



THE ECUMENICAL CHAPLAINCY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

CALLING OUR FRIENDS

Summer 2019/20 Volume 13

From the Chaplains



Associate Chaplain – Jeanette Unger

When I look back on ECUT's Facebook page for the past two months, there are messages about financial aid for students impacted by Covid-19, notes of congratulations to 2020 graduates who were not able to have in-person ceremonies to mark their accomplishments, invitations to online programs (everything from meditation to movies to Pride events), reminders about resources available to students with children, where to get emergency food relief, and most recently an affirmation that Black lives matter and an ask that White people work to understand and dismantle racism.

Underneath all these words and programs and resources is trust that God's love remains constant. Holding onto this Love when the world is chaotic and uncertain is a gift that chaplains can offer to students, staff and faculty at the university. While sometimes said with a shaky and teary voice, we nonetheless affirm that nothing can separate us from God's love.

The Reality of Two Viruses

BY ASSOCIATE CHAPLAIN LEONARD CLARKE JR. (JAE)



Black Lives Matter March, May 2020

What a year 2020 has been! We were on the brink of WW3 instigated by America's killing of an Iranian General. We lost a sports legend in Kobe Bryant who was killed along with eight individuals, including his daughter Gigi, in a terrible tragedy. And now, the world is faced with the reality of two deadly viruses: Covid-19 and Racism.

Ironically, even as the world shuttered its doors in an effort to slow the spread of Covid-19, the virus of racial inequality, racially motivated police misconduct, and unjust discrimination on the basis of ethnicity rages forward.

Over the past few months there have been murmurings and outrage over the shutdown of businesses and recreation. People held rallies lamenting a perceived loss of normalcy and their freedom to move about. But imagine living a life where your freedom to move about unencumbered is perpetually disrupted. Imagine patronizing businesses whose owners and employees are consistently suspicious of your presence. Imagine being fearful everyday of those who took an oath to protect and serve but who instead kill and brutalize. For centuries this has been the Black experience.

Reality of two viruses.....

For those who may feel Canada is blameless, this is misguided thinking. Racial inequality is not germane to America. The issues of racial discrimination are prominent in all of the world's societies. We are all aware of it but some of us choose to do nothing. As a result, the protests and unrest we are witnessing around the world are meant not only to lament race inequity and force change, it is also meant to force our silent, "do-nothing" subconscious into reality.

You may think, "... but there's nothing I can really do about race inequality." If this is you, you are wrong. You may not be an activist. You may not prefer to join a protest. But you cannot remain willfully oblivious. Silence and inaction only exacerbate the problem. Search your soul. Ask yourself, "Do I uphold negative stereotypes?" For instance, do you automatically feel threatened or uneasy in the presence of a minority? Ask yourself, "Have I remained silent and done nothing when witnessing acts of bigotry and racial discrimination?"

Did you defend, protect, or comfort your brother or sister facing injustice? At the very least, ask yourself, "Do I recognize my own privilege?" Are you aware of the inherent advantages afforded you based on the color of your skin?

Similarly, I admonish my Black, Brown, Asian, South Pacific and non-White brothers and sisters reading this article. Martin Luther King Jr said, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Do not think that because racism has not touched you personally that it will not ever touch you. What we do today in this climate will have a lasting impact for generations to come. For the sake of our children's future and the future of the world in general, we cannot afford inaction.



Ecology and Spirituality Art Show



Artist Tanvi Khurmi talking about her piece, "Gaia"

On March 3, 2020, ECUT sponsored an art show that invited submissions reflecting on the connections between land, environment, nature, spirituality and religion. With over 12 submitted pieces, the multi-purpose room at the Multi-Faith Centre was full of color, energy and meaning.

The artists were given an opportunity to talk about their pieces. One artist reflected on her current ecological anxiety and art as a spiritual practice that provides hope. Another artist reflected on the religious act of kneeling to pray as connection to the land.

A table at the centre of the room was a recycled paper origami-making station with help from UTFold, allowing people to participate in making and creating their own art.

Many thanks to Ecology and Spirituality intern, Samantha Lucchetta, for her work in organizing this event!

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Campus chaplaincy during coronavirus

As is true for so many people right now, the Covid-19 pandemic brings hardships and challenges as well as opportunities to think creatively about what, how and why we do the things we do.

Some students are really struggling with isolation, loneliness, and the impacts social distancing and remote learning have on their mental health. One international student wrote, *"It's been hard for me to get through the lockdown and am barely surviving."* Graduating student and the Ecology and Spirituality intern this year, Samantha Lucchetta, reflects: *"Being a graduating student during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a bit of a rollercoaster. While it has been nice to slow down and have time to myself, it's hard to deal with plans that have been delayed or cancelled entirely, especially after spending so long awaiting the freedom of being fresh out of university."* Other students, particularly LGBTQ+ students, are now isolated at home with family members who are not supportive.

As chaplains, we continue to be in touch with students for one on one for pastoral care and spiritual support through phone or video. At the U of T Scarborough campus, Associate Chaplain Leonard Clarke Jr. (Jae) has supported several students who have international family members who have died from Covid-19. We are trying to keep students informed of the resources that are available to them, especially financial aid and mental health support.

Although ECUT's programming traditionally slows down after April's exam period, we were able to move the Qu(e)rying Religion group to online meetings. The Student Christian Movement moved their gatherings online very quickly and at one point, were offering something every day of the week - from Bible studies to contemplative prayer to watching movies together to social hangouts. Some students have found a profound place of community and belonging online.

The pandemic has invited deep thinking about the world we currently live in and what changes in the direction of justice might be possible. Do we really want to return to the way things were? Again, Samantha Lucchetta writes, *"In many ways, this pandemic has challenged me to think more creatively and proactively about self-care and mental health, and it has also encouraged me to express more gratitude on a daily basis. I hope that this pandemic makes us think more critically about social justice and environmental issues, so that some good can come out of a tragic time."* There are so many amazing conversations happening right now about how we live in the world and we are grateful for the students who are asking these important questions!

We recognize that as students have moved back home, they may be turning to their home communities and congregations for support. Here's a word of thanks to those who might be caring for their university students in new and unexpected ways - your presence in their lives makes a big difference.

Thank you for your support as we live out our ministry in new ways.



Emmanuel College student and ECUT board member, Valerie de Souza, writes:

"As a student training to be a psycho-spiritual therapist/ chaplain, this Covid-19 pandemic has given me an opportunity for self-reflection and learning about what it really means to be a chaplain.

When our world gets turned upside down and there is uncertainty about the health and survival of ourselves and our loved ones, who do we turn to for a listening ear, a calming presence and reassurance that we are not alone amidst the turmoil? A chaplain!

Who is there to name our jumble of feelings - anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, sadness, loneliness, sorrow, laughter, etc. - and acknowledge them as normal? A chaplain!

Who can we turn to when we feel alone and lost, scattered and stressed, heartbroken and grieving? A chaplain!

A chaplain can reach out, even through technology, to make us feel heard, held and understood; to offer comfort and support; and to encourage us to take the next step forward to courageous live another day. I am grateful for the chaplains that I have gotten to know through the ECUT and feel privileged to be following in their brave, compassionate shoes."