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Living *Laudato Si'*
BOKANI TSHIDZU

Being trans, being present
NICOLETE BURBACH

We're learning it's our Church
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RUTH McCONKEY

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A young man doing his job
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REVIEWS

EVENTS



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"The Church is the Church only when it exists for others," wrote the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1944 from his prison cell. Bonhoeffer died less than a year after writing this, and he did not live to see the world in which his godson would grow up. But his idea of a Church that can get over itself, beyond itself, in order to be truly itself, "... not dominating, but helping and serving", is perhaps not too far from Pope Francis' vision of not just the Church but all human persons living with each other and for each other.

"[The Church] must tell people of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others," wrote Bonhoeffer. But where does such telling begin and what is its source? Perhaps it can begin in the Church, by discovering the treasure that is within, by learning the art of encounter and thus not learning war any more. "Let us arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!" (*Fratelli tutti* 217).
Natalie K. Watson, Editor

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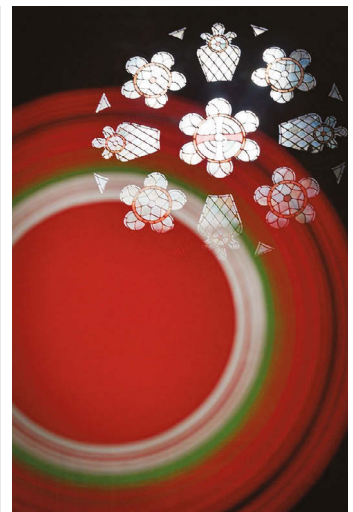
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'Churches can play a key role in catalysing a fair and fast transition to accessible clean energy,' writes artist and climate campaigner Bokani Tshidzu

Living the spirit of *Laudato Si'*

Bokani Tshidzu photographed by Nishant Shukla



Last year more than 170 young-adult Catholics wrote an open letter to their bishops in England and Wales, calling on them to follow the Vatican recommendation to divest from fossil fuels. I was one of them.

For a long time, I had known that sustainability is important and, being from Zimbabwe, I was especially aware of droughts in southern Africa. Becoming increasingly conscious of the urgency of the climate catastrophe, I felt called to what Pope Francis calls an "ecological conversion".

Most Sunday evenings, I attend a brilliant young-adult Mass in the Jesuit church at Farm Street in central London. Often followed by a social gathering, this provides a contemplative oasis in my full London life as a visual artist, with a studio in Hackney Wick, alongside my job as campaign officer at a Christian climate charity.

It was through volunteering in this young-adult community that I came across the text that changed my life – Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. Published a few months before the United Nations climate talks in Paris in

2015, it helped me make the connection between my faith and the climate crisis. Informed by the latest science and taking an honest look at the economics that got us here, the encyclical joined the dots between the social-justice impacts on those who are most vulnerable to extreme weather and the ecological crisis.

Increasingly, I also recognised that the solutions could not rely on individual choices alone, but that the Church had an important role to play. Two years ago, I began working for Operation Noah on the Bright Now campaign, which calls on UK Churches to divest (disinvest) from fossil-fuel companies and invest in climate solutions, such as renewable energy.

We are part of a global movement calling for institutions to sell their shares in fossil-fuel companies. Faith groups have been at the forefront of the divestment movement, accounting for 35 per cent of all divestment commitments. By divesting from fossil fuels and investing in climate solutions, Churches around the world are demonstrating moral leadership on the most urgent issue of our

time and declaring that financing fossil fuels is no longer acceptable as they literally fuel the climate crisis.

I am inspired by the global divestment announcements Operation Noah has helped to organise and celebrate that most UK religious denominations have now divested from fossil-fuel companies.

Both the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland and that of Ireland, some eight out of 22 Catholic dioceses in England and Wales, and many religious orders, including the Jesuits in Britain, have already divested. But the UK's two largest Churches – the Church of England and the Catholic Church in England and Wales as a whole – are yet to divest.

While global carbon emissions need to halve in this decade, all the major fossil-fuel companies – from BP to Shell to ExxonMobil – plan to prospect for new oil and gas fields, many of which are in Africa, to develop. The activities of fossil-fuel companies in Mozambique have led to violent instability in the north of the country and Shell's plans for seismic blasting off the Eastern Cape province's Wild Coast region have met with huge protests in South Africa.

Continued exploration and extraction of oil and gas goes against the explicit warnings of scientists and members of the International Energy Agency, who have stated clearly that all new fossil-fuel developments must stop in order to limit global warming to 1.5C and avoid the worst climate impacts.

The good news is that renewable energy is now the cheapest form of energy in most of the world, and Churches can play a key role in catalysing a fair and fast transition to accessible clean energy.

Our faith, the voices of brothers and sisters impacted by the climate change and the urgency of the catastrophe tell us there is clearly much more to do. I am continually encouraged by the work of many of those campaigners and leaders in the Church who are taking positive action to respond to the climate crisis.

Bokani Tshidzu is the Bright Now Campaign Officer for Operation Noah and a visual artist.

For more information, visit operationnoah.org or @OperationNoah on Twitter. www.artbybokani.com

Transness is something exciting, dynamic and beautiful, and it's a source of rich meaning for the Church, writes Nicolete Burbach

Being trans, being present

Nicolete Burbach



Annoyingly, when trans people try to talk about their lives, the discussion often devolves into a debate about whether trans life is justified: whether it's ethical to do the things trans people do, and whether the Church and society can rightfully accommodate them. The result is that trans people are constantly subjected to a demand to justify themselves.

This is not only tiresome but impoverishing. It is impoverishing because we only have a finite amount of time each day, and it stops us from spending it exploring our faith and life in a deeper way.

Some might say that, regardless of this, the demand to justify ourselves can't simply be ignored: we have to reach out to others in the Church and find a way to become "right" by them in order to be part of the community made up by them.

There is a point to be made here about the fact that this kind of "reaching out" is not the only thing we need to do to be members of the Church. Consequently, we need the opportunity to have different kinds of conversations too.

But I think this also evokes a superficial understanding of what this "reaching out" might mean.

During the 1990s and 2000s, trans studies became established as a topic for research in universities. Theorists built on philosophy and critical theory to develop sophisticated accounts of what it means to be trans and live a trans life.

One influential idea was to do with transness as a source of *meaning*. This idea drew from

the philosophical idea that meaning and language cannot be separated out from the world as we know it. According to this idea, to know the world is to figure it in language. Our language gives us a set of concepts that make the world and ourselves meaningful to us, and thereby understandable.

This doesn't mean that there is no world outside of language – just that this world is quite literally *meaningless* to us. We cannot know it because we cannot even "think" it: to "think" something is to put it into language, and thereby render it meaningful. As soon as we try to think about the world apart from language, we have consequently already put it back into language!

Under this view, we don't get to simply choose our language: it is received from our broader culture. But we can allow it to change and transform, particularly by bringing it into contact with things that don't fit neatly within the kinds of meanings it provides. These things disrupt those meanings, appearing unintelligible or meaningless, and this in turn prompts language to reorganise itself to make them meaningful.

Theorists such as Susan Stryker used this idea to understand what it is about transness that is so challenging to people. According to Stryker, trans people disrupt the meanings provided by the language of modern Western society. They do this by breaking down traditional boundaries and associations, for example around sex, nature and artificiality.

For Stryker, this also means that trans lives are an occasion for creating *new* meanings. This disruption opens up a space for new associations and ideas to come about, and therein new ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us.

Transness here is something exciting, dynamic and beautiful. To be trans is to embody the capacity for the world to be endlessly, inexhaustibly surprising. As a theologian, I might say that it reveals the true bounty of Creation.

Indeed, it is to participate in this Creation. It is to create with your body, which itself is bound up in language and therein bears the very meaning it disrupts and reconstructs.

The problem, for Stryker, is that some people don't recognise these new meanings. Transness just appears to them as a disruption; unintelligible or meaningless, and with no possibilities for new meaning to be

understood or appropriated by those that encounter it.

This gives another view of the conflicts in which the demand to justify ourselves comes about. But the solution to this is not just to do apologetics.

The first step is for trans people to explore these new meanings and how they can be expressed and embodied in our lives. It is only through exploring and living out these meanings that we can make them present to others. We need to live our trans lives, and live them richly, not just for our own sake (because we all need to live our lives), but in order that others might recognise their possibility and their richness.

This is also a kind of "reaching out", but in a way that is prior to explaining or justifying oneself: that of simply being present. Conversely, and perhaps paradoxically, the kind of demand to "reach out" discussed above ends up being a demand to reach out *without* being truly present – to reach out from nowhere. This is not truly "reaching out", which, while always aimed at someone we are reaching out "to", must originate "from" somewhere else.

This kind of "reaching out" should be familiar to Catholics. It is the reaching out that we do when we come together in Communion. The Body of Christ is a communion not of people who have all explained themselves to one another, but of people who are present to one another in the most intimate way possible.

I am not in communion with you because we understand each other. I am in communion with you because your body is my body is Christ's body.

And I think trans people should also be familiar with this sacramental reaching out: in our bodies, new meaning becomes present. Where new meaning is present, there is the possibility for an encounter with alterity and novelty. And, just like in the Church, which reflects the plenitude of Creation in the many different groups of people who meet at the altar, although this encounter can be a cause for incomprehension and conflict, it can also engender creativity and hope.

Nicolete Burbach is social and environmental justice lead at the London Jesuit Centre. Her research focuses on resourcing Pope Francis to navigate the difficulties facing trans people and the Church as they come into new forms of contact with one another.

Young people should not be discouraged on the synodal pathway, writes Chris Knowles

We're learning it's our Church

Young people are not the problem; they are part of the solution; they are partners in the renewal of the Church. So said Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*, his post-synodal apostolic exhortation in response to the 2018 Synod on Young People.

While many Church leaders were excited at the idea of doing things differently in the Church, others were suspicious, and some just dismissed us because of our age.

With the Church in such desperate need for renewal, why are we not a little more welcoming to new approaches in the way we live as a Church? After 2,000 years responding to the call to find new ways of living the truth of the Gospel, why aren't we used to this by now?

In 2017, Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry wrote that the Church has at times played the role of innovating that Silicon Valley does today. Take for example agricultural innovations emerging from the monastic tradition of farming: wheeled ploughs and three-field crop rotations fed the growth and flourishing of Western Europe.

More recently, innovation in the Church has come from religious orders, through their founders and charisms. Many of these founders were younger than I am now.

St Francis of Assisi's first rule (that is, the principles that guided his first followers) was given papal approval in 1209, when he was about 28 years old. In 1609, at the age of just 24, Venerable Mary Ward and her companions founded the first female apostolic order (that is, not enclosed or cloistered, the first order that could go into the world as the apostles did), which through its history has dedicated itself to the education of girls.

Alongside these saints and prophets, there were no doubt countless more whose stories we don't know, but they are all part of a tradition that has always relied on the young to understand our culture and bring the Gospel to it.

There are plenty of people who, despite the challenges, are already constructing new wineskins that meet the challenges of our time, as so many have before. In 2011, a group of young people in their twenties and thirties set up Million Minutes to help the Church better support young people as they make a difference in their communities. In 2018, a network of young adults set up the Ecological Conversion group to help the whole Church take seriously the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor.

Alongside other great initiatives, only so many spheres of Church life are touched, while so many others are calling out for new life. The rapid pace of development and cultural change in the modern world and what we're learning from the call to synodality means we need new approaches more than ever.

If you're a young Catholic reading this, please don't be put off by those negative voices; remember that there are many who have paved the way ahead of us over the

last 2,000 years, and as this Synod is showing us it's our Church.

If you're not part of that category, please help protect and nourish new life when you see it. If you're in a position of responsibility, be ready to hold it more lightly and be open to the new things that may flourish.



Chris Knowles is the co-founder of Synod Fruits (SynodFruits.org.uk). He lives in East London with his wife and his blind cat.

The Church and the NHS are at pivotal moments in their history. Maybe there are more shared similarities than we think, writes Ruth McConkey

Me and my institutions

As a so-called "cradle" Catholic, the Church has been an influential institution in my life. But there is another: the National Health Service, the institution I was very literally born into. In 2022, as both face pivotal moments in their histories, I have been thinking about other shared similarities, beyond their significance to me.

For starters, both were founded on simple, beautiful and quite frankly revolutionary principles:

"[NHS care will] meet the needs of everyone, be free at the point of delivery, and be based on clinical need not ability to pay" (NHS founding principles, 1948).

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ... You must love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-9).

Throughout their histories both have touched an extraordinary number of lives and done an extraordinary amount of good. But, for every good experience there have also been bad ones, and both organisations continue to try to come to terms with horrendous cases of abuse, both current and historic.

Beyond these well-publicised scandals, there is another problem. Numbers of doctors, nurses, clergy and laity have been declining for years. The reasons why are complex, but one stands out for me: disillusionment. For an increasing number of people, both the Church and the NHS are not "for them". Perhaps they have had to wait too long to be seen or have experienced discrimination. Or, perhaps they

simply do not believe that they are welcome any more, if they ever were in the first place.

So, how do we "cure" disillusionment? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. But we can take comfort in the fact that doubts, fears and, yes, feelings of disillusionment are not new to these organisations. We might like to think they sprung into being, perfect and fully formed but they just didn't. Healthcare in the UK did not begin when the NHS started; indeed, the NHS was only possible because of the preceding decades of tireless work by doctors, campaigners and politicians.

If you read the letters of the early Apostles, you don't get the sense of a confident Church, secure in the knowledge it will last for millennia. Of course there is deep commitment to Jesus Christ and his teachings, but, between the lines, there is also significant anxiety about how to grow and inspire the Church. But inspired they were, and so the Church has grown.

I don't know what's going to happen next. The Church synod may come to be viewed as the moment the Church changed forever, or as a missed opportunity. The NHS might recover from the pandemic stronger than it ever was, or it may collapse. But what I do know is that the challenges we face are no greater than those of the early founders and that we are no less committed to the values that inspired them. "Have hope and be cheerful," Paul said to the early Christians. I can think of worse advice.

Ruth McConkey is studying for a masters degree in public health.

Birmingham-based charity Stories of Hope and Home and the Columban Missionaries invited Catholic educators and refugees and asylum seekers to a three-day autumn Festival of Encounter at St Cassian's retreat centre in the Berkshire countryside. In conversation together, Tawasol Abdelsamad – architect, wife, mother and refugee from Sudan – and Neil Roseman – communications director at Northampton diocese – reflect on the experience, as recorded by James Trewby

Pathways to encounter



Tawasol Abdelsamad – I joined the Festival of Encounter because I love to visit new places and meet new people, to hear new stories and share mine. For me, people can know more about refugees and asylum seekers; if they meet them, they can know them. If you meet someone, it's different. You can feel their emotions, how they feel, all the difficult things. Why did you come?

Neil Roseman – I was invited, and at the same time, I felt that God was calling me to do something outside of my comfort zone. I responded before my brain had a chance to say, "Oh! You shouldn't do that!" ... What you said is so true. The moments that really

stood out from our time at Kintbury were the informal ones: meals, walks, casual conversations in the garden or around the campfire. It was the intimacy of the relationships that grew in those moments, alongside the programme. It's easy to be caught in a bubble, or even just to hear statistics about refugees, but through an encounter you meet the person. The statistics are important because they are made up of individuals, each of whom matters; every story is important.

TA - Stories can push people to think of others and how they can change their lives; what they can do to help people, to change

situations, even to challenge rules, to help them. Stories can change people's hearts!

NR – Facts are important. But we're talking about human beings, we're talking about a soul, and the dignity that comes with that.

TA – Some people have in their minds misconceived ideas about refugees and asylum seekers. They think people come to this country just for money ... for example, I am here, I didn't come here because I needed a job or money or a house ... we came here because my husband had a problem with the government. He had a house, a big family, had a job. We left everything we had, to come here, for freedom and safety only. Not money. We came here to be safe.

NR – The biggest value of the encounter for me is awareness. Awareness of the world in which we live, an awareness of other people's struggles, and predominantly, an awareness of the great hope people carry; this deep hope for the future and for others.

TA – I'm pleased you mention hope. When people are connected, there is something in your soul that pushes you, it looks different. You don't just want to give him something, no, you are called to care, to love.

NR – I came looking for ways in which I could give, but it was actually the opposite that happened. I left the encounter knowing that I had gained an awful lot more. We happen to be in a position where doors have opened for us, where they are not opening for others in this country. That's the huge privilege that we have. I can be loud, and hopefully, through my voice, my privileged voice, open doors. There is a lot that can get in the way of us really living out our faith, stopping us actually doing what we're called to do, putting our faith into action, reaching out to the most vulnerable, to people who just need us to recognise them as human beings. This programme helped me profoundly, spiritually, to live out my faith. This journey has changed my heart.

TA – I hope we can do a lot of encounters like this in the future. People change their minds, their hearts, we need more people ... then the country can be good for us! Maybe the government can change its rules. It takes time but it's good to start, good to try.

NR – As I think back, I think there is a fear, that entering into a relationship, in the unknown, meeting people with different stories to ourselves, that somehow we lose a bit of ourselves, that we lose something. The opposite is true. You gain. When we give, we become more.

James Trewby is the Justice and Peace education worker of the Columban Missionaries.

Reviews

Magic Goes Wrong

Somewhere, somehow, *The Play That Goes Wrong* went bafflingly right. What started as an Agatha Christie spoof in a pub theatre is now running with *Mousetrap*-like implacability in the West End, and Mischief Theatre, the play's architects, are now the BBC's go-to pratfall merchants and run a stable of farces across theatreland. Their latest progeny is *Magic Goes Wrong*.

The conceit will not surprise anybody familiar with this backlist: rather than the Cornley Polytechnic Drama Society overreaching its technical and dramatic capacities, we have an assortment of would-be conjurers attempting a series of poorly-conceived tricks for the Disasters in Magic Charity Fundraiser. As promised, these Go Wrong.

How they go wrong is suitably fascinating and impressive. As Tommy Cooper discovered, audiences take far more pleasure in tricks going wrong – especially when magic seems to happen just the same.

Fans of Penn and Teller will recognise their hands in the script: the American double act famously took classic tricks down wildly circuitous detours, usually involving horrible injuries to Teller, and collaborated with Mischief Theatre for this project. Mind-readings fail, escape artists drown, and of course somebody really is sawn in half.

The narrative stringing these set pieces together is pretty threadbare, and one sometimes wishes that they were presented simply as a disaster variety show. But the jokes do pay off, and some of the characters are sharply-written parodies of Derren Brown, Criss Angel, and other highly-hyped acts. Besides, who's watching a magic spectacular for the plot?

Magic Goes Wrong is touring the UK until May.

Events

Resonate

The *Resonate* series is the primary event run by the Archdiocese of Westminster's Youth

Ministry, featuring monthly talks at Vaughan House near the cathedral. On Thursday, 3 March, it hosts Ben Plimmer, founding trustee of the Catholic Student Network, for an evening exploring the theme Faith and Facebook, and the challenges posed by social media.

<https://dowym.com/events/resonate-w-ben-plimmer/>

St Patrick's Day

No need for any reminders in Ireland, where 17 March is a public holiday and the festivities inescapable, but there will be events aplenty in the UK as well – Patrick was a Briton, after all. In London, on Sunday 13 March a parade travels from Hyde Park Corner to Trafalgar Square, and expects to attract 50,000 people.

Engage

Castlerigg Manor's popular online youth ministry course is back with 10 weekly one-hour sessions from 15 March.

www.castleriggmanor.co.uk/engage

Youth 2000 Leeds Retreat

The Youth 2000 Retreat returns to Leeds Trinity University for March this year. Youth 2000 was founded in 1990 to help young people to draw nearer to Christ and discern their vocations, and centres its ministry on events "run by young people for young people". The dates are 18-20 March and the retreat promises three days of fun, fellowship, and worship for 18- to 35-year-olds interested in some of life's big questions.

www.youth2000.org

Passion Plays 2022

Cities across the UK will perform Christ's Passion in the open air on Good Friday, 15 April. Dramatisations of the Passion have an ancient pedigree, dating to the Mystery Plays originally performed by trade guilds, and historic cities including Chester, Worcester and Norwich, plan to stage the productions that were cancelled last year due to Covid-19 restrictions. Other venues include Liverpool, Bishop Auckland and London's Trafalgar Square.

www.passion-plays.co.uk

On 31 January this year, Akash Bashir was declared a Servant of God. Patrick Hudson considers the martyrdom of a Pakistani Christian now on the road to canonisation

A young man doing his job

"Martyrdom" sounds like rather an archaic process – the sort of thing that happened elaborately to the converts of the early Church, or to medieval missionaries. The odd prayer to the martyrs under Elizabeth I and gawping at a priest hole in a National Trust house is about as visceral as it gets in the UK. Lucky us.

On 15 March 2015, a suicide bomber blew himself up outside the Catholic Church of St John in Youhanabad, Lahore. He failed to kill the hundreds inside the church because his entry was blocked by the 20-year-old Akash Bashir, who died in the blast. On 31 January this year, the feast of St John Bosco, patron of young people, Akash Bashir became the first Pakistani to be declared a Servant of God, the beginning of the road to canonisation.

There is nothing obscure or archaic about the martyrs of the Church in Pakistan. The sad truth is that they are part of its day-to-day existence. On the day Bashir died, 17 others were killed and 70 wounded in coordinated attacks on churches in Youhanabad. Where I might offer to hand round the collection plate

on the odd Sunday, young men in Pakistan join volunteer security teams so that others can hear Mass said in safety. Bashir died taking his turn at these duties: that is what being an active member of his parish meant.

We are used to symbolism from our martyrs, and eloquent exposition – the voices of Edmund Campion and Oliver Plunkett have not been quietened by the centuries – but the details of Bashir's death have their own eloquence. Their terrible simplicity belies any romantic vision of martyrdom, but perhaps it can remind us of the real, blessed simplicity of the Sunday observance and those occasionally tiresome parochial jobs in a country where being a Catholic no longer demands physical bravery.

Saintliness is not complicated, and our prayers for Akash Bashir's canonisation will rest on the unvarnished facts of a young man doing his job. His last words: "I will die, but I will not let you enter." That is what happened.

Patrick Hudson is the 2022 Newman Intern at The Tablet.

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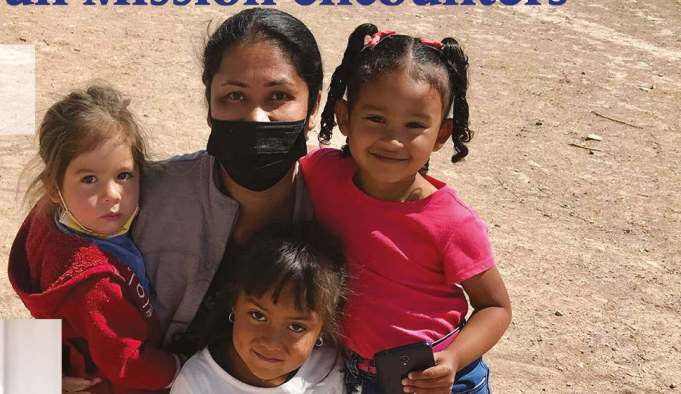
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Finding hope and God's love in Columban Mission encounters

Lay Missionary Rosalia Basada works at 'Casa del Migrante', a shelter for migrants on the US/Mexico border.



If you would like to find out more about the Columban Missionaries and their ministries with refugees and asylum seekers then listen to this moving video where Fr. Martin Koroiciri recounts a story of a refugee family walking from Venezuela to Chile in search of a new life.

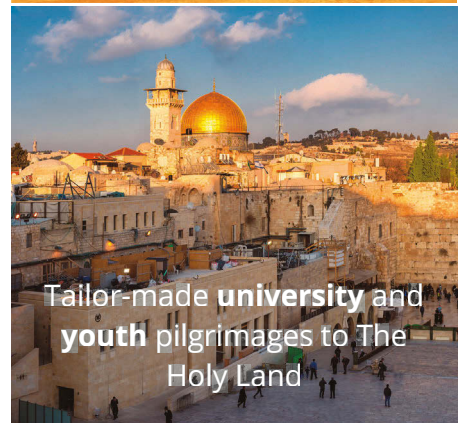


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