

Christian Today:

Five things we've learnt about Truth in the pandemic

The world is facing a crisis of truth, says Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. It's a declaration that resonates with many people facing up to the consequences.

Archbishop Welby's words come as truth remains under the spotlight during the long months of the pandemic. Claims and counter claims about the virus, vaccines and the effectiveness of government responses take centre-stage globally.

Welby compared current challenges with the ground-breaking Beveridge Report of 1942 that gave rise to the post-war UK welfare state. That report identified five major problems preventing improvements in living standards: 'want, ignorance, squalor, idleness and disease.'

The Archbishop told [Prospect magazine](#) "We face a crisis in truth. Seemingly infinite, instantly accessible information gives the problem a different complexion from the 'ignorance' of Beveridge's day.

"But the truth can nonetheless be very difficult to pin down. Conspiracy theories can circle the globe, misinformation causes real-world repercussions. We need to learn to judge the information we receive, think critically, and kindly, and act accordingly."

I've been involved in a project rooted in the Church of England's St Albans diocese, north of London, for the past three years. We have brought together people from a range of backgrounds and faiths in a series of online and offline gatherings to address the question 'Where is Truth now?'

People have shared their perspectives on how truth is faring in their professions and disciplines, and in wider society. All have welcomed the chance to talk about issues around truth, with some saying that their workplace culture failed to encourage open discussion.

We have produced [publications, videos and online interviews](#) and taken part in debates with other organisations about the role of truth in the 21st century world.

Sometimes, we have faced the question, "What can you possibly achieve, in the face of a tidal wave of distrust, fake news and disinformation?" Our reply is simple. We are seeking to keep the conversation going – to raise questions about the role of truth in our society, to uphold its value and give space for people to engage with the issues.

The project's co-ordinators are rooted in the Christian faith, following Jesus Christ who declared "I am the way and the truth and the life" and that "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." We have welcomed and embraced the involvement of Jewish and Muslim believers, and others not professing a faith.

A vital question for us from the experience of recent months has been 'How has truth fared during the pandemic? Here are five key points that have come out of our conversations.

One. Truth can save your life.

Knowing the truth about the Covid-19 virus and the vaccines that could guard against it is vital protection during the pandemic. The advice of scientists, health professionals and researchers has been widely sought out and debated as the pandemic has spanned the world.

But we've also seen a rise in conspiracy theories, anti-vaccination campaigns and growing confusion as people challenge the extent of the pandemic, and whether Covid-19 is really a threat. Social media algorithms stand accused of spreading misinformation faster than reliable facts and corrections.

More positively, we've seen an increase in people wanting to know the truth. Is the vaccine safe? Are the statistics accurate? How likely am I to get Covid? The post-modern idea of all truth being relative falls far short of the mark when the truth can save your life.

Two. Truth comes from trust.

Knowing who to trust is one of the fastest growing challenges facing anyone wanting to know more about the pandemic and its causes.

While faith in doctors and scientists is generally good, trust in politicians has remained low, and scepticism and confusion are growing.

Three. Truth can be found on your doorstep – but it's not always trustworthy.

Local information has become more important, especially during lockdowns. But with local newspapers and radio in decline, neighbourhood social media networks have been taking their place, spreading information – not all of it verifiable and sometimes incorrect. One observer of social media commented: "We make our truths by sharing our experiences."

Often, it's fear that drives our response to the stories we read. We eagerly consume stories highlighting a new 'threat' from Covid or scapegoating people not keeping to the lockdown rules. We respond emotionally, 'with our gut' – rather than our brain or intellect – to the things we read or are told.

Four. Truth has to be valued and protected.

Reliable, trusted journalism has been at a premium. ITV News journalist Julie Etchingham [defended the role of the media](#) during Covid-19. The news presenter, a practising Roman Catholic, explained: "If we're still attempting to function as a democracy in the face of this, then scrutiny is clearly crucial. Many in our front-line services and the wider public are demanding answers. We are there on their behalf."

In December 2020, the editor of the Yorkshire Post, James Mitchinson, published his response to a reader who believed social media posts over his newspaper's reports of a young boy who had a traumatic experience at a Leeds hospital. The open letter, headlined '[Do not believe a stranger on social media who disappears into the night](#)'

sets out the contrast between verified public interest journalism and disinformation posted online.

Five. Truth can be complicated – and that’s ok.

Throughout the pandemic, politicians have spoken about ‘following the science.’ This, they have said, has guided their decision making. Yet scientists can have a range of views, based on similar research findings. It’s in the discussion and debate that scientific truth arises.

Challenging judgements have to be made between a range of possible outcomes and their social and economic effects – that’s the role of the politicians we elect.

People accept that the ‘scientific evidence’ is not always straightforward – we know that truth can be complicated, from our own daily lives. So politicians who level with their electors about the complexity of the decisions may be received with more credibility.

In the discussion around truth in the pandemic, we’ve been asked several times, “where is the Church in this debate?”

It’s encouraging to see the Church on the front line – working at the grassroots to help those impacted by the effects of the pandemic. The [BBC report](#) of churches helping people with food parcels in Burnley, has rightly just won an award from the [Sandford St Martin Trust](#) that promotes the best in religious broadcasting.

In continuing to ask the question “Where is Truth Now?” our modest St Albans-based project is helping to keep the conversation going – and encouraging others to do the same.

Rev Peter Crumpler is a Church of England priest in St Albans, Herts, UK, and a former communications director with the CofE. He is the author of [‘Responding to Post-truth](#)