



MISSION UNDER LOCKDOWN: CENTRES OF MISSION DURING COVID-19

Church Army's Research Unit, June 2020



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1 Introduction

This report summarises the findings of research conducted during the COVID-19 crisis with key personnel from Church Army Centres of Mission. During April and May 2020, evangelists at 21 Centres of Mission were interviewed in phone calls or video chats that lasted approximately one hour. They were asked about the effect of COVID-19 on their teams, contexts and local churches, as well as the effect on their Centres of Mission (CoM). Finally, they were asked to reflect on encouragements and wider questions or concerns.

Descriptions in this report of an evangelist's local context should be regarded as findings of evangelist perception, rather than findings of geographical fact. Evangelists are well positioned and trained to understand their contexts, but they should not be burdened with expectations of objectivity and their perspective is not equivocal to that of all other locals.

1.1 Summary

- Evangelists have all been affected differently by COVID-19.
 - Emotional and mental health effects have been varied.
 - Some evangelists have had to self-isolate.
- Almost all church and CoM gatherings have been moved to the internet. Where this has proved impossible or undesirable, some activities have stopped.
 - Online activities are sometimes drawing a larger number of attenders than they were previously.
 - Several CoM are also facilitating online spaces for faith exploration, as well as virtual peer-support networks.
- Centres of Mission are partnering with local churches and agencies to meet physical and spiritual needs.
 - Most forms of food provision and practical support have continued.
 - Demand for these services has increased, and many have become 'takeaway' or 'home delivery' services.
- Some communities appear to have been hit harder by COVID-19 than others - many deprived areas are subject to compounded difficulties and reduced resources.
- Evangelists are concerned about funding and review.
- Evangelists are thinking about what church will look like going forward, what to stop doing, and how to make disciples well during a global pandemic.

2 Immediate Effect on Evangelists and Volunteers

Before considering the impact that COVID-19 has had on the work of our CoM, it is important to reflect on the immediate effect that it has had on our evangelists themselves.

Evangelists and volunteers have been affected in myriad ways depending on their personal circumstances and factors outside their control.

2.1 Symptoms, Vulnerability and Bereavement

Several evangelists and their family members have displayed symptoms and had to self-isolate. Sadly, at least one volunteer has lost a loved one, and at least one volunteer has died.

At least two evangelists have been self-isolating due to their own vulnerability. At least one evangelist has been cohabiting with a vulnerable family member.

2.2 Childcare

One evangelist mentioned the increased demands of juggling work and childcare.

2.3 Mental Health

Effects on mental health have been varied. Below are some paraphrases of sentiments reflected by evangelists:

- I've stopped for the first time in 30 years, which is difficult.
- Lots of projects have been stopped or put on hold, which is depressing.
- Reinventing everything is quite tiring.
- There's a form of bereavement for everyone.
- I'm a 'glass three-quarters full' kind of person - I see potential and opportunity.
- I've got so many ideas! Lots of time to reflect and read.
- The present crisis has affected my mental health.
- It's difficult for team members who are living alone.
- We're still having days off and having fun.

3 Effect on the Work of Centres of Mission

All our evangelists are continuing to work, albeit quite differently from before. Evangelists at one CoM successfully contested their diocese's decision to furlough them.

3.1 New and Upcoming Appointments

COVID-19 has introduced complications to the appointments of three pioneer evangelists.

- Javier's induction at Blackpool CoM has been carried out through FaceTime, which has been tiring.
- St David's have appointed Molly as maternity cover for Ruth, but she has been unable to move house so she has been working remotely from Essex. She is being introduced to locals through a leaflet.
- Gloucester and Forest are still hoping that their new pioneer will start in August.

3.2 Communication

The ways in which evangelists communicate with each other, with volunteers and with external contacts/service users have all changed.

3.2.1 Internal Communication

Evangelists and their teams are meeting to chat, pray and plan using the internet. In some CoM these meetings are happening daily, and in others, weekly.

3.2.2 External Communication

CoM are working to 'keep in touch' with existing contacts. This is happening through social media, phone calls and the physical delivery of needed resources.

3.2.3 Communicating with Vulnerable People

Vulnerable people (conventionally vulnerable, as opposed to vulnerable to COVID-19) are hard to contact under lockdown due to safeguarding considerations. This is especially true of homeless people. Since it is not always appropriate to collect the personal data of vulnerable service users, some CoM have lost contact with people they were supporting.

3.2.4 Internet Access

In rural or deprived contexts, access to the internet can be limited. This may be because of technical skill shortages, slow internet or tech poverty. In these contexts, evangelists are spending a lot of their time maintaining relationships through individual phone calls.

3.3 Changes to Activities

Face-to-face activities have stopped, in accordance with government advice. Many activities and relationships have been transferred to the internet (sometimes the phone), and some activities have stopped.

3.3.1 Fresh Expressions of Church

Fresh expressions have stopped meeting face-to-face. Many have transferred to Zoom or Facebook Live, often with complementary WhatsApp groups which are used for socialising and peer support. In Greenwich, a fresh expression for vulnerable adults has had to stop.

3.3.2 Food Provision

Food banks and drop-in meals have continued, and demand for the service they offer has increased. These services have transitioned to a home delivery or 'takeaway' model.

Many schools are delivering free school meals, and many evangelists are helping with these deliveries.

The food bank in Liverpool has closed because most of the volunteers were over 70 and had to self-isolate.

3.3.3 School Assemblies

With the closing of schools, school assemblies have stopped. One evangelist wanted to hold a virtual lunch club for key stage 3 pupils, but safeguarding considerations made this non-viable.

3.3.4 Preachments

Preachments have ended with the closure of church buildings.

3.3.5 Building Relationships

Lockdown has put a stop to most face-to-face efforts to form new relationships, which comprises a large percentage of the normal workload of some evangelists.

3.3.6 Baby Basics

Baby basics in North Belfast continues, because 'babies are still being born!'

4 Effect on Communities

4.1 Domestic Abuse

Many evangelists are concerned about domestic abuse victims who are unable to leave the house.

4.2 Economic Concerns

Economic effects have been varied. Some evangelists remark that little has changed for people on benefits. However, Nick in Greenwich notes that zero hours workers have been hit hard, and cash-in-hand labourers have been left with nothing.

4.3 Struggling Parents

Especially in underprivileged neighbourhoods, parents are struggling to help their children access education. This is because of a lack of computers, a lack of physical space and a shortage of academic skill.

4.4 Intersections of Deprivation

In underprivileged neighbourhoods, a variety of factors can conspire to make things more difficult.

- In Greenwich many children are looked after by their vulnerable grandparents, which makes it harder for them to shield from the virus.
- There are concerns in Greenwich that the collapse of 'county lines' drug dealing could lead to a heightened rivalry between local gangs.
- Evangelists in various localities have noted that people don't appear to understand or 'believe in' social distancing.
- Large families (e.g. up to seven children in Middlesbrough) face additional struggles in coping with isolation.
- Tech poverty has become a much more substantial form of inequality.

4.5 Emotional Effects

The government mandated physical isolation is difficult for all communities, but evangelists say it is having an amplified emotional effect in communities where general isolation was already a problem.

People are worried and afraid. One evangelist believes this is exacerbated by the discord between the government's optimistic messaging and the unsettling experiences of most real people.

4.6 Emergent Hope

Evangelists have highlighted some 'silver linings' in their communities. Several report a growing sense of cohesion and community spirit. Furthermore, some people appear to be re-evaluating what is important to them and looking for new sources of hope.

5 Effect on Churches

Many church services have moved online, but some have stopped. The income streams of some churches have been adversely affected.

5.1 Online Services

Most churches appear to have moved at least their main weekly service online. There are many reports of increased attendance at these online services, which has been attributed to ease of access, people looking for hope and, where livestreams are concerned, the ability to attend anonymously.

Some churches have found that large portions of their worshipping community are unable to engage with online services, particularly in rural and farming contexts, or where congregations have a high median age. For this reason, some of these churches are not offering an online service.

5.2 Loss of Revenue

Many churches receive a significant portion of their income through cash donations, and the cessation of physical meetings means that much of this income has been lost. Churches have also lost the revenue that they generate through hiring out the church hall.

5.3 Inward vs. Outward Looking

Several evangelists perceive a dichotomy in the ways that churches are responding to the crisis - some are looking outward to their neighbourhoods, whereas others are, in the words of one evangelist, 'battening down the hatches'. One evangelist says that some churches do not have the resources to meet the pastoral needs of the congregation whilst developing new outreach.

5.4 Funerals

One deanery in Hackney has implemented a system of rotating funerals between churches to avoid pastoral overload.

5.5 Volunteering

Two evangelists have noticed some churches becoming more involved with their local food bank (in one case the CoM food bank) during the crisis.

6 Response of Centres of Mission to the Crisis

6.1 Meeting Practical Needs

CoM are providing many forms of practical support.

6.1.1 Provision of Food

CoM-run food banks continue to provide food in the face of increasing demand. The A7 CoM food bank has experienced over a tenfold increase in demand!

In addition to this, many evangelists are volunteering or continuing to volunteer with other food providers. Several evangelists have started to volunteer with the distribution of lunches at local schools, and others are distributing food informally to those they know within the community. Some evangelists have offered to volunteer but had no response, possibly due to a surplus of such offers.

6.1.2 Other Forms of Direct Practical Support

As well as food, CoM are providing many other forms of practical support. These include:

- Helping to coordinate the supply and redistribution of PPE as part of the local mutual aid group.
- Delivering curtains, bedding and towels.
- Delivering activity packs to local children.
- Helping vicars with Zoom.
- Delivering shopping.
- Translating government advice for a local family.

6.1.3 Signposting and Connecting

CoM are often well positioned to signpost local services or connect resources to needs. This has been happening in myriad ways:

- Distributing information about services to vulnerable women.
- Connecting people with local food providers, in some cases distributing food vouchers.
- Interceding with the council on behalf of a Syrian family with broken central heating.
- Connecting a person experiencing loneliness with a volunteer who could call them regularly.
- Generally 'spreading the word' about available government support.
- Distributing 50 Easter eggs that were donated by a local surgery.
- Distributing 90 leftover McDonald's meals to the school families.
- Producing a puppet video explaining coronavirus to school children.
- Drumcliffe CoM have been giving out grants.

6.2 Meeting Emotional Needs

Almost every evangelist referred to the emotional support their CoM is offering, whether formally or informally. Evangelists are:

- Phoning local people.

- Sometimes this is to provide a consistent point of social contact, and sometimes it's for the explicit purpose of providing much needed pastoral and emotional support.
- Phone calls are also a means through which practical support is offered.
- Connecting lonely people with volunteers who are happy to phone them.
- Setting up WhatsApp groups for peer support.

6.3 Meeting Spiritual Needs

Physical needs may have changed and increased, but CoM also continue to meet ever-present spiritual needs by introducing people to Jesus.

6.3.1 Virtual Services

Many fresh expressions of Church attached to CoM continue to meet, albeit remotely. See subheading 'Fresh Expressions of Church' under 'Changes to Activities' for more information. CoM are also facilitating online prayer meetings and Bible studies. Youth groups continue to meet.

6.3.2 Virtual Discussion Groups

At the time of interview, a few CoM reported that they were planning to launch online spaces where people could ask questions and discover Jesus for themselves. These included a *Let's Talk* group, an *Alpha* course and a *Discovery Bible Study*. At Liverpool CoM, existing *Alpha* attenders have started meeting for a weekly group study (the *Alpha* course itself has been put on hold).

6.3.3 Children's Activity Packs

About a third of the CoM interviewed were delivering activity packs to local children. In most cases activity packs were physical, but Llandaff CoM were distributing a virtual activity pack through a network of local churches.

Some packs are sent to the children on the register of CoM events, and others to children known by the CoM in the community. Some were delivered specially for Easter, whereas others are delivered weekly or monthly. Packs sometimes complement virtual activities, facilitating competitions and prizes.

6.3.4 Resourcing Churches

There are many ways in which CoM are resourcing the wider church:

- In Selby, 'Kids Club' videos are being distributed for use by the wider church.
- North Belfast CoM are producing video updates for the Diocesan Youth and Children's councils.
- Blackpool CoM host a daily prayer meeting for the parish.
- Medway CoM are looking into the possibility of hosting an online slavery awareness course.
- A7 CoM have set up an 'unofficial' Zoom chapter for local Christian workers.
- Selby CoM are facilitating prayer for local ministers.
- Several CoM are assisting other churches and ministers with technology.
- Drumcliffe CoM have found themselves adopting a *de facto* role of general innovation/resourcing within the wider diocese.

7 New Challenges

COVID-19 has brought many new challenges for evangelists.

7.1 Funding

Because of the uncertain state of the global economy, it has become very difficult to secure grants. Many churches have also experienced a loss of income, which means they are less able to support their local CoM.

CoM food banks have experienced an increase in demand, and one evangelist asked whether any central funding might be released to meet this need.

7.2 Review

A few evangelists have expressed concerns that their CoM might be reviewed according to previously agreed criteria without regard for the significant change in circumstances. Clear messaging from the central office may assuage these concerns.

7.3 Technological Skills

Many evangelists appear to be 'ahead of the curve' in terms of their technological skill sets in comparison to their peers. However, this may not be the case for everyone; one evangelist feels they are still 'trying to get [their] head around new digital technology', and wonders if digital training could be incorporated as standard for evangelists.

8 Wider Questions

Evangelists are asking thought-provoking questions about the future of Christian ministry.

8.1 When Lockdown Ends

Although nobody is sure when lockdown will end, evangelists are already considering how they might prepare for it. Many of the questions asked about this reveal significant differences in presuppositions of best practice. For instance, some evangelists are asking about how communities formed online might continue to grow once they transition offline, whereas others have questions about whether some online fellowship ought to continue indefinitely. These differences might also be explained by differing assumptions about the length of lockdown, which was very uncertain at the time of interview.

Additional, but related, questions were asked about the respective centrality of physical buildings and social media in missional strategy.

8.2 Letting Things End

Evangelists have pointed out that the circumstantial ending of several initiatives is an opportunity for reflection. Which of these things might not need to be restarted?

8.3 Evangelising Well in a Pandemic

COVID-19 has changed the pastoral landscape. Evangelists are asking themselves how they can:

- Share the good news with people who are afraid.
- Facilitate meaningful discipleship that lasts beyond people's (rightly) instinctual running towards God in a crisis.
- Make God's love and goodness clear through practical service, so that people look beyond evangelists and see Jesus.
- Build good relationships with people who they've never met face to face.

9 Sources of Encouragement

Amidst all the difficulty, evangelists have identified several sources of encouragement.

9.1 New Connections

Some evangelists have noticed a growing spirit of openness, and a desire to connect. Many virtual gatherings are experiencing higher attendance than that of their former physical versions, and social media 'likes' and connections have increased. One evangelist explained that people are looking for hope and purpose online.

Engagement with the community has further increased through new people stepping forward to volunteer, sometimes from local churches and sometimes from the wider community.

Drumcliffe CoM report that previous investment in ecumenical relationships has borne a lot of fruit during COVID-19. Blackpool are creating lasting relationships with other organisations, and Isaac Hanna (Drumcliffe lead, Ireland RDO) is exploring forming regional partnerships with larger organisations.

9.2 Emerging Community Spirit

Evangelists in many contexts have identified people coming together and offering one another support. This is a wonderful development, and one evangelist has expressed hope that this obedience to the command to 'love thy neighbour' might comprise part of a wider turning towards God.

9.3 Praise for the Church Army Community

Multiple evangelists have expressed gratitude for midday prayers with the Church Army community on Zoom, which they say they have found very helpful and encouraging. One evangelist feels that there is a growing sense of community in Church Army.

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