

To be seen

Jodie Hoff

*It would be too easy to say that I feel invisible.
Instead, I feel painfully visible, and entirely ignored.*

(Author unknown)

I wonder how inclusive people believe our church to be. A place where true hospitality, the love of strangers, regardless of their status in society, is part of our cultural DNA. I often reflect and think about how visible or invisible people may feel in our church.

One day during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was driving to school and listening to the radio. The reporter was sharing a story about an 82-year-old woman living in a Brisbane suburb. This woman had been overwhelmed by the generosity of people in her neighbourhood who had started dropping off food for her and making meals. She observed that for so long she had been 'invisible' in her community and now she felt 'visible'. She then went on to wonder if that would change once the pandemic was over. That she would become 'invisible' once again and forgotten. What a striking thought. Something so extreme as global pandemic leading people who are the most vulnerable in our community suddenly feeling visible and part of community, but then fearing this could change once again over time.

During the pandemic, it has been interesting to note how movements such as 'the kindness pandemic' on Facebook have engaged people around the world, where people have shared simple stories of kindness, empathy, connection and service. A stark contrast to people losing their minds in supermarkets purchasing hundreds of toilet rolls in one go. But really, who knew how we would all react? Not many of us have lived through a pandemic before. This has been new for everyone.

I was listening to a podcast where Hugh Mackay (psychologist, sociologist, and social researcher) was being interviewed and he was asked what was the most significant idea that has come out of the pandemic so far. Hugh commented on the concept of understanding what it meant to be a neighbour. He made reference to the parable of the good Samaritan and the importance of this story in regards to humans understanding compassion and neighbourliness. How do we answer the question 'Who is my neighbour?' It is both a challenge and a call to action. What would your answer be? Who are you in the story of the good Samaritan?

I work with young people, staff and families in a K–12 Lutheran School on the Gold Coast. Our school has a strong focus on service-learning, and we have partnerships with a few organisations in the community including an aged care residence and an agency that works alongside people experiencing homelessness. These partnerships are very hands-on, with staff and students visiting aged care residents and serving people living rough on the street. Within an instant of Covid-19 restrictions being introduced, those opportunities to connect face-to-face and to serve were gone. No visiting aged care facilities and no

volunteering on the streets. How were these people's needs going to be met? How would social isolation impact the well-being of these people?

The concepts of presence, boundary crossing, innate dignity, story and coming as guest underpin our service-learning partnerships. We have used these concepts to explore with our students how we still connect with our partners but in different ways. The core of what we have been doing is teaching our students how to be empathetic. Seeing with eyes of another. Listening with ears of another. Feeling with the heart of another. Our young people have come up with new ways to serve that respect the needs of the other so that our friends on the street and in the aged care residence don't remain invisible or ignored. Once we return to our 'new normal' we can't forget these people or these new ways of being.

According to the ABS Census, 2016, [homelessness in Australia has increased 13.7% in five years](#). It is believed that homelessness (in its many and varied forms) could be on the increase due to Covid-19, with people who would never have expected to find themselves homeless, experiencing homelessness. These could be people sitting in our pews. I know they are in my school.

Due to Covid-19, the world is not going to be the same anymore. Our church needs to learn to adapt. We need an empathetic mindset that will allow us to be open to new possibilities, consider different structures and to think in ways that we never have before. Do we have the courage and capacity to reshape our role in a changing society, so we can meet the needs of our neighbours who we are called to serve? Remember, Jesus ensured that the invisible became visible and were not ignored.

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