



## Learning Note #4

### Care and connection in the time of COVID-19: Working slower and deeper Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, with Thuli Mjwara

25 August 2020

*'...touching base more regularly has opened up opportunity for more [and different] kinds of engagement... not structured... just space for people to talk and share without pressure'*

*'COVID has forced, almost despite the barriers of technology, a more human engagement'*

## Background

For many, the onset of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown has been a negative experience. In addition to the economic and health impacts, people have felt more isolated, have experienced difficulties in maintaining their mental health, and have struggled with loneliness. Our practice of community, in the absence of face-to-face contact, has suffered, as has the delivery of our projects and processes. Many people have reported how much more difficult it is to live and work in this way, and view a post-COVID world with some anxiety as a result.

Some organisations have a slightly different story to tell. Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), a Cape Town based organisation that 'catalyses faith communities to celebrate LGBTI people in Africa', reflected on how the separation and distance imposed on our relationships by COVID, has, in fact, resulted in a more human set of relations. In the space and time afforded by distance, they have been able to deepen their reflective practice, to consciously develop 'habits to engage', and to take the time and space to connect more deeply and humanely with others in need of care and support.

## Insights gained

***'You can't burn yourself out trying to keep the world warm'***

***'If my cup is empty, I cannot help anyone, I have to find the things that fill my cup too'***

***'We have to be honest with ourselves about what we can and can't do'***

The 'activist drive' often results in neglect – of friendships and family and of self. Many in the social justice sector struggle with self-care. Their practice, often framed by the idea that we 'are doing it for the greater good' and 'in service to community', can result in exhaustion and burnout. In the resting time afforded by COVID, some have become more conscious of the physical and emotional load that they carry as an inevitable outcome of the pressure to serve. Through this consciousness, they have realised the need to replenish themselves, to take care of their own physical and mental health, and to stop and reflect more so that they can be of greater service to others.

***'We work with humans [and so] we have to put our humanity first'***

It is important that we engage with each other beyond the transactions of work. The essence of our practice is built around reinforcing and upholding people's humanity. To live out this practice effectively, we have to take the time to get to know each other, to build relationships founded in trust, honesty, integrity and a deep appreciation for each other.

***'Playing a secondary role - a support role - is as important as that of the frontline activist'***

***'We now stop and listen to the answer to the question 'How are you?' We are seeing people for who they are'***

The providers of care are often forgotten. The people who enable others, those who provide the supportive environments and who do the 'dirty work', are rarely acknowledged. Increasingly, activist leaders dominate our narratives about change and transformation without much concern for the community that shapes and holds them, and enables their visibility and success. We must pay more attention to and celebrate the nurturing and care roles that make our work more viable. We must honour those people who listen, talk, and advise and provide a space for debriefing and reflection – and who ultimately allow us all to function more effectively.

***'Visibility is a form of solidarity – [being available] so that people can ask the questions they have...'***

***'We are part of community'***

In all of our work we have to remember that we are part of many different communities, including those we work in. It is important in these spaces that we live out the positive example we expect to see in the world. Through our own lives and actions we are able to inspire change, to give others confidence, and to demonstrate that other ways of living are possible.

***'...a practice that is slower and deeper...'***

COVID has taught us that we need to take the time to deepen our engagement with the people we work with – to take the time to get to know each other better. We cannot make assumptions about what people need or what they have to offer, and it is through this process of engaging each other that we are able to do our work better. The process of engaging, of recognising and responding to each other's humanity, is as important as the outcomes of our work.

## Questions for our practice

### **Has COVID made us aware that we are not practicing solidarity and social justice in the way we say we are?**

It is interesting to reflect on how our practice and relationships have changed in a positive way as a result of COVID. This remarkably difficult period has given us opportunity to reflect on and change the ways in which we relate to each other and our work. It has given us an opportunity to interrogate what it means to interact in a more human way – in a manner that is in alignment with our values and principles. This opportunity though also asks us the question: How have we really been practicing our solidarity? Have we truly engaged each other as human beings in pursuit of a common goal? Or have we allowed the pressures of delivery and the demands for ‘progress’ to undermine our practice? If we have, how can we make sure that we retain our human-centred, values-based practice when we return to a post COVID ‘normal’?

### **What might a practice that is slower and deeper look like?**

Community workers often work in ways that are detrimental to their well-being. By focussing on their responsibility towards others they often forget that they themselves are part of community, need care and support and cannot achieve everything. It is important therefore that we figure out how to nourish ourselves – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The challenge to all of us to find the time to build our own resilience in the face of injustice, making sure that we take care of all of the facets of ourselves - our bodies, our minds, our emotional state, and our souls. How do we as individuals and as a community develop the tools, processes, and attitudes to do this? How do we create and safeguard the time needed to care for ourselves and each other?

**Contact**

**Email:** [info@actubumbano.org](mailto:info@actubumbano.org)

**Web:** [www.actubumbano.org](http://www.actubumbano.org)