

COVID-19, CHURCHES & COMMUNITIES

A CHURCH FOR THE NATION
A CHURCH FOR THE FUTURE

A SPECIAL REPORT FOR
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture
University of York

COVID-19, CHURCHES & COMMUNITIES

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COVID-19, CHURCHES & COMMUNITIES

A SPECIAL REPORT FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

1. INTRODUCTION:

A CHURCH FOR THE NATION, A CHURCH FOR THE FUTURE

Not only has COVID-19 brought about the most seismic change to lives in a generation, restrictions have prevented parish churches and cathedrals from caring for congregations and communities in all the ways usually available to them. Nevertheless, they have employed many innovative, creative responses which have won widespread appreciation and respect. Despite the ongoing challenges, churches should be confident in what they have to offer in spiritual and practical care. They have very clear messages of hope, comfort, forgiveness, and new life to share with a weary, wounded, and insecure population.

The Church of England, in particular, offers a unique, national infrastructure, present in every community, equipped with local knowledge and networks, and often offering the only public space for community use. For centuries, churches have provided an everyday 'National Wellbeing Service'¹ as well as functioning as an emergency service in times of crisis, as they have during the pandemic. Churches are therefore now poised to play a very strategic role in recovery, as lives and communities are rebuilt.

This brief summary report draws on the data from over 5,500 survey responses and interviews presented in the '*Churches, COVID-19, and Communities*' (CCC) report published in April 2021 (see churchesandcovid.org).² The findings are analysed here with particular reference to the mission of the Church of England and the opportunities and challenges facing local churches. This summary seeks to support clergy, PCCs, and church members in planning for the future, through summarising grassroots evidence of:

- Achievements during the pandemic (including the extraordinary creativity of responses; increased appreciation, trust, and respect from other organisations the wider community; and enhanced opportunities for building partnerships), and the potential benefits for worship, mission, and pastoral care in the future
- What churches want to contribute to rebuilding and serving communities and helping with recovery, in a context of increased need
- The importance of a holistic, interconnected approach to mission
- The support needed to maximise future outreach and sustainability

¹ The Church of England alone was hosting 35,000 social care projects pre-COVID. See Church of England 2019 'Statistics for Mission' return (<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/2019StatisticsForMission.pdf>). See also <https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org/>

² Throughout this summary report, reference will be made to topics covered in greater depth in the CCC report and the relevant section numbers (e.g. 1.3.1) will be given in red. Relevant appendices in the present report are highlighted in dark blue. References to external research will appear in footnotes.

2. WHAT COVID-19 REVEALED ABOUT THE VALUE OF CHURCHES

Difficult and frustrating as the effects of the pandemic and accompanying restrictions have been to negotiate and overcome, there have been many positive outcomes which offer significant opportunities for enhanced ministry and mission in the future. The impact of COVID-19 has shone new light on the importance to individuals and communities of what churches have been quietly offering for decades – and just how devastating it has been for so many church-based activities to be suspended. Data from non-church members, church members, and leaders, shows clearly:

A. How vital churches, buildings, and activities are to community wellbeing, social interaction, and spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health

Key aspects include:

- The importance attached to spiritual presence in a community, the ability to attend worship, and to find peace, comfort, and hope (2.2)
- The value attributed to buildings and outdoor spaces, both spiritually and practically (2.2.3)
- The provision of cradle-to-grave activities promoting wellbeing, offering social contact, and combatting loneliness and isolation (1.2.1)
- The role of buildings and rituals (formal and informal) in bringing comfort in grief, anxiety and fear (3.2; 3.4)
- The huge contribution of churches to social care, including distribution of food and other essentials, debt counselling, addiction or homelessness support, education clubs, and countless other services. Church buildings are especially valued as approachable and accessible places where both initial 'light touch' and more structured professional support can be provided or signposted (1.2.2)
- Churches as community hubs hosting key facilities such as play groups, clinics, post offices, shops, markets, etc (1.5.1)
- Spaces to explore and enjoy shared heritage (2.2.3)
- Spaces for cultural engagement such as concerts and exhibitions (2.2.2)

B. How churches adapted creatively through online/in person provision

Many churches were quick to explore and embrace ways to use technology, such as Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube, to reach out to congregations and communities. In the process, they found themselves engaging new audiences, including those who previously faced barriers to attending worship. The limitations of technology (digital poverty; the challenges of engaging children and young people in worship; 'Zoom fatigue'; and the strong need for face-to-face human contact) also became apparent and churches have worked hard to offer 'mixed-mode' responses wherever possible.

Areas where new approaches and enhanced provision have emerged include:

- Worship, wider spiritual engagement/teaching, exploring faith (2.3.1; Appendix 1; Appendix 2)
- Activities for children and young people, such as Online Toddlers and 'Church in a Bag' (Appendix 3)

- Taking festivals and seasonal themes out to communities, for example 'Carols on your Doorstep'; a Christmas trail creating scenes from the Nativity Story in local shop windows; A 'Hope in Lent' transformation of a church's grounds
- Pastoral care, including meeting the practical needs of those self-isolating (1.3)
- Use of art installations to bring light, hope, comfort, and enjoyment of beauty
- Use of outdoor spaces to serve and connect with communities (2.3.2; Appendix 4)
- Support/consolation for the bereaved and anxious (3.3; Appendix 5)
- Social contact, including sending cards and gifts; online wellbeing courses, toddler, and children's groups; food deliveries; phoning the lonely and those without online access (1.3)
- Social care, including adapted debt support, foodbanks, takeaway meals for homeless people and others; food banks and parcels for individuals and families; 'baby basics' packages; contact centres for separated parents and children (1.3)
- An enhanced role for hospital chaplaincy supporting patients and staff (3.2.1; 3.6.3)
- Meeting specific needs, such as hosting COVID testing and vaccination centres (1.3.2)

C. Evidence of new respect

Churches have a very long track record of partnership working and this has developed significantly during the pandemic. Local churches rapidly stepped up, offering spaces, volunteers, long-term local knowledge, and key resources. They also frequently expanded provision to meet increased needs. The result has been enhanced appreciation of churches as valued partners from communities, other care providers, local and national government, and policymakers.

This includes:

- Greater recognition of church buildings and outdoor spaces as valuable, convenient resources for shared delivery of public and community services (1.3.2; Appendix 4).
- Significantly strengthened relationships between churches, parish councils, and local authorities, including meeting emergency needs in the areas of food poverty, shielding and self-isolation, and mental health and wellbeing (1.4.3; 1.6.2; Appendix 8).³
- New benefits emerging from innovative partnerships across denominations, as well as with local schools, and a wide range of charities (1.4.3).

'The need was enormous during the pandemic, so we opened up every day ... we have a lot of people with literacy problems so there was a huge need when everything else had closed down. In the first lockdown we gave out over 1,000 food boxes but it didn't feel very dignified for people to be given boxes of food they hadn't chosen. So now we have a 'pop-up pantry' once a week. People pay £5 for two big bags of food. We have also joined forces with a local credit union... One man has now saved £20 and says he has never had that amount of money in his life. We are really making a difference.'

Church Leader (Interview).

³ https://www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf pp. 24-31.

*'A Foster and Adoption Group planned pre-Covid ... has launched this year through Zoom ... We have partnered with Home for Good and Young People' Counselling service in the village to run this and **we are probably in a stronger place** with the resources of the Counselling Service than we would have been pre-Covid.'* Church Leader (Survey 2)

*'Local councillors and volunteers and I have worked closely together on several initiatives and **have got to know each other much better**. Church volunteers have stepped up in some cases and down in others (due to being in higher risk groups). A significant number of non-church local people volunteered to support neighbours. Many of them are continuing to be part of a coordinated neighbourhood support group.'* Church Leader (Survey 1)

This expansion of local, established, trusted church-based networks has thus proved very successful, and churches are indicating a strong desire to build further collaboration with others to meet increased need (1.4.3).

D. The importance of volunteering

Volunteers are at the heart of outreach and caring for communities, in normal times and in crises. The pandemic has shed fresh light on the value of volunteering, both for those who serve (in terms of their own development and wellbeing) and for those who are served, as well as the potential to build wider relationships. This includes:

- The temporary or permanent loss of elderly or vulnerable volunteers has shown the need to address their sense of isolation, and develop guidance, training and support to enable those who wish to do so, to return to their roles (1.6.3; 2.5.2).
- The recruitment of new volunteers who wished to support their communities, had time to engage because of furlough or changing work patterns, and saw churches as trusted established networks with whom to work (1.5.4).
- The interest amongst new volunteers in exploring faith because of the relationships forged and experiences gained through volunteering.

'What I've realised is how much people really sit up and listen and want to know about the church, if the church is involved in the community and making a difference ... because of that ... we've been given that invitation into people's lives.' Church Leader (Interview)

*'We have made significant relationships with local people who have volunteered to help run our food hub. This has opened doors for conversations about faith and opportunities to pray with them.'*⁴

'[Our new volunteers have] been a real point of growth of connection between ourselves and the community. We've had a couple of key volunteers ... who have come from the local community and are new to the church but are joining in with online worship and exploring faith. They have made that connection through volunteering at the food bank.' Church Leader (Interview)

⁴ Church in Action 2020/21: a Survey of Churches' Community Responses to the Pandemic, Church of England and Church Urban Fund, April 2021, <https://cuf.org.uk/news/church-in-action>

Finding ways to continue and build relationships and collaboration with such people of goodwill across communities will play an important part in the Church's outreach and future contribution to meeting needs in the wider population (see [Appendix 7](#)).

E. The importance of interconnected approaches to relationships and outreach

The research data clearly highlights the extent to which all aspects of ministry and mission are inter-connected and have the potential to feed and enhance one another.

COVID-19 has shown that the roles of worship, pastoral care, spirituality, using buildings and outdoor spaces, community activities, social care, working with volunteers, welcoming visitors, and sharing heritage) need to be assessed in each context, before being implemented, as appropriate, as part of a 360° approach to outreach and service.



3. CHURCHES AND RECOVERY: NEED AND RESPONSE

What churches offered pre-COVID, together with the creative responses shown during the pandemic, shows their potential to make a huge difference to recovery across the country (1.4).

A. Increased need

The shock of the pandemic, and the multiple kinds of loss it has brought, have impacted very severely on people's personal sense of security and wellbeing (1.2). The effects of widespread illness, (often sudden) bereavement, and rapid changes in education, employment, and income, have been compounded by isolation⁵ caused by loss of social interaction and activities which sustain wellbeing. Increased need is evident across all ages and social classes, not just those often thought of as 'vulnerable.' Churches, and the activities they provide and host, are vital in overcoming isolation, helping people to find healing, and rebuilding lives and communities.

Social isolation was identified as a major issue by **79%** of all survey respondents.

B. What churches can and wish to offer

Respondents articulated their strong desire not only to reinstate but also to expand outreach activities because the pandemic has created greater need across a wider range of people and thus more opportunities to serve. Many see the period of recovery as a

⁵ See <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Loneliness-beyond-Covid-19-July-2021.pdf>

chance to review their vision and 'reset' their approach to mission and service, rather than just to reinstate past practice. Plans include:

- Continuing to open up worship, spiritual support, and outreach to wider and more diverse audiences, both online and in-person (see **Appendix 1**):

'We will continue streaming services live ... This is a definite must for the future. There are regular members of the congregation who are home ill, shielding or caring [... who] have very much appreciated the online presence. It is another way of making church more inclusive.'

Rural Church Leader (Interview)

*'Given the ... dispersed nature of our Rural Churches, emerging technology has offered significant opportunities for Church communities to grow and flourish, as the physical impediment of distance has been effectively removed ... There is also evidence that those Churches moving to a blended physical and virtual model will find new ways to flourish.'*⁶

- Encouraging use of buildings and outdoor spaces as places of remembrance, comfort, hope, and celebration, thus offering places where positive memories can be created following a period of great trauma for many (**Appendix 4**; **Appendix 5**)
- Reinstatement and expansion of 'normal' activities for all age groups to help individuals and communities recover and find new hope and security.

'Desire for connection and social contacts are going to be huge. So we are thinking of some form of community cafe space relaunched off the back of our Foodbank on a Friday which might reach a different group of people.'

Church Leader (Interview)

- Expanding facilities to provide spaces for community use and outreach

'The COVID pandemic has, if anything, made [our aims] more urgent ... [There is a] lack of community space, particularly indoor space, on the estate. We had already been drawing up plans for an extension ... which allows us to have a meeting place in the community.' Church Leader (Interview)

- Continuing to work with and support volunteers, including those recruited from the wider community during the pandemic (**Appendix 7**)
- Developing and expanding specialist support to meet increased needs

For example, more churches are undertaking debt counselling training, recognising greater need, including among those who previously were financially secure.

'With an eye to the probable increase in unemployment and additional money worries, volunteers from the church, including the vicar, are undertaking the Christians Against Poverty Money and Life Skills training so they can offer this support.' Church Leader, Interview

- Opening up more spaces in which to relax and enjoy music, drama and art

⁶ 'Rural Churches response to Covid-19,' Yorkshire Churches Rural Business Support, January 2021. See <https://ycrbsorg.wordpress.com/covid-rural-church-response/>

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Meeting the challenges of the pandemic has brought huge pressures, strain, and tiredness. It has also generated many positive new relationships and initiatives and there is now a unique chance to build on what has been achieved in ways which will support and enhance mission going forwards. 2021 offers a moment to review and 'reset' church priorities and approaches *in the context of local opportunities and capacity*, drawing on past strengths *and* the creativity shown during the pandemic.

A. Evolving 'mixed-mode' worship and spiritual engagement long-term

Feedback from church leaders and members illustrates the huge gains that have come from developing Sunday worship, daily prayer, small groups, and new ways of engaging children and young people and others online. Benefits include expanding access for many who find physical attendance difficult; enabling rural multi-church benefices to worship together; and allowing many to explore faith and 'try' church for the first time.

'We ran an Alpha course online and that was really positive. People seemed to be more willing to talk and open up online from their living rooms or bedrooms than they did coming along to the church building in the evenings.'

Church Leader (Interview)

There is also clear evidence of the *limitations* of online provision in terms of personal contact and support, as well as problems caused by digital poverty and poor WiFi reception.

'[I have missed] not being able to have the necessary contact to affirm people ... display love, compassion, and welcome' Church Member (Survey 2)

In addition, many leaders invested heavily in online teaching and worship in ways which may not be wholly sustainable as previous patterns of ministry resume.

As survey respondents clearly indicated, it is vital that new mixed or hybrid patterns are developed for the future, blending the best of online and in-person in ways which are *strategic, realistic, and sustainable* in each local context (see [Appendix 1](#); [Appendix 2](#)).

B. Recognising and maximising the value of buildings and outdoor spaces

The restrictions of the pandemic have prompted both Church Members and 'Non-Members' to articulate the value of buildings and what they offer congregations and the wider community as spaces of worship, learning, sharing, wellbeing, hope, perspective, social interaction and social care.

There is also enhanced appreciation of the potential of churchyards and other outdoor spaces as COVID-19 safe areas for witness, worship and comfort. Offering specific guidance, linked to examples of creative approaches, will help churches of all sizes maximise safe, effective use of both buildings and churchyards. See [Appendix 4](#).

C. Supporting bereavement and loss

The pandemic has also caused a 'grief epidemic,' leaving people of all ages, including children, with a deep need to express their loss, find comfort, and be enabled to move on. Churches have a vital role to play in:

- Providing spaces, formal services, low-key informal activities, and support which will allow individuals and groups to address their grief and loss and create positive memories (see [Appendix 5](#))
- Devising plans and guidance which will ensure that churches (of appropriate sizes) will always be available for funerals ([3.5.1](#); [3.5.2](#))
- Expanding support for the sick, dying, and bereaved, including allowing church ministers to operate as key workers in the community, and greater investment in hospital chaplaincy to support patients and NHS staff ([3.2.1](#); [3.6.3](#))
- Re-instating normal activities to combat isolation and allow people to rebuild their lives after bereavement ([3.2.3](#))

D. Positive memory-making and healing

An important consequence of COVID-19 has been the loss of opportunities to mark life events, negatively affecting the emotional wellbeing of people of all ages. Not only will the damage caused by the pandemic linger long in the minds and emotions of all who have lived through it, but restrictions on travel and gatherings have hampered the creation of positive or comforting memories for many. Some have been denied long-anticipated celebrations of key points in their lives; others have experienced unsupported grief, leaving them distressed and struggling to move ahead. As restrictions relax, there are great opportunities for churches to play an enhanced role as places of commemoration *and* celebration through:

- helping people mark life events in new ways, through offering 'catch up' celebrations for births, weddings, and major birthdays (see [Appendix 5](#))
- providing in-person support to help individuals and families remember those who have been lost, and work through their grief through both formal services *and* simple individual activities (e.g. candle-lighting and leaving prayers)

Churches have the chance to expand provision, inside or outside buildings, to offer spiritual comfort, and support healing and future wellbeing. In supporting both mourning and celebration, churches will value guidance and the sharing of creative ideas.

E. Welcoming visitors as part of mission

Welcoming visitors is not just the calling of major historic churches but offers all congregations low-key but effective mission opportunities through:

- opening up buildings to local people and visitors from further afield
- providing 'light touch' explanations of the history and purpose of the church and the life of the Christian community
- making introductory spiritual resources available
- creating inviting spaces for prayer and reflection

The renewed interest in 'the local' offers new possibilities for reaching out to communities through exploring shared history and heritage (see [2.2.3](#); [Appendix 6](#)).

F. Sharing resources for mission

COVID-19 has prompted many creative responses, both online and in-person, which, if brought together, have the potential to enrich and support mission and ministry for years to come. Sharing and adapting stimulating ideas during the pandemic proved both fruitful and encouraging. Interviews with survey respondents suggest the urgent need for a long-term, open access, national, online resource. This should offer:

- a platform to share ideas, large and small, which can be customised to fit local contexts
- a searchable database where individuals, dioceses, and others can submit short descriptions, guidelines, images, and links to creative ministry ideas

G. Working with volunteers

Volunteers have been key to the ways churches have supported their communities through the pandemic. However, COVID-19 has also had an impact on the Church's volunteer base. Many older volunteers, who provide a very high proportion of CofE capacity, had to shield for a time. At the same time, many new volunteers came forward, impressed by what they saw churches doing to support vulnerable communities.

- new volunteers need to be retained and relationships further developed
- former volunteers need to be helped to return, regain confidence, and rediscover fulfilment in volunteering (see **1.5.4; Detailed recommendations, 3; Appendix 7**).

H. Working in partnership

During the pandemic, churches have demonstrated the multiple strengths they bring to partnerships with other Christian groups, charities, and local authorities. In order to play a full role in recovery, they will need

- access to further training, support, and funding for enhanced partnership working with local agencies (including statutory and voluntary groups).
- opportunities to learn from the innovative and creative approaches to community partnerships developed during the pandemic, which can enhance long-term practice and provision (see **1.4.3; Detailed recommendations, 3**).

I. A review of financial support for churches

The recommendations of the Taylor Review⁷ need to be revisited in the light of the severe loss of income experienced by many churches, due to reduced giving, suspension of community activities, loss of hire or visitor income, and the absence of normal fundraising activities. Parishes report that they are using up their reserves to pay their Parish Share or other costs. This will have an impact on following financial years, especially if repairs or other capital works are needed. The following would help churches regain some financial stability and security:

⁷ 'The Taylor Review: Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals' December 2017.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/669667/Taylor_Review_Final.pdf
Detailed Recommendations, 3, p31.

- When churches meet the necessary criteria, they should be eligible on equal terms for all sources of public and government funding targeted at charities, social enterprises and the voluntary sector.
- Some churches will need tide-over grants to make up for lost income in 2020-21.
- The Government needs to confirm that Local Authorities and Parish Councils may award money to churches for community needs, as the Taylor Review suggests (1.5.3; **Detailed Recommendations 1**).

J. Provision of streamlined up-to-date guidance

To function effectively, churches need clear, authoritative, up-to-date guidance which they can confidently interpret and implement for their own situations.

- Summer and Autumn 2021 are vital periods for clarifying guidance in a way which will allow churches to continue to remain open and serve, even in the event of subsequent waves of increased virus transmission. The focus needs to be on what *can* be done and providing clarity on key issues. The overall objective must be that churches do not ever have to close completely again!
- Government guidance needs to be informed by wider consultation with those on the ground and to incorporate greater flexibility in relation to the size of buildings, local capacity, resources, and Public Health advice
- When core guidance is updated, this must be communicated clearly and quickly, and with adequate notice. Previous guidelines must be removed from websites etc to avoid confusion or 'guidance fatigue'

Areas in particular need of definitive guidance include:

- leaving prayers; lighting candles; giving out prayer cards and other resources
- re-opening church buildings for social care and community groups (including templates with visual examples of planning and risk assessments by activity; clarity on insurance issues)⁸
- re-opening for visits and cultural and social events (templates for risk assessments; guidance based on numbers of visitors; how to use tools such as leaflets and touchscreen displays safely; clarity around insurance). See **3.5.2**.

5. KEY SUPPORT NEEDED TO MAXIMISE CHURCHES' CONTRIBUTION

A. Recognition

Greater recognition is needed from government, local authorities, and decision-makers, of the importance of churches to the wellbeing of people of all ages. Funding and other support needs to acknowledge the connected roles of church buildings as places of worship, spirituality, hope, and comfort; spaces of shared heritage; and vital hubs of community togetherness and social care. There also needs to be recognition of the importance of celebrating life events, including births, weddings and funerals.

⁸ See, for example, <https://www.covid19saferspaces.org/> 'Safer Churches.'

B. Funding

Churches need sufficient funding to survive the financial impact of COVID-19 and develop enhanced provision to help communities recover and become more resilient. Many churches need support to install accessible essential facilities such as kitchens or toilets, or to refurbish existing facilities to meet current standards and new needs. Others need to develop buildings, either by reordering interiors, or by building extensions to create more flexible spaces and enable a wider range of activities.⁹ Dedicated advice, support, and easy-to-access targeted funding streams are essential.



62%

of Anglican Leaders stressed the need for financial support for **buildings**



C. Guidance

Summer and Autumn 2021 must be used for consultation with churches on the ground and clarification and simplification of policy and guidance, so churches can fully support the recovery of communities and their future wellbeing, even in the event of further waves of virus transmission. Some churches are still struggling to re-open.



47%

need financial help for **community projects**

37%

requested financial support for **facilities**



D. Training

Churches need access to training:

- in volunteer management and support, including developing programmes for returning and new volunteers¹⁰ (see [Appendix 7](#))
- in developing partnerships with charities and local authorities building on the creative community initiatives (digital and in-person) developed during the pandemic (see [Appendix 8](#))
- to help churches embrace more creative approaches to engagement with visitor communities (both digital and in-person), building on the support of existing networks in the church visitor and tourism sector (see [Appendix 6](#))



33%

are looking for additional financial support for **staffing**

⁹ The National Churches Trust *House of Good* Report (October 2020) identifies lack of both suitable spaces and facilities as high on the list of barriers faced by churches wishing to host more community activities in their buildings even pre-COVID. <https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org/>

¹⁰ This could include a cross-community certificate in Volunteering and implementing the Kruger report proposal for a 'Volunteer Passport' 'across different organisations ...with a single identity and criminal records check. *Levelling up our communities... A report for government by Danny Kruger MP September 2020.* <https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf>

E. Support and care for leaders as well as members

Church leaders have often suffered the direct effects of COVID-19 in their own lives, as well as carrying the demands of reassuring and caring for others; keeping congregations together; supporting bereaved families and traumatised communities in difficult and restricted circumstances; rapidly developing new skills; and developing new community partnerships: all in the face of reduced income and numbers of personnel. Some leaders have felt undermined by constraints on their ability to serve, varying approaches across dioceses, and media speculation about redundancies and church closures. In some cases, these factors have impacted badly on their sense of calling, mental health, and motivation. There is also evidence of leaders feeling well supported and great excitement about new opportunities to serve and reach out, new patterns of ministry, and enhanced respect and relationships with communities. Moving forward, all leaders will benefit from:

- acknowledgement of what has been achieved and the personal cost involved
- clear affirmation, support, and training
- communication/consistency of messaging across dioceses

6. CONCLUSION:

A CHURCH FOR THE NATION, A CHURCH FOR THE FUTURE

COVID-19 has put churches of all sizes under huge pressure; it has also opened up creative new ways to serve in the future. The pandemic has highlighted what churches offer, the creative ways in which they have responded in a time of great need, and the potential of the unique national infrastructure of the Church of England to make a very substantial contribution to recovery. Despite all the challenges, this is a profoundly important moment *and opportunity* for churches to rediscover and reaffirm their place at the spiritual and caring heart of communities and the nation (see '[Health check](#)' tool below).

A 2021 'HEALTH CHECK' FOR CHURCHES

Introduction

This simple 'holistic health check' seeks to help churches of all sizes to:

- clarify how you can develop your ministry and reach out to your communities in the face of new needs, challenges, and opportunities
- identify what support will be needed to achieve this

The questions are designed to help you assess the ways COVID-19 has impacted upon your church and community. They will help you to recognise the ways you were able to support your congregation and wider community during the pandemic and consider how your church can develop this support as we move into recovery. This review has been shaped by over 5,500 responses from churches and the general public as part of the 'COVID-19, Churches and Communities' research project.¹¹ The main report and further information can be found at www.churchesandcovid.org

This is a resource to encourage you and help you plan for the future. It is not an official audit and there is no obligation to share your responses.¹²

COVID-19 has brought a time of unprecedented loss, change, and challenge, which has placed great demands on everyone. However, there is also much to celebrate in what churches have been able to continue, initiate, and develop, and this should give us great confidence for the future. As we look towards recovery, there is a unique chance to pause, recognise what has been learned, and think how this can shape and energise ministry and mission going forward. This process, which can only be driven by *your* church context and opportunities, is based on four main questions:

- Where are we now in our church life and relationships with the wider community?
- What are our priorities in moving forward?
- How can we ensure our buildings are fit for purpose?
- What support will we need?



¹¹ A partnership between the University of York, the Church of England, the Association of English Cathedrals, Historic England, the National Churches Trust, and the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance.

¹² If you *would* like to share thoughts or plans to encourage others, contact info@churchesandcovid.org.

A holistic 360° view of mission and ministry

COVID-19 has shown yet again how closely every aspect of church life can work together in outreach. Each relationship and activity developed, whether online worship, running a foodbank, or helping the grieving find comfort, has shown the potential to transform lives as part of a holistic vision for mission.

Members of the wider public told our research team of the great sense of loss felt when in-person worship was not possible, and church buildings were unavailable at a time of crisis. Yet churches still managed to meet spiritual needs and care for those who were suffering, especially the most vulnerable. The hard work, local knowledge, and creativity seen in the response of so many churches during the pandemic has brought enhanced respect and recognition across communities as well as productive new partnerships with individual volunteers, local authorities, charities, and other organisations. These relationships offer exciting new ways to reach out and serve.



Carrying out your 'health check'

It will be important to set aside a specific time to work through the questions, perhaps at a PCC meeting, or inviting the congregation and those who use your buildings to share thoughts and responses.

Dividing into small groups, writing questions on large sheets of paper, and inviting people to write their thoughts on post-it notes, can help make sure all voices are heard. Post-it note boards can then be put up for through-the-week users and visitors to add their views (people can self-identify as church members, volunteers, users, local community etc). Many people have felt isolated during the pandemic and this could help them reconnect and share their experiences. It will be important to capture and record ideas and share a summary with the congregation and community to shape future vision and support.

For some churches, resuming what worked well in the past will now be the priority; others may want to continue new activities developed during COVID, or increase what they offer.

Areas to consider

The questions fall into three sections: **'BEFORE COVID,' 'DURING COVID,'** and **'2021 ONWARDS – LOOKING TO RECOVERY,'** and cover worship, evangelism/outreach, spiritual growth, pastoral care, and wider community engagement.

QUESTIONS:

1. BEFORE COVID (i.e. before March 2020)

A. List the worship, discipleship, and evangelism/outreach activities:

- you undertook each week/month (including youth work, school assemblies, visits to care homes etc).
- occasional activities (such as Alpha Courses, Holiday Clubs, and festivals).

What worked well and why? What were the challenges?

B. List the community activities:

- that took place in your church/hall/grounds, led by you and others
- that you were involved in beyond your building

What were the benefits to you and the community? What were the challenges? Who were your key partners or users?

C. How much was the building open for the community or visitors?

D. How was the church seen by the wider community before lockdown?

2. DURING COVID (especially the three national lockdowns and tier restrictions)

A. Worship, discipleship, and evangelism/outreach:

- What activities were you able to continue?
- What new or expanded faith-focused activities did you provide? (e.g. online services; Sunday School at home; online daily prayer; outdoor carols; online groups exploring faith)

What worked well and why? What were the challenges?

What new skills were developed by church members? How could these be used going forward?

B. Community activities and care

- What activities were you able to continue?
- Which social/community activities had to be paused? (e.g. toddler groups; coffee mornings; lunches; dementia groups; addiction support; exercise classes; young people's/uniformed groups; welcoming visitors; concerts)
- What new activities did you develop? (e.g. foodbanks, networks of volunteers to deliver shopping etc)
- Were you able to form new partnerships with other churches, organisations, parish councils, or local authorities? If so, what role did you play?

- What was the impact of COVID-19 on your volunteers? Did new volunteers come forward? How are you planning to continue any new relationships?

How do you think the church is seen now by the wider community? How has the pandemic strengthened or weakened the relationship?

C. The role of church buildings, churchyards, and other related green spaces

- How did COVID-related access restrictions affect the views of your congregation and the wider community on the value and role of church building(s) and any outdoor spaces?
- What would be necessary to keep your building open as a space of peace and comfort and/or maintain activities in the event of future outbreaks?

How can your buildings and/or outdoor spaces be used more effectively in outreach and care for your community and in welcoming visitors?

3. 2021 ONWARDS - looking to recovery

A. Worship, discipleship, evangelism/outreach

- What aspects would you like to re-instate?
- Which new activities would you like to continue and develop?

B. Community activities and care

- What new needs have you identified within your community (e.g. increased debt, food poverty, stress, unresolved grief, educational needs)?
- What do you see as the priorities in helping individuals and groups recover and rebuild in the next few years?
- How important will it be to have your building open for the community and visitors?

C. What support or resources will you need to continue/develop key activities

Possible examples:

- guidance on COVID-related risk assessment and management
- hardware/software for online work; materials for prayer spaces
- training for working with volunteers and partner organisations
- funding for activities, staffing, and/or adapting your building to meet need
- advice and guidance on welcoming for visitors and telling your stories

4. Final reflection

- **What is your vision for your church in the next ten years? What are the key words that summarise this? Include all aspects of church life, including worship and engagement with the community**

Further guidance

If you would like more guidance on undertaking this review and further steps in community consultation and project planning, you can find free additional resources here:

Churchcare: This Church of England website offers guidance and advice on the day-to-day maintenance of your church; how to open up your buildings to the wider community; and, where applicable, how to go about making changes to your building.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare>

The Crossing the Threshold Toolkit: a step-by-step guide to managing a church building project. In particular, we recommend Chapter 2 - Undertaking a Community Audit and Consulting with the Community.

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/parish-support/community-partnership/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit.php>

This resource is in the process of being updated and a new version will be available in the autumn.

The National Churches Trust provides grants, practical support and information, as well as sign-posting to other sources of useful advice. There is a detailed Building Advice section on their website which covers care and maintenance, making the most of your building as well as advice on managing building projects. There is also a Resource Centre with over 2500 documents and web links to other sources of advice, sorted into topics and easily searchable and the House of Good report which outlines the huge contribution of churches.

www.nationalchurchestrust.org/building-advice

<https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org>

The **Empowering Design Practices** research project has also produced several easy to use resources that describe practical ideas on how to engage with your community on identifying their needs and how you and your church building can work to achieve this.

<https://www.empoweringdesign.net/edp-resources.html>

APPENDIX 1

WORSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP – WAYS FORWARD

Introduction

The ebb and flow of waves of coronavirus, and accompanying restrictions and guidance, have led to great creativity and agility in adapting worship, fellowship, and pastoral care. This has included multiple developments in the provision of online and telephone ministry, the innovative use of outdoor spaces, and creative approaches to re-opening buildings when permitted (see [Appendix 4](#)). Whilst the move online opened up new opportunities for mission for many, others lacked access to the resources or skills needed. It is now vital to reflect on this experience in planning for the future as churches consider how to retain and combine the best aspects of in-person and online interaction, without overburdening leaders and church members. The answers may differ for each church, but sharing ideas, experiences, and training is crucial to ensure that best practice can be developed and clergy and communities sustained in the future.

Key Research Findings

Research responses show how greatly valued online approaches have been, but also reveal their limitations and the desire of most to return to and maintain some form of in-person worship and fellowship. For a fuller discussion see the main report ([Section 2.3](#)), but three themes have emerged as key for future planning.

5. Experiences of online worship during the pandemic are not necessarily indicative of their long-term sustainability

The rapid and creative development of online worship reached new audiences and was widely welcomed in the first wave of pandemic. It encouraged early speculation that this could offer a replacement of in-person provision, raising questions about the need for locally-located clergy and buildings. However, while 63% of respondents valued online provision as keeping them connected to their church community, it is clear that for many this has been a deeply appreciated *short-term* response while buildings were closed. People greatly missed being alongside each other, physically in the same place for both worship and fellowship activities. Informal opportunities to interact were increasingly valued as a means of combatting loneliness and isolation.

67% of Anglicans cited the “Inability to interact in person socially with others” as the restriction on churches that had the most significant effect on their wellbeing, while 50% selected the absence of communal singing.

‘[I have missed] not being able to have the necessary contact, hugs, speaking with the eyes’ Member (Survey 2)

The move online of so many areas of working life and learning also led to a sense of ‘Zoom fatigue’ amongst some.

‘Zoom fatigue from many families has meant they are not connecting with church/Messy Church online’ Church Leader (Survey 2)

However, as we return to a degree of 'normality,' certain aspects of online provision may be *more* appreciated in the future, offering working people the possibility of taking part in evening meetings without having to rush out after commuting home, or attending Sunday services without the need to round up the children or travel. There is a clear desire among many for a blended – or hybrid - approach going forward. Many churches and clergy will need both training and additional resources to help them deliver this effectively.

6. The quality of the experience matters – online and in-person

The experiences of the past year have revealed that the quality of the experience of worship is very important to people, however it is delivered. Key to considering how a blended approach to worship might be delivered in the future is a better understanding of the potential of the technology and medium, and how this can develop over time. The immersive, sensory experience of worship is hard to replicate online, and major challenges were encountered with synchronising online singing. The inability to celebrate and share the Eucharist was keenly felt by clergy and congregations.

Other concerns about online services appear to stem from their quality, indicating that these could be overcome with support and training. Such challenges are to be expected. “In-church” worship has evolved over many centuries and leaders have developed extensive experience, whereas lockdown catapulted most churches into their first attempts at online worship, while also facing numerous other unique ministry pressures.

Moreover, churches have varying strengths and needs, and modes of delivery that appeal to some will be off-putting to others. For example, while some have felt alienated by online worship, others have found it offers new possibilities for inclusion:

‘Online services are good, but I'm a spectator, not part of a family’

Member (Survey 1)

‘People can contribute where they wouldn't have stood up in church in front of the congregation [...] Quieter voices from the congregation have been able to be heard - a subtle democratisation ... we have heard from a wider number of people’ Church Leader (Survey 1)

Learning how to deliver high-quality online worship that responds both to the worship traditions and needs of communities will therefore create opportunities – and expectations - for enhanced and more diverse service provision.

7. A blended approach: integrating online practice into long-term patterns of worship

Many churches are carefully considering ways in which online practice can best be integrated into the wider pattern of worship – whether through streaming an in-person service, or creating something new entirely.

‘I think online worship has to have its own integrity, for the people it's serving. And if those people are the people who for whatever reason don't want to come into the building, they don't want to sit there and watch “from the sidelines”. [...] I don't see what happens in church as the only way of being church.’

Church Leader (Interview)

Mixed-mode or hybrid approaches also offer ways to increase access for those with additional needs that make in-person worship a struggle:

‘Streaming services live ... is another way of making church more inclusive ... One of the best things for me was being contacted by a lady who has 2 young children. The younger one is autistic. She said she would not be able to bring him to church for a full service with lots of people around and unfamiliar surroundings plus noise. For her it has been wonderful to dip in and out of the services at the level suitable for her son.’ Church Leader (Survey 2)

Rural churches have found that online worship (using creative ways to access power and WiFi)¹³ offers the chance to bring together communities across multi-parish benefices and provide weekly services for all. Some are continuing to stream services from a different church building each Sunday, allowing the whole community to worship together and providing an experience which is developing relationships and a greater sense of unity:

‘What we saw when the pandemic hit was a realization that we could be present in each community. I serve seven communities over 20 square miles [...] it's not like working in a suburb where everybody is within two to three square miles of the church. [Online] I could be present in everybody's house ... through Facebook or Zoom, and that had a knock-on effect. Existing congregation members who would only attend church in their locale were coming every week, regardless of whether the service was in their village.’

Rural Church Leader (Interview)

The same leader reported that the move online also enabled wider access to worship for those who previously struggled to attend for health or other reasons, and likewise *“people who had a strong association with our church but lived a distance away.”* Online use helped this parish deepen their sense of community in a new way. This progress must be retained as new patterns of worship are established in months and years to come.

The future of worship post-pandemic will not be solely a case of “new” online provision blending with “old” offline services. COVID-19 creativity has also extended to new, non-digital forms of worship, many of which will still be valuable as restrictions and anxieties ease. The Church at every level has an opportunity to enhance worship patterns, drawing on the experience gained and innovations introduced.

Recommendations for the Future

Looking forward, research indicates the importance of patience and careful discernment in a number of areas. Online worship remains a new experience for many church members and leaders, only undertaken because of unique circumstances and challenges. We must therefore be quick to learn, and slow to criticise areas that appear unsuccessful, instead taking this as an opportunity to develop a form of mission and ministry that might have taken decades to progress without this catalyst.

¹³ Churches have overcome challenges in the area of internet connectivity by investing in mobile 4G roaming hotspots / hubs or in lithium battery generators (for rural churches without electricity) allowing services to be simultaneously online and onsite. See <https://ycrbsorg.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/crbs-rural-church-response-to-covid19-final-17.01.20.pdf>

- After discerning which struggles are intrinsic and which can be overcome, it must be a priority to listen to the success stories and offer training and guidance on best practice in areas that are particularly difficult to manage online.
- There needs to be a national hub for sharing effective creative ideas.
- Where struggles have been caused by a lack of technical resources, literacy, or infrastructure, the Church must use this as an opportunity to both institute its own initiatives (such as training for leaders and dedicated funding for churches to acquire necessary hardware and software), but also to lobby for wider solutions, such as the importance of access to broadband and issues of digital poverty.
- It is vital to consider carefully how traditional and new approaches can fruitfully co-exist. Whether these take the form of live-streaming in-church services – while ensuring that both online and in-person audiences feel engaged and valued - or distinct services that are intentionally crafted for online platforms, it is important that these are approached with the same care as any other form of worship. Many Anglican churches already operate multiple services focused on different groups, and an online only service could be considered in the same way.
- We must learn from those with long experience in these areas – including established ministries developed by and for Christians with disabilities, using technology to improve access to worship for those who can find in-person church a struggle.

However churches choose to bring together their online and offline offerings, this will require extensive patience, creativity, reflection, training, and sharing of knowledge, as they continue to explore and develop best practice.

Support Needed

It is key that the Church takes this opportunity to develop models of best practice as well as training for online ministry. These tools should draw on both the struggles and the successes and be adaptable for all contexts and levels of expertise. Alongside this, the Church must create a platform on which church leaders can share and access creative ideas for online (and, indeed, offline) ministry in order to support them in the future.

APPENDIX 2

ONLINE 'BEYOND SUNDAYS'

Introduction

While much of the discussion around 'online church' has focused on Sunday worship, it is possible that the greater long-term impact will be seen beyond main services. 73% of church leaders surveyed said they offered prayer/pastoral support online, ranging from formal Morning or Evening Prayer to more informal approaches, across all age ranges. The lack of geographical pressures in online engagement is crucial here. Many regular churchgoers, have attendance on Sunday mornings already built into their rhythm of life. Midweek sessions, however, often have to compete with other commitments (not least work, school, and associated travel). Removing the need for additional journeys through using online platforms has broadened the potential audience and has been well received.

Key Research Findings

1. Midweek Prayer

One of the most commonly seen developments is daily prayer, with many churches seeing a growth of interest in morning and evening prayer.

'We have a Zoom morning prayer group, using the Northumbria Community prayers. This is attended by up to 40 different devices each morning.'

Church Leader (Survey 2)

'We've been doing Zoom morning prayer twice a week, and somebody leads evening prayer on Facebook Live three times a week ... people are stepping into roles they never thought they'd do, especially ... online, and for a lot of us it's just like, "I would never have thought our generation will be doing that kind of thing".' Church Leader (Interview)

'The morning prayer via zoom organised by another church in our Deanery has been excellent and I have formed new friendships with many people from other churches.' Member (Survey 1)

Key here is the increase in accessibility that online platforms have offered to those who are involved in full time work or care. The timing of in-person midweek morning and evening prayer means it frequently clashes with work or commuting schedules and is therefore often only accessible to a minority of church members. By shifting these to platforms such as Zoom, individuals can engage from wherever they are, perhaps, for example, incorporating prayer into their morning tea break. These platforms have provided opportunities for interaction through comments or discussion, leading to development of new relationships and communities:

'Our new zoom morning prayer, again for the Benefice, has also given me the opportunity to share prayer with people I wouldn't normally see and is another huge blessing.' Member (Survey 1)

'[I have felt most connected through] the evening prayer meetings on Zoom, where we have fellowship with people you're normally just standing in a queue together to go into Evensong.' Member (Survey 1)

'Online daily office via Facebook - I started to recognise people in the comments. I'd never been able to get to Morning Prayer pre Covid.'

Member (Survey 1)

'Church has been providing daily online Facebook live prayer and services and I've found these are a great source of comfort. I have attended spiritual reflection sessions more during lockdown than I would have attended church in person!! Virtual church allows me to be honest with my emotions and cry if I need to without worrying about anyone seeing me!' Member (Survey 2)

2. Discipleship and Evangelism

Alongside daily prayer patterns, online provision has also expanded to other aspects of through-the-week church life. This has included adaptation of Bible studies, Alpha courses, and other small groups which may be more suited to platforms such as Zoom than larger Sunday services. The ability to take part from home, reducing the need for post-work travel on a weekday evening, as well as expanding the geographical reach of groups, means their appeal is likely to continue.

'We ran an Alpha course online and that was really positive. People seemed to be more willing to talk and open up online from their living rooms or bedrooms than they did coming along to the church building in the evenings ... From what I've heard, that has generally been the pattern, that Alpha seems to work really well in other churches online.' Church Leader (Interview)

'Small groups who meet weekly or fortnightly to share their faith and study the Bible have met more often and in a more relaxed way online, they can share fears and anxieties in their safe community group. So small groups have had a key role during lockdown, they have provided pastoral care within their groups to support one another.' Church Leader (Survey 1)

Many churches will return to pre-pandemic midweek patterns but these examples indicate that a blended approach may be very useful.

3. New Possibilities

The development of online provision has also led to new ways of building community throughout the week, including, short wellbeing and mindfulness sessions, and evening videos for children and families:

'We started doing something new called 'Pyjama Prayers', which is a weekday late afternoon, 'night-night time' for toddlers with a puppet and a prayer and a song, which is pre-recorded [...] They're very short but they were really popular'

Church Leader (Interview)

The fact that many churches have started or substantially developed their presence on social media during the pandemic has the potential to grow and sustain church communities beyond weekly attenders. With both absolute attendance and frequency of attendance dropping significantly over past decades, features such as Facebook pages

allow for individuals to remain connected to their church community throughout the week and throughout the year, even if they rarely attend services in-person. This offers a major opportunity for churches both to build their relationship with the wider local community and to witness to those who are for whatever reason reluctant to attend church services regularly. This offers a mission opportunity that may not be possible in other ways, as well as an opportunity to show the depth of church community life beyond the services. Through these platforms churches have the potential to grow their own community and their role within the wider local community - and to integrate the two more closely - and to build the perception of the church as more than a once-a-week activity.

Recommendations

Drawing on the creativity and ingenuity of church leaders and members and recognising the ways in which needs have been met through midweek online provision, can strengthen mission and ministry in the years to come.

- Many of the time and geographical factors that limit people's ability to engage with church beyond Sundays can be eliminated by developing interaction online. This can include, for example, homegroups using a mixture of online and in-person sessions. It is likely that as the workforce reverts to more regular commuting, these approaches become even more appealing, while those with mobility or transport difficulties will continue to benefit from greater flexibility in terms of opportunities to engage.
- The wider Church must be proactive in capitalising on these advances, promoting their benefits, and offering guidance on weekday engagement that deepens faith, stimulates growth, and enables local churches become even more closely embedded in their communities.

Support Needed

Churches need easily applicable and encouraging guidance for best practice across a range of online approaches, including outlining benefits, tips on planning, and solutions for common IT difficulties or queries.

There is also a need for a national online platform onto which churches can upload their experience and creative ideas to be accessed by people across the country. The innovation seen during the pandemic needs to be harnessed and shared for the benefit of the whole church.

APPENDIX 3

CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES, AND SCHOOLS

Introduction

The impact of the pandemic on children and young people has been enormous. Very young children have suffered lack of social contact; education has been seriously disrupted through lockdowns and requirements to isolate; and families have faced the pressures of home schooling. These factors have impacted most severely on those already facing deprivation and other challenges.

Key Research Findings

1. Creativity

Churches have faced major challenges in seeking to meet the needs of children, young people, and families. Yet there is evidence of great creativity and innovation, including approaches that will be valuable long after restrictions are eased.

Schools Work

- Many churches used existing relationships with schools in order to identify families in particular need during the pandemic:

'Our 'Food 'n' Fun' group for families had to stop meeting, but in partnership with social workers and the local school, they have been providing food drops and at Christmas, presents for the most vulnerable families.' Church Leader (Survey 1)

'Launched a school holiday food parcel scheme with referrals made by local schools.' Church Leader (Survey 2)

- Churches developed mentoring schemes to support young people struggling during this period:

'Launching a youth mentoring programme to get young people into education or employment' Church Leader (Survey 1)

'Online youth mentoring; in-school mentoring' Church Leader (Survey 2)

- Some churches offered online or recorded assemblies:

'Our vicar has done short assemblies for primary-school aged children every day of term-time since the beginning of lockdown, with songs, prayers, bible stories, and different backgrounds each day. These are on Facebook Live, and he engages the kids/parents/teachers with questions and reads out their responses during the assembly. These have been so appreciated by parents during home-schooling and teachers since then, and the children have loved it.'

Member (Interview)

'We have recorded school assemblies on video to send out to schools. These are now reaching a much wider audience and are being used by more schools than we had time to visit before lockdown.'

Church Leader (Survey 1)

Activity Packs

- Many churches created activity packs to be collected, distributed (e.g. alongside foodbanks), or delivered to families. These frequently included craft activities, Bible stories, games, and toys. Some provided materials to accompany weekly online services and other events (such as holiday clubs and nativity trails); others were offered purely as a gift to families.

'We have been making 'boxes of hope' for people in need in the local community. providing good quality food and some craft activities to entertain the children.' Church Leader (Survey 2)

'We introduced Messy Church in a bag which could be picked up from the church porch or delivered. This helped us engage with several families and gave opportunities for doorstep conversations.'

Church Leader (Survey 2)

'A Children's nativity trail, with family fun bags delivered to all completing the trail.' Member (Survey 2)

2. Online Provision

Churches developed online approaches for regular members. Some replicated existing groups and services, while others introduced entirely new digital initiatives.

'We found families and kids weren't really engaging with the [live-streamed] main services, because they were quite geared towards adults. ... From the summer onwards, we used resources from York diocese. Everything was in a bag you gave to the kids each day [for a holiday club], or each week [for services] ... That worked really well because they had everything that they needed. Whether craft materials, or the story printed out, that was all delivered to them ... with a video I pre-recorded, including the story, a craft, and a prayer activity. That was scheduled to be at the same time as the adult service, so parents could set their kids up with that and watch the service themselves.'

Church Leader (Interview)

'Facebook children's church - people could watch but also comment and interact. We could share photos of our children doing craft which made us feel more like we were doing something together.'

Member (Survey 1)

'I started doing something called Big Questions Breakfast for kids at the beginning of services. Earlier in the week I would interview a little child [on Zoom] over their breakfast and I'd ask them a big question and then they asked me a big question' Church Leader (Interview)

'I help lead a youth group of 11–14-year-old girls on Zoom. The group is now a real lifeline both for the girls and the leaders!' Member (Survey 2)

'We started something new called 'Pyjama Prayers', a weekday 'night-night time' for toddlers with a puppet and a prayer and a song, which is pre-recorded. They're very short but really popular.'

Church Leader (Interview)

3. Innovating Online and Off – A Case Study

One church shifted their usual children's provision online: *"For 45 minutes before the service on Zoom we all [including parents] gather and play fun games and read the Bible and there's some prayers with their kids".* When in-person services returned they *"kept the Zoom format but created 'pods' with families sitting on carefully-spaced circular rugs."* For babies, toddlers, and their families, the church began "Bubble Church" (because people had to stay in their household bubbles) and again utilised the mats to ensure social distancing.

'Over 50 new people started coming within the space of one or two weeks ... I think we've just chanced upon a format which hits the nail on the head in terms of being exciting for babies, toddlers, little children and their families, and also having a sort of seriousness to the worship as well.' Church Leader (Interview)

Recommendations

- Develop materials that explicitly target the key emerging needs of children and young people, in particular mental health, social development, and academic progress among vulnerable children and those from deprived areas.
- Develop a national resource hub accessible to all, where online and offline creative approaches can be uploaded and shared. This is particularly important for children's and youth work, as it is frequently led by volunteers or non-specialist leaders.
- Establish patterns of best practice for (in particular) online work in this area, learning from the struggles and positive experiences.
- Draw on the creativity of specialists in children's, youth, family, and schools ministry, in developing these areas and for enhancing ministry to adults.

Support Needed

As churches respond to the long-term aftermath of the pandemic among children and young people in their congregations and communities, they will need:

- Dedicated resources targeted to the particular struggles faced by under-18s during this period
- Further training for those working with these groups so children, young people, and families can recover from the impact of COVID-9 and find hope and encouragement for the future.

APPENDIX 4

USING BUILDINGS AND OUTDOOR SPACES IN WORSHIP, OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY CARE

Introduction

'Churches need to be open to offer the community a safe, welcoming place and hope.' Non-Member (Interview)

'Churchyards have become very important to so many families who often visit and stay to find a sense of belonging during uncertain times' Member (Survey 1)

The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the value placed on church buildings and associated outdoor spaces, not only by congregations but also by the wider community.

Key research findings

1. The multiple roles of church buildings

Survey responses and interviews made it clear that church buildings make multiple contributions to spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing, and play a key role in building relationships with those in the wider community. While online activities were helpful to many church members, others (particular those without internet access) struggled to discover what spiritual and practical help churches were offering and how to connect with them. As one vicar observed, *'The church building is our address. If we are not there, it can be very hard for people outside the congregation to find us.'*

Survey respondents identified loss of access to church buildings as damaging to individual and community wellbeing. They particularly identified the following elements as important to them and their communities, whether church members or not:

- Access to regular worship and special services for congregations and the wider community, including celebrating life events, such as births and weddings
- Spiritual and broader wellbeing benefits from access to church buildings as sites of beauty, peace, comfort, refuge, and hope, where people could have remembered those who were ill or had died, especially when they had been prevented from visiting them
- Opportunities to express grief in buildings which offer safe peaceful spaces of comfort and perspective, acknowledge the person lost, and the creation of positive memories and connections which enable individuals to move forward positively (see [Appendix 5](#)).
- Enhancing wellbeing and combating isolation and loneliness through group activities, including toddler and children's groups, parenting classes, fitness classes, coffee mornings, lunches, book clubs, and volunteering
- Hosting social care activities, including dementia clubs, addiction support, food banks, and education clubs

- Building up communities through church buildings hosting community cafes, shops, markets, Post Offices etc
- Opportunities to explore and enjoy the shared heritage found in churches

2. The value of outdoor spaces

'I always leave with a sense of quiet groundedness'

Non-Member (Survey 1)

Churchyards and other outdoor spaces have a long, rich heritage as places of worship and burial and focal points in rural and urban areas, offering residents and visitors a deep-rooted sense of community and belonging. Increasingly seen as important sites of nature conservation and wellbeing, they create much-needed green spaces in built-up areas and preserve a biodiversity often lost from intensively-managed rural landscapes. Engaging with nature in churchyards is increasingly recognised as bringing wellbeing and educational benefits to all ages, through initiatives led by charities such as *Caring For God's Acre*.

Research data shows increased appreciation of the value of churchyards as safe outdoor spaces; expanded uses in witness and worship; and a desire to share creative ideas and develop further facilities (**Section 2.3.2**). Respondents are looking for more guidance, and ways to use churchyards creatively and safely.

During lockdown, churches created prayer stations, prayer trees, and prayer tents where support and resources could be found. Church windows, porches, and noticeboards signalled ongoing Christian presence through posters and flowers. 'Churchyard tidy' and gardening groups offered a safe environment for volunteers and others to reconnect. Once allowed, outdoor services became an important alternative to gathering inside, enabling easier social distancing, and sometimes using pre-recorded music. Several respondents noted the importance of this for those nervous about resuming indoor worship. Choirs greatly appreciated socially-distanced outdoor singing when allowed (**Section 2.3.2**).

Creative examples of outdoor prayer and worship included:

- Prayer walks starting and ending at the churchyard; prayer stations outside and inside the church (e.g. at Harvest); candles/battery-operated tealights; prayer trees, especially at Christmas; a 'prayer planter' and labyrinth in a car park; spaces for people to leave flowers in memory of a lost loved one; summer outdoor 'garden' prayers
- Outdoor services: regular communions; Harvest festivals, Palm Sunday and Easter gardens, outdoor Candlelit nativity and carol services; 'Forest Church' 14
- Celebrating life events, including outdoor funerals (or broadcast of funerals to outdoor spaces), and outdoor baptisms
- Seasonal lights and illuminations marking festivals (e.g. Summer 'Son et Lumière'; All Saints; All Souls; Advent; Christmas; Candlemas); school or pub car park Nativities

¹⁴ <https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/discovering-forest-church/s>

- Drive-in services in car parks
- 'Carols on the cobbles', 'Carols on your doorstep;' street by street carol singing by family bubbles for those shielding and housebound

Some churchyards and car parks played a crucial role in sustaining existing community activity and outreach. Porches, lych gates, seats and benches were particularly valued as places to rest during daily walks and spaces to meet safely once restrictions were eased.

'The church garden became a much sought-after place of peace and refuge during the Spring/Summer lockdown' Church Leader (Survey 2)

Creative examples of outdoor social and community events included:

- Foodbanks, Food parcels, or Baby and Christmas Gift boxes accommodated in temporary shelters or church doors/porches
- Take-away lunches and Craft Kits for home learning
- 'Bring your own flask and cake' gatherings to combat isolation and loneliness
- Small, socially-distanced musical recitals and concerts
- Book groups, lectures and outdoor tours
- 'Coffee, colouring for adults, and chat' outside at the local pub

Recommendations

- The significance of places of worship as places of individual and community wellbeing, offering peace, beauty and inspiration, sanctuary, solace and comfort needs to be recognised and further developed
- Offering celebrations and commemorations to those who have been deprived of opportunities to share and support one another by the pandemic (see [Appendix 5](#))
- Improving buildings to ensure that they are COVID-safe
- Planning use of spaces and future measures to ensure that buildings and activities can remain open as much as possible in the event of further waves of COVID
- Providing highly visible, welcoming signage outside buildings which provides information and a clear invitation to what is offered, especially for the wider community
- Enhanced welcome and outreach to visitors in search of quiet spaces or opportunities to explore and enjoy shared heritage, including those from the local area. Approaches can include offering simple resources about faith; focal points for reflection; prayer cards; and activities such as leaving prayers, and lighting candles
- Offering hubs for those working from home, and cool peaceful spaces (see GOV.UK Cold Buildings and Spaces initiative)
- Expanding use of outdoor spaces for outreach work, services, fundraising, concerts, and life events through the year
- Exploring partnerships with groups such as Caring for God's Acre.

- Developing outside spaces, creating community gardens, enhancing wellbeing, biodiversity, and commitment to carbon zero

Support needed

- Simple and clear guidance on risk assessments, health and safety, and safe use of indoor and outdoor spaces
- Advice and guidance on sources of funding where facilities need to be improved and buildings made fit for purpose for both worship and community activities
- Creation of a central hub for creative ideas and resources which can be easily updated and downloaded, including models for services of celebration and commemoration¹⁵
- Examples of temporary and more permanent environmentally-friendly structures to support outdoor activities, and guidance on their use
- Initiatives and incentives for churches to use outdoor spaces to benefit communities and individuals, delivered in partnership with others

Resources

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/making-changes-your-building-and-churchyard>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/outdoor-worship>

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/parish-support/community-partnership/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit.php>

<https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/working-what-you-have-things-do-now/opening-visitors>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/cathedral-fabric-commission/advice-and-guidance-cathedrals/visitor-engagement> [also relevant for parish churches]

¹⁵ For some existing helpful resources see <https://churchsupporthub.org/>

APPENDIX 5

POSITIVE MEMORY MAKING AND HEALING

Introduction

'My gran passed away at the beginning of March. [Her funeral] could not take place until 7th April, by which time it was limited to 12 people ... No wake could be held for wider family and friends to celebrate her life or share memories. I gave birth to my first child on 10th April [with] huge delay on meeting family and friends ... My brother's wedding also had to be postponed.' Non-Member (Survey 1)

Like this survey respondent, many people feel that COVID-19 has not only brought pain and anxiety, but also robbed them of the opportunity to grieve 'properly' for those they have lost, or to celebrate key life events such as births, weddings, major birthdays or anniversaries, with family and friends. Yet memories made and shared on such occasions are vital to emotional and mental wellbeing and healing. There is strong evidence that inability to do this during the pandemic has caused lasting problems.

Key research findings

COVID-19 has brought an unprecedented experience of individual loss and collective trauma, often suffered in isolation. The impact of a great number of deaths in a short period has been compounded by the fact that many have been prevented from visiting or caring for the dying, or holding a 'proper' funeral. This has often resulted in an enduring sense of pain and guilt: '[The] funeral was small and [I] still feel we haven't properly said goodbye ... [it] feels as though her life has gone and [she has] not been fully recognised for the person she was.'¹⁶ A 'Non-Member' wrote, 'Funerals are a celebration of life that give friends and family an opportunity to *share memories* and say goodbye' (Survey 1), and the bereavement charity CRUSE notes, 'Having opportunities to remember the person who has died, and all they mean to us, *is vital to grieving*.'

'I was unable to see my brother before he died & unable to attend a service. Still have his ashes to inter.'

Non-Church Member (Survey 1)

Church buildings have emerged as important to many, whether church members or not, because they are beautiful, peaceful spaces offering informal and formal opportunities to express grief, acknowledge the person lost, and find spiritual support and hope. Some churches were able to offer opportunities during Remembrance services and All Souls Service for people to remember loved ones who had died.

'At the evening service on Remembrance Sunday (November 2020), we are having a time called Remembering with Thanksgiving, which is a really special time for people who have been bereaved and have lost loved ones. Our churchwarden will be lighting

¹⁶ 'Supporting people bereaved during COVID-19: Study Report 1, 27 November 2020.' Cardiff University and the University of Bristol, p.3. <https://www.covidbereavement.com/post/supporting-people-bereaved-during-covid-19-study-report-1-27-november-2020>

a candle for each loved one who has died when their names are read out in the church, and people can just come and be there in private prayer.’ Church Leader (Interview)

Open spaces, including churchyards, have also found renewed significance as spaces for quiet reflection and prayer (see **Appendix 4**). Churches have also offered simple but effective tools such as 'memory' trees and 'hope' trees, with ribbons, baubles or labels. These have provided individuals and communities with much appreciated places to remember lost loved ones and find comfort and help.

Lost opportunities to celebrate have included weddings, major anniversaries, school and college leaving events, and retirements, all moments that could have lightened the dark experiences brought by COVID-19.

Recommendations

Weeping with those who weep

The need for human contact and in-person support has never been greater, as people remember those they have lost, and work through their grief. There will, for some time, be increased need for formal services *and* simple individual activities (e.g. candle-lighting and leaving prayers). Churches have the chance to expand provision, inside or outside buildings, offer spiritual comfort, and support healing and future wellbeing.

A number of churches plan to provide collective opportunities for mourning those lost during restrictions on funerals and wakes. These will offer outlets for grief for those who have been denied this, as well as a space for communities to reflect and support one another.

‘The inability to hold funerals, with people able to express their grief and support each other, has had a huge effect. There needs to be some way of offering a memorial service to help those who are bereaved and allow those who are grieving to come together for mutual support.’ Church Member (Survey 2)

‘I’ve already had a request for some kind of memorial stone to remember those who died during the pandemic. We are offering free memorial services for those unable to say goodbye to loved ones in the way they wanted.’

Church Leader (Survey 2)

Rejoicing with those who rejoice

Many people will now be looking for chances to gather joyfully, celebrate together, and create memories that can shine amongst the struggles. Churches can engage with communities by offering ways to 'catch up' with celebrations, such as a service of blessing for all babies born during COVID; a joint party celebrating major birthdays; or a fundraising event where wedding dresses that could only be appreciated by a handful of guests can now be fully enjoyed.

Support needed

In both mourning and celebration, churches will benefit from guidance, encouragement, and the systematic, easy-to-access, sharing of creative ideas at national and diocesan level, which can be interpreted for their own community and context.

APPENDIX 6

WELCOMING VISITORS AND MISSION

"Church buildings matter... not as historic monuments, or museums to a faith few are interested in any more, but as often beautiful public sacred spaces where honest conversation, whispered prayers, and public ritual, place each of us as a small part of a much bigger story ... As we recover together ... we will need these spaces more than ever."

Revd. Lucy Winkett, Rector of St. James Piccadilly.¹⁷

Introduction

The impact of COVID-related closures of church buildings prompted many non-church members to fresh recognition and expression of the value they attach to these places. Such responses should encourage churches to explore how welcoming visitors, whether local or from further afield, can contribute to building new relationships and sharing faith.

Key research findings

1. The value attached to church buildings

Survey responses showed clearly how much both Church Members and Non-Church Members had missed access to church buildings, especially at a time of special need. Church buildings are valued as places of quiet and beauty, which offer space for reflection, processing difficulties, finding comfort, and recharging batteries.

Many do not have quiet spaces inside their homes or green spaces outside, and needs have been magnified by the pressures of home-schooling, work and financial difficulties, and isolation from families and friends. In times of personal and national crisis, people often look to churches as places of comfort and reassurance. This need was particularly apparent in responses from Non-Members who gave need for quiet reflection (75%), and a peaceful, safe place (68%) as key reasons for wanting to visit churches (**Section 2.2.1**). These responses should encourage churches to realise how valued their buildings are by the wider community and indicate that engaging with visitors can be an important part of mission.

'I missed... finding comfort in a place that had stood the test of time through generations. A sense of reassurance, continuity and permanence.'

Non-Member (Survey 1)

2. Building on new trends

Predictions are pointing to staycations¹⁸ and an increased value placed on 'the local.'

'Many people have found things closer to home they would have never expected ... There's a desire to look for places that are off the beaten track; undiscovered places. [Churches] have local people that you can meet .. and are the place to go to discover about the local community.' National Churches Trust Interview

¹⁷ Church Times, 21 May 2021

¹⁸ Data from research by VisitBritain <https://www.visitbritain.org/covid-19-consumer-sentiment-tracker>

During this last year, many churches have improved their digital offer to visitors and increased their presence on social media. Some have created video introductions to their building and the life of their Christian community. Potential visitors often like to learn about their destination in advance.

'It is about doing something that is kind of more engaging, more informal, very personal that says, "Come and have a look around our church."

National Churches Trust Interview

3. The importance of good communication

When some churches closed because of COVID-19 restrictions, no explanation or information was offered to the wider public on doors or noticeboards, giving many the impression that the church had simply ceased to operate.

Others provided explanation and contact links, such as:

- Prayers
- An invitation to post a prayer request in an external prayer box
- An invitation to attend outdoor activities
- Directions to places flowers could be laid in memory of someone
- Information on where pastoral support could be accessed
- Notice giving details of local support groups eg: foodbanks

Recommendations

'Entertaining strangers' and mission

Visitors to churches may be motivated by interest in history or architecture but once inside their focus may change. Many speak of unexpectedly experiencing a sense of peace and wellbeing, catching a glimpse of God, or finding themselves wanting to explore the faith which has shaped the building and community. 'Tourists' can be an 'audience in waiting.'

Churches can respond to these opportunities by providing materials and activities for the wide range of people who may come into their building. These could include using both digital and printed resources to offer:

- Faith-centred interpretation of the history, meaning and purpose of the building, its art, architecture, and furnishings, as well as stories of its local, regional or national role
- Accessible explanations of Christian faith and worship
- Opportunities and resources for prayer and quiet reflection, and remembering someone who is ill or has died (such as providing candles, pebbles, prayer trees, and prayer cards: somewhere to leave prayer requests and/or flowers).
- Family-friendly activities developing a positive relationship with church buildings
- Sharing the life of the current Christian community, with photos of church members, activities, and local community partnerships
- Invitations to services, exploring faith groups, or other events

Welcoming visitors and engagement with the wider community

Churches can contribute to the local economy, if visitors also visit other attractions in the area. Shared publicity and promotions, creating two-way sign-posting and trails to other churches and heritage sites, taking part in events and linking websites can be valuable in building relationships. Working together also offers an opportunity to involve local people in welcoming visitors, for example through researching local stories, creating displays, and applying for grants, as well as volunteering. These are people who might not initially wish to become members of the congregation, but they may value and love the building and be willing to help look after it. Friends Groups can be helpful in enabling this kind of support.

Where possible, churches should consider opening more to:

- Provide increased opportunities for encouraging people to explore faith
- Offer places of beauty, quiet, reflection, and comfort
- Encourage support for the building
- Strengthen the local economy

It is vital that the initial invitation encouraging people to enter a church building is welcoming and positive. This requires signage on the exterior, notice boards and the main door, to be highly visible and attractive, and to make clear what the church offers.

Language must be inclusive and make all visitors feel the welcome includes them. For instance, the phrase, 'The church is open for private prayer,' can in fact be offputting to many, as 'private' potentially sounds exclusive.

Support needed

Churches often benefit from specialist support and training to help them develop a range of visitor engagement initiatives, including:

- better understanding their own heritage and key stories
- developing new approaches to interpretation
- guidance on how to share faith with visitors
- develop new ways to encourage visitors such as social media and promotional aids such as OS Platforms, Google Business, Trip Advisors
- Making it easier for those who wish to give to do so eg: contactless giving

Resources include

Visitor Engagement Plans for Cathedrals (also relevant for parish churches)

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/cathedral-fabric-commission/advice-and-guidance-cathedrals/visitor-engagement>

Opening for visitors

<https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/working-what-you-have-things-do-now/opening-visitors>

APPENDIX 7

WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Introduction

Volunteers have always been central to all areas of church life, including serving the local community. The majority of church volunteers usually come from the local area and their knowledge and contacts have played a major role during the pandemic, as the importance of volunteering came to the fore.¹⁹

Key research findings

1. Creative responses

Volunteers have been central to the ways churches have supported their communities through the pandemic. The full range of care and resources delivered includes:

- Practical help, including shopping, dog walking, collecting prescriptions, delivering goods, and carrying out small tasks.
- Spiritual and emotional support, often through befriending or listening services.
- Financial aid, through in-kind support like food deliveries or, in some cases, small hardship grants.
- Digital support, such as helping their local community to get online and connected, including provision of digital skills training and purchasing devices for those in need.
- Running foodbanks and offering take-away meals and activity packs for children.
- Keeping support groups going, where possible, by moving them online.

Churches achieved this by calling on established volunteer networks, welcoming new volunteers, strengthening existing partnerships, and building new ones.

'Since the start of the pandemic, I have helped oversee an upscaled foodbank with hot meal distribution [with] about 60 volunteers ... [and] man a freephone community helpline ... We have delivered gifts to care homes and GP surgeries and provided online support for youth [...] The needs are overwhelming.' Member (Survey 2)

¹⁹ The pre-pandemic value of church volunteers and their importance to society is highlighted in the National Churches Trust 'House of Good' report which calculated that 'the wellbeing value of regular volunteering (at least once a month) in church buildings in the UK is at least £165 million'. <https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org/>. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society's 'Keeping the Faith' report highlights the positive experience of partnership working between local authorities and faith groups, especially churches, during the pandemic. https://www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf Chapter 5 Analysis: the survey pp. 21 - 24.

2. Challenges

Volunteers have been key in the various ways that churches have supported their communities through the pandemic, yet the pandemic has also had an impact on the church's volunteer base. Our research showed that a major challenge during this time was that many elderly volunteers, who form a high percentage of CofE volunteers, had to shield. However, many new volunteers came forward impressed by what they saw churches doing to support vulnerable communities.

Of the 85% of Church Members who previously had a volunteer role at their church or cathedral, 79% said that they expected to return.

COVID-19 has created increased demand as well as additional needs. Responses showed that leaders and members recognise that churches and other places of worship not only need to resume their role as social hubs but to expand activities to meet increased levels of need across society. This will require a sufficient number of volunteers, and it will be crucial to encourage volunteers to return as well as recruiting new volunteers. Church leaders will therefore benefit from training in these areas.

A major risk going forward is a shortage of local volunteers. A high percentage of church volunteers are retired and many fall into vulnerable groups, meaning they had to shield.²⁰

'Our foodbank is run by volunteers who are from lots of denominations. At the moment, it's myself and our curate who are running it in lockdown because our volunteers are shielding ... We have some volunteers who are very fit and active but are in a vulnerable age category.'

Church Leader (Interview)

Some volunteers have not been able to resume because of illness, bereavement, or increased issues in balancing work and childcare; others have simply taken the chance to step down. Churches also reported that many volunteers were keen to return, as it was an important part of their well-being and signalled a return to "normality." A hospital chaplain noted that older hospital volunteers were desperate to return because 'they want their life to have meaning and if that meaning is taken away life loses its purpose'.

3. Gaining new volunteers

A very positive finding is the increase in recognition of the role that churches play in the well-being of their communities, leading to people seeing the church as an effective channel for providing support to those most in need during the pandemic. Because people trust the church, many are more prepared to offer their services:

'We had people just getting in touch with us saying "I've seen your initiative; we would love to come and do some deliveries on Christmas Eve." So, we met 14 new delivery drivers that we've never met before who did a fantastic job.' Church Leader (Interview)

²⁰ The *Historic England Heritage Sector Volunteer Survey* in February 2021 found that of the 310 responses, of which over 50% were from a faith-based or church organisations, around 75% of their volunteers fell into the over 65 age bracket. Compared with a similar survey from 2019 we see a drop of 33% in the number of individuals who contributed volunteer hours in 2020, with 74% of all organisations experiencing a drop in their volunteer numbers between the two dates.

Churches are also skilled at creating a 'virtuous circle' of volunteering between recipients and providers of social care (1.4.2). Volunteering is a two-way channel, benefiting those who give as well as those who receive. It also offers the possibility of personal growth and development as a consequence of help received. People may find themselves at different points in the circle of need and support, depending on their stage in their lifecycle, their employment status, and their personal life experiences.

'We had people coming to us saying, "Three years ago I was in a position where I didn't know how I was going to get through Christmas with my three kids. I was unemployed; I was vulnerable. I'm in a very different circumstance now and I'd really love to give back to another family".'

Church Leader (Interview)

Many churches have been made more aware of their volunteers' skills and of any gaps. The need to move communication and activity online rapidly was cited as a major challenge:

"With so much interaction needing to happen online and via social media, it has exposed the weaknesses in my skills and the shortcomings amongst our existing volunteers." Church Leader (Interview)

Other churches are identifying new needs within their community and seeking to build up their volunteers's skills. Volunteers from one church, including the vicar, are undertaking the Christians Against Poverty Money and Life Skills training so they can support those facing unemployment and financial problems:

'The course incorporates some of the money stuff but is also about helping people shop well and cook healthily. There's a section on relationships and not falling out with your neighbours etc. Lots of the families and the homeless people we see, their life's a bit of a mess in all sorts of ways.' Church Leader (Interview)

4. An opportunity for mission

Several churches reported that new volunteers who have started working with churches in the pandemic have also begun to explore faith as a result of the relationships developed:

'I've really realised how much people really want to know about the church, if the church is involved in the community and making a difference ... they see the practical love of God at work.' Church Leader (Interview)

We've had a couple of key volunteers ... who have come from the local community and are new to the church but are joining in with online worship and exploring faith [having] made that connection through volunteering at the food bank.' Church Leader (Interview)

This finding aligns with the research undertaken by Theos (2020) which found that 'social action can be a route to church growth in both numerical and spiritual terms.'²¹

²¹ Growing Good; Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England, Hannah Rich, Theos, 2020. <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2000/01/31/the-grace-project>

Recommendations

COVID-19 has created both increased demand and additional need, and volunteers will be increasingly important in community rebuilding. Ensuring there are sufficient volunteers is therefore paramount, and thought needs to be given to the following areas:

- Encouraging volunteers to return.
- Awareness of the wellbeing of volunteers and how they may have been affected by the pandemic. Some may have lost social confidence and this will need to be rebuilt
- Providing COVID-safe conditions for volunteers so feel secure in returning
- Developing relationships with volunteers who came forward during Covid and encouraging them to continue to work with churches, even if the immediate need changes. As newcomers, they will bring new perspective, ideas, and skills.
- Highlighting the mutual benefits of volunteering: for churches and for volunteers (1.5.4). For some it is a route to paid employment (which needs to be supported by structured training and development), while for many, volunteering is a major source of fulfilment, wellbeing, contact with others, purpose, and increased self-confidence.
- Using new ways to recruit volunteers such as partnering with other organisations, participating in social prescribing and company volunteer programmes, and local apprenticeship schemes. This can help broaden the demographic range of volunteers.
- Training existing volunteers to gain new skills
- Recruiting volunteers with key skills from the wider community, thus strengthening links
- More effective management of volunteers so that they can undertake their roles to the best of their abilities and are retained long term.
- Recognising that volunteering can be a pathway to exploring faith and that reaching out to and working with volunteers is part of a church's mission

Support needed

- Churches need Volunteer Management training and support on how to engage with, manage, value and therefore retain volunteers, both returning and new
- Churches also need training in providing COVID-safe spaces and supporting volunteers in carrying out their work positively in a COVID-safe environment
- Consideration should be given to developing cross community skills certificates in volunteering, and the possibility of creating a 'Volunteer Passport' to be 'used across different organisations, in the public and social sectors, with a single identity and criminal records check.'²²

²² *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant A report for government by Danny Kruger MP* September 2020. <https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf>

APPENDIX 8

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

'In this time [...] creative partnerships and coalitions have formed across faith communities and with other organisations and government agencies, bringing people together to tackle social issues.'

The Rt Revd Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London²³

Introduction

Churches deliver a huge amount of social care, through a combination of running projects themselves and working with partners, including local authorities, charities, and community groups. In 2019 churches were involved in 35,000 social action projects,²⁴ providing and signposting both 'light touch' and more structured support. Recent evidence shows that the effects of the pandemic have made working in wider partnerships with other organisations including local authorities even more necessary. It has also greatly increased appreciation of what churches and other faith communities have to offer.²⁵ The COVID-19, Churches and Communities report describes how existing partnerships have been strengthened and new ones developed to meet new needs (**Section 1**).²⁶ In survey responses and interviews, church leaders and members strongly emphasise the mutual benefits of partnerships and their wish to develop them further.

Key Research Findings

1. Strengthening existing partnerships

It is clear that from March 2020 onwards, partnership working became even more valuable in supporting vulnerable individuals and communities (**Section 1.3.2**). Churches were able to make use of existing partnerships, such as relationships with local schools, which helped to identify vulnerable families who needed access to food parcels.

'We [had] help with the food support from local primary schools. We went to them all and said, "We can take five of your most vulnerable families that we will promise we will visit every week and give food and provide activities." And they gave back to us. One said we could use their minibus, while another offered a staff member to help deliver to our families.'

Church Leader (Interview)

²³ Foreword to *Stepping Up and Stepping Out*, The Good Faith Partnership, June 2021
<https://goodfaith.org.uk/case-studies/stepping-up-and-stepping-out-towards-a-future-social-covenant-between-faith-communities-and-government-in-covid-19-recovery-and-beyond>

²⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/2019StatisticsForMission.pdf>

²⁵ 'The networks of a faith community, the relationships within a congregation or faith group, are a source of huge resilience and opportunities for the people they seek to help'. Danny Kruger MP, *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant*. <https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/new-social-covenant>

²⁶ <https://churchesandcovid.org>

In some cases, the pandemic meant services had to be delivered differently resulting in new partnerships. One church was able to provide volunteers from its congregation and networks to support a charity needing to adapt from running a 5-day a week elderly day-centre at the church to providing clients with meals and support at home.

2. Developing new partnerships

Many new partnerships were formed to meet the new needs triggered by COVID-19.

‘Our church has developed a partnership with 6 others from all different denominations and none to form a Community Help Hub offering shopping, prescription collection befriending, food and gift packs, meals for school kids, money courses, well-being courses, prayer ministry, listening, crisis response and referrals to agencies.’ Church Leader (Survey 2)

‘All these needs have been provided by a village volunteer force co-ordinated by Churches Together with the parish council. The existing Village Car Scheme (Medical journeys for villagers without their own transport) ... has provided food, prescriptions and medical transport.’

Member (Survey 2)

Churches also entered into partnerships with charities offering specialist help.

‘Food poverty became a very big issue ... we have developed something called a Pop-Up Pantry in conjunction with another organisation ... which is about using intercepted food i.e. food that would go for waste. For two hours each week in both our churches, we have ‘a social supermarket’ on tables and people pay £5 for two big bags of food ... fresh fruits and vegetables and essentials such as dairy items, tinned food and bread. We also have joined with a local Credit Union ... and put one pound to people's five pounds into a credit union account. So they're getting food at a much-reduced price, plus starting to save.’ Church Leader (Interview)

3. The benefits and opportunities of working in partnership

Survey responses showed churches increasingly aware of the benefits of working in partnership, recognising it produced more effective care and allowed more people and organisations to see 'the church in action'. Increased recognition of the role of churches in supporting their communities and the positive partnerships they are forming with statutory organisations also means that they are more likely to be invited to be part of conversations and initiatives on how to solve key issues within communities.

‘The community group which arose was an excellent example of churches, parish councils and neighbourhood schemes working together.’ Church Leader (Survey 1)

‘In our local community (village) church and chapel volunteers have led the coordination of a local support group linked to the village parish council. It has built stronger local links and been an opportunity for residents to see faith in action in the community, not just in the church.’ Member (Survey 1)

‘Two members of staff have parish community focused roles. They have led collaboration with the City Council, opened a food bank, a listening service,

a befriending scheme, outdoor play, delivering craft kits. With other statutory and non-statutory agencies, we got a £50k+ grant from Lottery to open a new Community Hub. In recognition of the part we have played, the church (along with others) has just been given (without applying) a £12k 'thank you' from the City Council.' Church Leader, Survey 2

*'Over the pandemic, we have moved from the edge of people's thinking in terms of the response to food poverty. We now have a greater voice in the town-wide conversation, both with the council and other Church/Christian organisations we now partner with.'*²⁷

Other research has highlighted the increase in positive partnerships between churches and local authorities.²⁸ The findings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society's *'Keeping the Faith'* report, published in 2020, highlighted positive experiences of partnerships between local authorities and faith groups during the pandemic. Local Councils particularly praised the ability of churches and faith groups to reach the most deprived communities, mobilise volunteers, and offer buildings for wider community use:

*'The pandemic has given rise to a significant increase in the numbers and depth of relations between local authorities and faith communities. The often hidden or unnoticed contributions that faith groups make to the resilience of local communities have become much more visible. Local authorities say they have discovered a new appreciation of the agility, flexibility and professionalism of faith groups and faith-based organisations in their responses to the pandemic.'*²⁹

4. Recognition that partnerships are key to supporting post Covid-19 recovery

There is a clear sense among church leaders and members that partnership working must now expand to meet growing need (see 1.4.3).

'I would like to see my church act as the home for a range of services, including food banks, concerts, scout and guide, choir, performance arts, counselling and mutual support, which use its buildings to serve the wider community of all faiths.' Member (Survey 2)

'Our church is part of a city-wide unity movement (Gather network) and we are rolling out the community hub model to other areas across the town addressing issues of economic recovery and wellbeing for all.'

Church Leader (Survey 2)

'A strong relationship between the church and the local GP surgeries and other service providers (especially mental health) will be key to the long-term recovery of the community.' Member (Survey 2)

²⁷ *Church in Action 2020/21: a Survey of Churches' Community Responses to the Pandemic*, Church of England and Church Urban Fund, April 2021 p22 <https://cuf.org.uk/news/church-in-action>

²⁸ *Church in Action 2020/21*, pp 20-21.

²⁹ *Faith and Society: Keeping the Faith Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities*, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, November 2020. https://www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf

'More networking to link with local community groups so that our support can be more structured and effective. Long-term ongoing support for economically disadvantaged groups [alongside] the local council service teams will lead to service policy delivery changes.' Member (Survey 2)

'We're considering partnering with a Community Interest Company to provide IT skills to the over 50s, to help with re-employment or change of career. It would be based in the church hall. That could be good for people's confidence, mental health and job prospects.' Member (Survey 2)

Recommendations

- There needs to be a fresh acknowledgement of the key strengths demonstrated by churches that make them very strategic partners in meeting community need. This should be communicated to government at all levels, as well as to the voluntary and charity sector.
- Partnerships need to be supported by two-way training: giving non church bodies training in 'faith literacy' and an understanding of how churches and faith groups operate; and training churches in how to build and maintain partnerships with outside organisations.

Taking the findings from the *'Keeping the Faith'* report a stage further, the very recent *'Stepping up and Stepping out'* report suggests that:

'By strengthening partnerships between faith communities and government agencies, a powerful social covenant between the state and faiths can be created that will, in turn, positively impact the lives of millions throughout society'.³⁰

Support needed

- While many churches have built productive relationships with local authorities, others lack the confidence, connections, or expertise to work closely with local stakeholders. Churches need access to better training and support for enhanced partnerships with local agencies, including statutory and voluntary groups, to develop shared understanding of changing local needs and new approaches to collaboration.

*'Churches across the UK were asking us the question: how can we work well with our local authorities and other local agencies as our localities look to recover from Covid-19?'*³¹

- Future plans need to build on the innovative, creative, and effective approaches to partnership working and engagement with communities, both digital and in person, developed during the pandemic.

³⁰ <https://goodfaith.org.uk/case-studies/stepping-up-and-stepping-out-towards-a-future-social-covenant-between-faith-communities-and-government-in-covid-19-recovery-and-beyond>

³¹ <https://yourneighbour.org/the-church-in-lockdown>, p.18. In July 2020, YourNeighbour launched a toolkit with FaithAction to offer practical advice to churches to enable them to strengthen their relationships with their local councils. *A Toolkit for Working Well with your Local Authority* <https://yourneighbour.org/engaging-locally>

COVID-19, CHURCHES, AND COMMUNITIES RESEARCH TEAM

Revd Dr Dee Dyas is Reader in the History of Christianity and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity at the University of York. She has led major funded research projects on cathedrals and oversees the Centre's heritage interpretation partnerships with cathedrals and parish churches. Her recent publications include *The Dynamics of Pilgrimage: Christianity, Holy Places and Sensory Experience*, Routledge, 2020; and *Pilgrimage and England's Cathedrals, Past, Present and Future*, (co-edited with John Jenkins), Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Dr Kate Giles is Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity at the University of York and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Archaeology. She is an expert in the history and archaeology of medieval and early modern community buildings on which she has published widely. She was former York Minster Archaeology Fellow and a trustee of Yorkshire Historic Churches Trust.

Dr Rob Barward-Symmons recently completed his PhD in the Sociology of Religion from the University of Kent based on an ethnographic study of an evangelical youth group in London looking at processes of religious formation within these spaces. Previously Rob earned degrees in Theology and Religion & Society from Durham University. He has worked as a research assistant for Cranmer Hall, Durham and the Bible Society and as a tutor and lecturer at Ridley Hall College, Cambridge.

Becky Payne spent 18 years with Historic England before serving for 7 years as Policy Officer in the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division (CofE), promoting and enabling the potential of church buildings as a resource for the whole community. She now works as a freelance consultant undertaking projects on sustaining historic places of worship, including developing online resources for congregations; evaluating various sector initiatives - most recently the NLHF's Grants for Places of Worship and the National Churches Trust's MaintenanceBooker; and acting as consultant to university-led research projects. She is a member of the London Diocesan Advisory Committee and Development Officer at the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance (Heritage Alliance).

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