

SANCTUARY LONDON

FINDING HOME. TOGETHER.



CHANGING TIMES

Four weeks ago, if I had taken the same photo, in the same place, at the same time on a Wednesday afternoon, the room would have been filled with about 18 tables and 120-150 people visiting as they wait for dinner to be served.

COVID-19 has changed everybody's reality, and life at Sanctuary is no exception. We have always thought that what makes Sanctuary so great is that we prioritize relationships over programs. Sure, we have a few meal programs each week, but those are really just used as opportunities to get to know people. We want to create liminal space, where people are primed to develop deep and meaningful relationships with others. Food is great, and we all need that for sustenance. But playing cards, sipping coffee, intimate conversation, laughing, singing, and crying with others. That's where it's really at!

All of this has become a bit more challenging over the last number of weeks. Under the direction of the London Middlesex Health Unit, we are no longer able to have dine-in meals. So we have tried to be as creative as possible with putting together meals-to-go. We allow two people into the building at a time to take what they need, before sending them on their way. For those who really need to chat for a few minutes, we are thankful for a large empty parking lot, where we can visit briefly in the 6 foot evenly spaced line.

We care about people, and we call these people our community, our family, so we want to be together. And we also need to keep people healthy and safe, and at this time that means not being together. How do we reconcile these two important realities? Let's just say, we're doing our absolute best! We're so thankful to have you on the journey with us. -D.R.

ALREADY ISOLATED.

BY MECHELE TEBRAKE

It doesn't take too many degrees of separation these days to hear of the struggles people are living with during this COVID-19 pandemic.

People don't have usual access to their doctors or other appointments. We live in a time where grocery stores and pharmacies are out of the items people need most. To gain entrance to essential shopping there is controlled entry and people are being screened. They are being asked questions of where they've been, who they've been in contact with and how their physical health is at the moment. Social spaces such as malls, libraries, salons, and gyms are closed and off-limits, leaving people feeling scared and isolated. When in public people are constantly practicing social distancing, so as not to transmit or receive COVID-19. If they're not, others are quick to jump out of the way, sometimes saying rude things. I was a witness to this just this week.

If anyone sneezes or coughs in public they feel like they've committed a crime and are worried about what others might be thinking. People are not reassuring which affirms fear and judgment. They are quick to glare at those who can't contain a sneeze or cough in public. People are continually sanitizing before and after you as you move through spaces.

Our lives have had to quickly adjust leaving many of us unemployed wondering about job security. We are unable to create a plan forward in our day-to-day life until COVID-19 has run its course. Hopefully, we will have done well. We are left uncertain about what the future holds. We are left feeling out of control in this situation.

All of these experiences are new and feel strange to many of us. We are living in uncertain times and that makes people scared and anxious. We are told that all of the safety precautions that have been put in place are necessary and good things to do if we are going to "flatten the curve", as the professionals say. I'm not arguing against that at all! For now, this has become a new reality for us all.

There is a reason I would like to mention the new realities that we all are experiencing. In the wake of COVID-19, what we are experiencing and how we are feeling isolated, anxious, unsure and afraid is not a new experience for a lot of our community at Sanctuary. For some people, this is every day, for several years already.

People who are housing deprived or judged to be, living with addictions and/or mental health concerns are commonly excluded from social spaces. They are excluded and screened while others are not. A lot of people don't have doctors or have a difficult time finding one. Those folks rely on walk-in clinics and urgent care facilities when they are feeling unwell. Before they go, people will consider if they can handle being judged and treated unkindly. Many people go to food banks only having to make do with what is there. The idea of going with a shopping list is almost ridiculous because the shelves are often bare. If they are upset and express their disappointment in not being able to get something they need, others are quick to remind them that they should be grateful that such places exist.

I regularly hear from people how they are not welcomed or banned from public spaces such as libraries, malls, and even parks. These bans imposed on people last weeks, months, years, or even a lifetime. This often happens because of a misunderstanding or failure to listen to a distressed person. People in our community are often being screened and asked very private and uncomfortable questions. They are often being asked to retell very intimate details of the worst things that have ever happened to them. All this comes with the offer of some sort of service that will help put them on a path to becoming whole. It is very difficult for many in our community to put a plan in place for their futures when every day is about survival for the next meal or place to sleep.

There are those in our community who are used to others social distancing from them not because of the scare of COVID-19 but because they are looked on with disdain and judged to be scary. People begin to believe such things about themselves when they are treated this way so often. I have been told by people that they believe they are monsters and unworthy of love.

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ALREADY ISOLATED...CONTINUED

I'm not bringing up these realities to scare or make anyone feel guilty but rather, to highlight what I think we all have in common. We all want and need a place to belong. We all want and need places to go that make us feel valued as a person and give us hope. We all want and need to know that we matter. We all want and need to know we are loved.

Maybe for the first time in a very long time, we as a greater community are in a space to have more empathy for each other.

Maybe for the first time in a very long time, we are in a better place to remember, listen and learn from one another, not just from people who look and sound like us.

Maybe for the first time in a long time, we are in a better position to hear from the isolated fringes of society.

Maybe for the first time in a very long time, we won't be so afraid.

Maybe for the first time in a very long time, no one will live with the barriers of today.

Maybe for the first time in a very long time, we will see with fresh eyes that we are all image-bearers of the Creator and are beloved. -M.tB.



IN THIS TOGETHER.

Ever since all the non-essential businesses were forced to close a few weeks ago, downtown London has looked very different. It's almost like a ghost town from a movie. There are very few people walking around, and even fewer cars. Closed signs are up everywhere. The whole scene is very bizarre. And the only people you can find are people experiencing homelessness, sleeping rough in doorways, or sitting on the street corners. I considered taking a few photos to include in this newsletter, but that just didn't seem right for some reason.

What bothers me the most is that this whole virus, at least in North America anyways, originates from wealthy travellers, who brought it home with them from various places around the world. I'm not trying at all to say that wealthy people, or people who love to travel are evil... far from it! I too love to travel, and I consider myself among the privileged and wealthy of this world. But the problem is that this virus is having the most devastating effects on people who are already impoverished. Almost all of us have moved our work, schooling, and social lives to online or on the phone. With public libraries, drop in centres, employment centres and any other place that might let you use a phone or wifi shut down, this leaves anyone who doesn't have phone or internet in the dust. So many of our friends who are already feeling marginalized and isolated, are now completely cut off from any possible connection.

And the effects go far beyond social connection. Imagine being told to stay home when you really don't have one. How do you self isolate? How do you prioritize keeping yourself and others safe from an unseen, totally intangible virus, when all of your daily energy (and more) is completely spent securing (just barely) your tangible, physical needs, including where to sleep that night, what am I going to eat next, and how am I going to keep myself warm? With COVID-19, these tasks have become an even greater challenge, and other uncertainties have been added. With all public spaces shut down, even something as simple as where to use the bathroom has become major a problem. Everywhere we go, we are told to wash our hands... ok, no problem... uh, where?

The city and other organizations have been trying to do some things to help. They have added a few portable toilets around the city, and they have tried to move some people from the crowded shelters into vacant motels/hotels. This has helped a few of our folks. But it seems more should be done. Once again, I do not intend to point fingers at anyone. And I sincerely wish I had some better, creative solutions to offer, and the truth is, i don't. But I do think that this is something we all need to be thinking about.

This pandemic sucks, and it has affected all of us. We need to be in this together. And we need to be especially mindful of those with less. -D.R.





STILL MUCH TO BE THANKFUL FOR!

Even at times like this, there are so many things to be thankful for. The support that Sanctuary has received has been absolutely overwhelming, and ever encouraging. People have been calling to see if they can bring in baked goods to share with our friends, or to drop off homemade masks for us to use and hand out. When we were struggling to find hand sanitizer for our community members when we were first told that we could no longer have people in the building, one of our supporters immediately made a donation so that we could rent a portable hand-washing station.

Perhaps what has been most impactful has been the response we have seen from within our own community. People who normally attend Sanctuary meals out of need, have been bringing us bags of rice, eggs, granola bars, cans of tuna, take out containers and so many other items, because they want to contribute and help other people who are struggling in a similar situation to themselves.

A hearty and sincere **'Thank You'** to each of you who have supported us in a variety of ways through this challenging time!

Sanctuary London

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