your head balanced at the top of your spine so that your neck muscles are not pulling in any direction to keep it upright.

Close your eyes and be aware of the sounds around you. If you can identify what they are, acknowledge that, but do not think about the cause. Just let there be a sea of sounds with you quietly in the centre of it.

Then pay attention to your breathing. Do not deliberately breathe any particular way. Just let it happen as it was before but pay attention to either the feel of the air coming in and out of your nose or mouth or to the movement of your abdomen as it moves in and out. Be aware of the air coming into you and going out again. Pay attention to this for several minutes.

While you are doing this your mind will wander. Perhaps to plans for what you must do later, or to remembering things that have happened. Or to things that might happen. Be aware of those thoughts, and the emotions that go with them, and gently bring your attention back to your breath.

It might help to set a timer, perhaps of ten minutes for the whole exercise. But not longer. Less would be fine. Then when the time is up open your eyes and pay attention for a few minutes to what you can see: looking for the colours, shapes and textures of the things before you.

Repeat this exercise on a number of occasions. You might find after a while that you find it easier to be still in other places, and to move into stillness for a few minutes on a bus or train, or at your desk or computer, developing a greater sense of being yourself: a person who has ideas, plans, worries, possessions and relationships, but is other than all those.

Group Meeting

1. You need a large sheet of paper and some pens, and a sense of humour. It might help to have coffee or another drink to begin with.
2. Near the centre of the paper draw a picture to represent each person in the group. You could each draw yourselves or simply draw a stick figure. If you are drawing yourselves don't take it too seriously. This is not serious art and it is not going to be marked like at school!
3. Then draw lines connecting each of the figures in the diagram.

4. Then in turn let each person in the group tell the others about someone who has influenced them for good. It might be anyone: a significant cultural figure, someone they have never met but who wrote a book or song which has influenced them, or it might have been a childhood friend or their grandmother. Anyone.
5. As each person contributes their part add these characters to the diagram, with another picture and line connecting them to the diagram of the speaker.
6. It may be that someone has mentioned a person who was also a good influence for someone else. In that case draw another line connecting these two.
7. When each person has described and drawn two or three people, as a group try to guess who might have influenced these people. And add them to the diagram.
8. There will come a point where you have run out of time or paper, or both. But that's enough. You have drawn a diagram of a very small part of a vast network of good influences in which you are caught up.

For the Next Session

Have a look at what you will each be asked to do in preparation for the next session. Check out that you all understand what is involved.

Reflection after the session

Think about your weekly schedule and see whether you can build into it time and space for a stillness meditation, as well as contemplation and engagement. That might sound a lot but it would be possible to put them together. For example, by spending a few minutes being still, then looking at what is in front of you, noticing colours, shapes and movement, and then going for a short walk, being deliberately aware of the air on your hands and face, and maybe touching one or two things on the way. And, allowing a bit of extra time, the walk could even be a journey that you have to make anyway.

Session 3: LIGHTING FIRE

Compassion and Justice

There are so many people around. Most of them we don't notice, or we ignore. They have their lives and we have ours. And as humans we are only capable anyway of having significant relationships with a limited number of people.

So we take no notice of most of the people around us in the street, or the train, or perhaps at work or even where we live.

We do this to protect ourselves. If we get involved with other people we can get hurt. Not only might they hurt us, but we might also begin to share their pain. And we often want to avoid it because we are afraid it will weigh us down and stop us doing what we want to do. It will sap our energy or take up our time.

Or we suspect that it will stir up in us some of our own pain that we have carefully buried. We do not want to feel again what we have felt in the past. We don't want to open up our old wounds.

But in protecting ourselves in this way we are sometimes allowing bad things to happen which we might be able to stop. We are also cutting ourselves off from a rich source of energy.

In counselling work a helpful distinction is made between sympathy and empathy. When we are sympathetic we get sucked into the other person's problem and are of limited help to them. When we are empathetic we have insight into how it feels for them but we are also able to remain to some degree objective and so are able to see beyond the problem and help the person through it.

Many religious traditions teach that 'compassion' is a good thing. Compassion is akin to empathy. Having compassion involves allowing ourselves to feel for another person, but this feeling empowers us to take some action.

In the Bible compassion is coupled with justice. 'Justice' in the Bible is not about making sure everyone gets what they deserve but doing what is helpful for those who are disadvantaged.

In the story of Moses and the burning bush, in Exodus chapter 3, God says that he has heard the cries of the Israelites who are slaves in Egypt and has come to rescue them. This is then a motif throughout the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament: that God is compassionate and acts for justice.

It is what the prophets call for and what Jesus demonstrates when he repeatedly draws an outsider into his new community with forgiveness and healing. Unfortunately, in some bibles this continuing theme is obscured by using the word 'righteousness' instead of 'justice' to translate the original Hebrew and Greek words.

If we are going to work effectively for the good of humanity and the earth we need the energy which comes from compassion, which is the energy of God. We cannot afford to cut ourselves off from the suffering of the earth and the pain of other people.

But we also need to avoid being drowned by the pain or our own sense of inadequacy. It is important to maintain our balance and sense of self. The earlier exercises of contemplation, engagement and mindfulness can help us do this. They root us in the present moment, in the world as it is, and help us be aware that we too are only a part of the whole. We are not required to solve all problems for everyone or for the world, but to do our part where we are in our time.

Before the next session there is an exercise in deliberately imagining what another person might be going through emotionally. It might be good to do this several times.

Other Reading

David Osborne, *Love for the Future: a journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) chapters 5 and 6

Karen Armstrong, *Twelve steps to a Compassionate Life* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011)

Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996)

Barbara Butler, *Inherit the Earth? Millennium Development Goals – so near and yet so far* (London: CTBI, 2013)

Preparation

On a short journey pay attention to the people you pass or meet. What do you think they are feeling? How does their life seem to be for them? Speculate on where some of them might be coming from, and going to.

You may well be wrong but it helps you to remember that they have lives beyond the short time that they are near you. With their hopes, joys, pain and fears they too are part, with you, of the great network of life.

Group Work

First, tell each other if you did the preparation exercise and what came out of it for you. If anyone found it particularly hard or painful let them tell, if they wish, how they dealt with that strong emotion.

Then, in turn let members tell each other what issues of justice they see in their local community, church or place of work. Make a list of them. Issues may be related to the members' experiences in the preparation exercise, but not necessarily. They could be other issues they are aware of.

Think and discuss what you could possibly do to help bring justice into that situation. It might involve talking with people, or joining a campaign, or raising money, or writing letters. You cannot do everything so simply choose one of them which you will work on.

It might be that everyone in the group lives in the same neighbourhood, works in the same place or attends the same church, in which case you could decide to take action together. If members of the group live, or work, or worship in different places then each individual will need to take one thing and in future sessions say how they are getting on with it, and what response, if any, they have had.

For the Next Session

Have a look at what you will each be asked to do in preparation for the next session. Check out that you all understand what is involved.

Reflection after the session

Think about what you have chosen to do for justice, and how you feel about it shortly after the meeting. It may be excitement, fear, or a sense of being weighed down by yet another thing to try and do.

Acknowledge that feeling. And assess whether you need to amend your plan. If so, go ahead and amend it. But try not to do nothing. It's better to do something very small but possible than keep an ambitious plan which you don't carry out.

Session 4: CHOICES AND CHANGES

Repentance and Faith

Words accumulate baggage as time goes on. A word which at one time seems very appropriate to convey an idea can come after a while to suggest something quite different. Then it's hard to know what to do. Do you trade in the old word and use a new one, or do you carry on with the old one hoping that it will carry on doing the job for a bit longer?

'Repentance' is one such word. When it was first used in English translations of the Bible it meant 'to change', or more particularly, to change one's mind and therefore do something else. By the twentieth

century it had come to suggest feeling bad about oneself. By the twenty first century it has come to hardly be used at all, except in religious services, so perhaps it can be reused again soon.

But whether or not it can, it is an important idea. And the old message that we need to repent is more important than ever. Our whole consumer culture is wrecking the planet. As more and more people consume more and more stuff and put more and more pollutants into the water and the soil and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere the life systems of the earth are put under increasing stress. Already things are beginning to collapse. A big extinction of species is beginning and the climate is changing.

We need to change our ways. We need to 'repent'. We need to develop a different way of living with the earth.

If you are following this course or reading this page you probably don't need to be persuaded of that. You've probably read books or articles about the problems, and have heard talks or lectures on how we need to be living instead. (If haven't, have a quick look at the websites of Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, WWF, Climate Coalition, Forum for the Future, or Green Christian, to give you a flavour of what is being said, or read Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si.*)

One problem is that we can't get off the boat. We are being carried along. We are part of a global society and most of us have little influence over what happens.

And when we come to try to do things differently we get stuck. We want to seriously reduce our carbon footprint but we still have to travel to work and heat our houses. We want to stop deforestation in the tropics but find it hard to avoid food containing palm oil. We want to reduce the amount of rubbish we send to the tip but still end up with plastic wrappers and containers which will take decades to disintegrate and then leave a toxic residue.

And here we turn to our second misunderstood word. 'Faith'. To many people it has come to mean either a religion, as in the Christian, Muslim or Buddhist faith, etc, or things a religious person is supposed to believe. A devoted Christian might feel they have little faith because they don't believe Jesus literally ascended into heaven, or that he will come again on the clouds, or that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born.

In the Bible faith is trust. Jesus commends people who have faith in him but nowhere does he ask them what they believe. In fact, in Greek, faith is not something you have but something you do. Faith in God is trust in God.

Obviously your faith is going to be affected by what you believe. If you believe that God can intervene in what is going on in the world you might trust God to stop people making a mess of things. But if you look at what's happened in the past and conclude that God doesn't interact with the world that way, your trust in God will take a different form.

Faith is important in the face of our inability to do things very differently because we can trust that, however God engages with the world, it is still God's world, God's universe; this is God's project and God is still active within it. And we can trust that we are not written off by God even though we can't get everything right.

An ancient prayer is *Kyrie eleison*. 'Lord have mercy'. We can say that, and get on with life, free of the burden of failure to get on and do what we can for the earth.

Other Reading

David Osborne, *Love for the Future: a journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) chapters 7 and 8

Rowan Williams and Joan Chittister OSB, *For all that has been, thanks* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010)

Kathy Galloway, *Sharing the Blessing: Overcoming poverty and working for justice* (London: SPCK & Christian Aid, 2008)

Catherine von Ruhland, *Living with the Planet: Making a Difference in a Time of Climate Change* (Oxford: Lion, 2008)

Preparation

Make a list of things you would like to be different in your own life for the sake of other people or the earth.

Group Session

Each person in the group talk briefly about any action they have taken for justice following the last session; what results they have had; and how they feel about it.

Then, as far as each person wishes, share in the group the list they made in preparation for the session: of things they would like to be different in their own life for the sake of other people or the earth.

Each person choose one thing that they think they can actually change. Discuss with the group what might help. Then decide what you need to do first to help bring about the change.

For the Next Session

Have a look at what you will each be asked to do in preparation for the next session. Check out that you all understand what is involved.

After the Session

Take the first step towards change that you decided on in the group session.

Session 5: STORIES, SONGS AND SIGNS

Hope and Fellowship

Hope and optimism are sometimes confused but they are not the same thing. An optimist is not necessarily hopeful and a pessimist is often not without hope.

Hope enables people to carry on, and to carry on caring, even when things are desperate. It is a conviction that the pain, the grief, the struggle and suffering of the world is taken into a greater reality where the wounds are not removed but healed.

Out of loss comes new possibility. Out of death comes life, in time and in eternity. In the energy and new growth of the spring, in the passions and dreams of children, in the beauty that we can sometimes glimpse even in a scene of destruction, we have continual reminders of this.

But at times it is obscured. The light is hidden. Hope then is the conviction that it is still there, even if it can't be seen. A conviction that out of even the worst that can happen, God can and does create new life and possibilities. Even out of death.

Usually people don't put this into words. They are too busy doing what they need to get by, taking each day at a time. Or talking about God seems irrelevant, or crass, particularly if their idea of 'God' is of a superbeing who could make everything better but for some inscrutable reason doesn't do so. In their situation hope is lived out by carrying on caring despite the absence of 'God'.

Living with hope is not a matter of ignoring the bad and just looking at the good: watching the water lapping on the beach and not seeing the litter; seeing children round a barbecue on the shore of a loch and refusing to think about the nuclear missiles that are stored across the water; enjoying easy travel through a rugged landscape and not considering the price we are paying in changing the climate.

Hope involves recognising the pain amidst the pleasure and the bad within the good. It involves recalling our human story as one of war, violence and exploitation as well as courage, justice and technological progress. It means recognising that there is death as well as life, but doing so with the conviction that goodness, creativity, life and joy ultimately overcome the destruction.

For most of us, hope is encouraged by other people: people we know and share our struggles with, or people of the past or in other places who write songs, compose music, tell stories or capture images in their poetry, and somehow strengthen our determination to live, and to live for justice.

In this session we will think of what has in the past helped us in dark times, and share these with each other.

Other Reading

David Osborne, *Love for the Future: a journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) chapters 9 and 10

Tom Gordon, *New Journeys Now Begin: Learning on the path of grief and loss* (Glasgow: wild Goose, 2006)

Ruth Burgess, *A Book of Blessings, and how to write your own* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2001)

Jurgen Moltmann, *In the End – the Beginning* (London: SCM, 2004)

Preparation

Find a piece of music, a poem, a picture, a story or something else which has been a help for you in a dark time in your life.

Group Session

Each person in turn share what they have chosen that has been helpful to them in a dark time. Each tell the others as much or as little about the situation as you wish.

If you have time, each choose another person's selection to hear or see again.

Together choose one piece of music to listen to again in the next session, and one thing to read.

For the Next Session

Have a look at what you will each be asked to do in preparation for the next session. Check out that you all understand what is involved.

Reflection after the Session

What can you do now that might help you in future dark times?

Session 6: ON EAGLES' WINGS

Wisdom and Love

Wisdom is an English word that is not often used now. We talk about people being clever, smart, successful, brilliant, shrewd, and bright, but rarely about them being wise. Perhaps because we know they aren't. Perhaps because we have stopped thinking about and looking for wisdom.

In many ancient societies people did look for wisdom. Wisdom was seen as the answer to the question of how they were to live. Wisdom was about how people were to get on with each other, and about their relationship with the world, or at least the part of it with which they had dealings. It was highly prized and what was believed to be wisdom was passed on in stories, poems, proverbs and songs.

A word that is often used now is the word 'love'. There are probably more stories, poems and songs about love than about any other subject. But there can be different kinds of love. There is the love which is a fondness for some person or thing: a child, a particular place, a food or a style of music. There is the love which is a deep and strong friendship between people. There is the love which is a strong emotional and physical attraction between two people. In Greek there are different words for these kinds of love: *storge*, *philia* and *eros*.

In the New Testament a fourth word is used: *agape* (pronounced 'agapay'). This is the love that Jesus teaches and that Jesus shows. It is, says John's gospel, what God has for the world.

Love for other people might be summed up as seeing what is good in them and doing what is good for them. As such it will evoke compassion and work out in justice.

Love for God will give rise to an appreciation of God's creation and a trust in God's creative love.

This love gives a direction and energy to life as it resonates with the energy, or Spirit, of God.

In the book of Isaiah there is a passage which is addressed to a group of downtrodden people, beginning to lose hope. He says that 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.' (Isaiah 40.31)

The rising flight of an eagle can be a symbol of hope. An eagle can also be a symbol of wisdom. An eagle is able to see over a wide area from its high curving flight. With its sharp eyesight is also able to see the detail in the land below.

In our culture of ever increasing specialism, wisdom will involve having a broad view, able to see how different actions and possibilities fit together and how they might work out over time. It will also involve not ignoring the details of how things actually work.

Wisdom will give the view. Love will give the direction and the energy.

In this session we will share our experiences of encountering wisdom, and celebrate the love we see in Jesus and are told to live out ourselves.

Other Reading

David Osborne, *Love for the Future: a journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) chapters 11, 12 and Conclusion.

C.S.Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960)

M Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (London: Random House, 1983)

E.F.Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Bond and Briggs, 1973)

Preparation

Think of someone you know or have known, who was or is wise? They might be someone you have known personally; or a writer, artist or scientist you have come across; or a politician you know about. What was it about them that made them 'wise'?

Group Session

Have a simple meal together and have a piece of bread or a roll and a glass of wine on the table, or if you are sitting in low chairs, on a coffee table in the centre.

As you are having the meal tell each other about the 'wise' person you have thought of.

After the meal read the three short passages from the Bible below.

Then someone take the piece of bread, break it up and pass it round so that everyone can have a piece.

Then pass round the glass of wine and all take a sip.

After this, read the passage you chose last week, play the piece of music you selected.

This is the end of the course. All tell each other what you hope to be doing as an individual and with others as a consequence of what you have discussed and shared together during the course.

Finish by reading together the prayer that is below.

Note: the session has some resemblance to a communion service. It is an ancient Christian practice known as an 'agape meal' which may have been how the communion service originated. Agape meals have taken place many times down the centuries, particularly as a way of enabling Christians to worship God, remember Jesus and celebrate their fellowship, without the constraints of church rules.

Bible Readings for Session 6, from the New Revised Standard Version:

Isaiah 40.28 - 31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary,

and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

1 Corinthians 11.23 - 25

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

John 15.9 - 11

As the Father has loved me,
so I have loved you;
abide in my love.
If you keep my commandments,
you will abide in my love,
just as I have kept my Father's commandments
and abide in his love.
I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete.

Prayer:

God beyond us,
God among us,
God around us,
God within us;
you call the cosmos into being
and love your creation;
help us, as disciples of Jesus,
to be open to your Spirit's gifts of wonder, joy and simplicity;
to share your compassion for the earth and its people;
to work with you for justice, peace and healing,
and to live with faith, hope, wisdom,
and love.