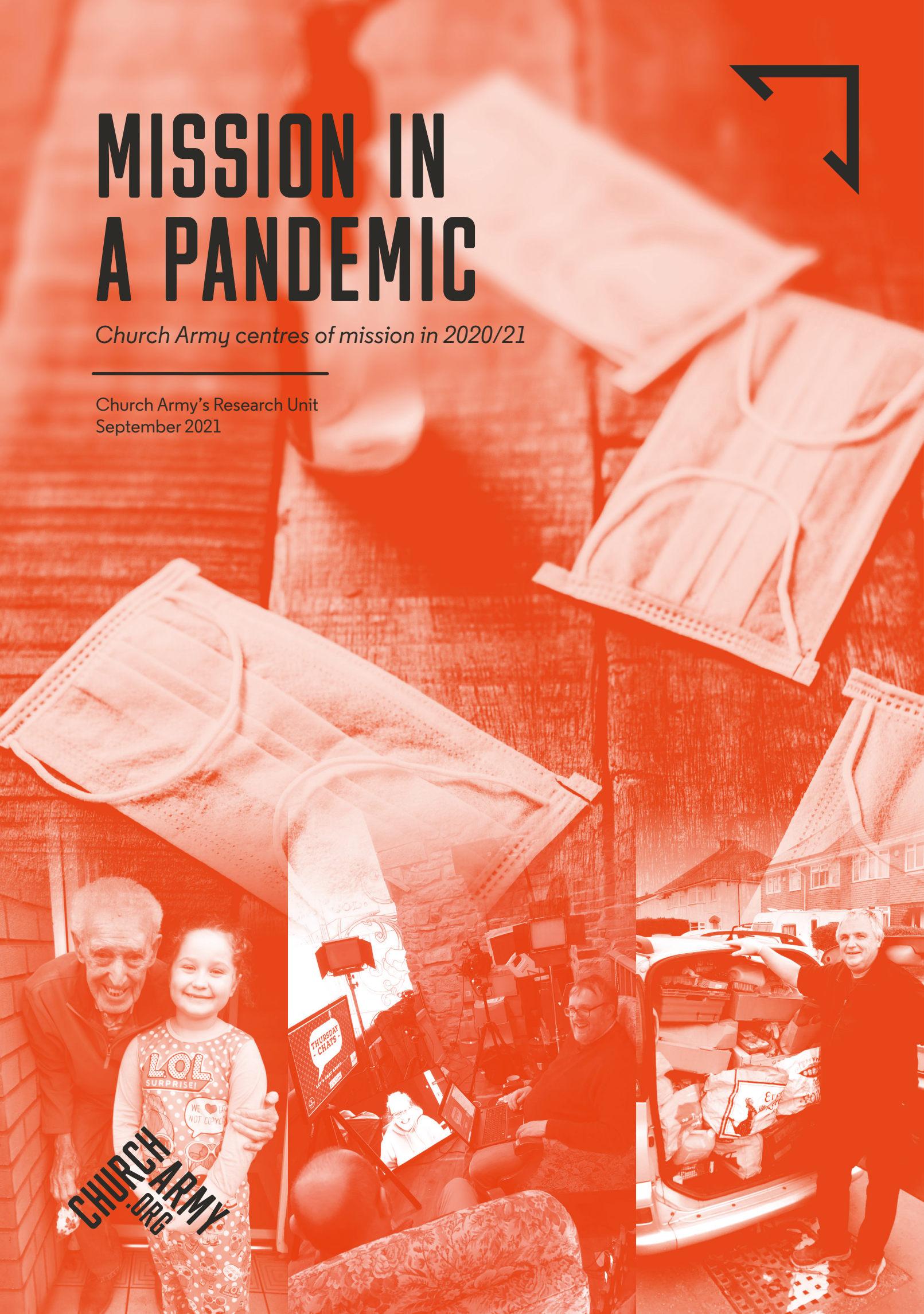


MISSION IN A PANDEMIC

Church Army centres of mission in 2020/21

Church Army's Research Unit
September 2021



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FOREWORD

On 23rd March 2020 the UK followed the Republic of Ireland into widespread lockdown, and a season of life unparalleled in living memory began. In the midst of restrictions and the pain of loss, this has also been a period of social change. Christianity is the faith of God made flesh, and the disciples of Jesus are always directed towards the world, as the life of God in Jesus Christ was directed to the world. Small wonder perhaps that the upheavals of the recent past have resulted in not only challenge for the churches of these islands, but also a flourishing of creativity. We have been called into service in the name of Jesus in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world.

This report is a timely consideration of how one part of the Anglican churches of these islands has risen to the challenge, taken knocks, but also discovered growth and creativity. Church Army, the Anglican mission community, has the privilege of living out its missional calling amongst some of the most deprived neighbourhoods of these islands. The story of this report for those communities is certainly one of suffering under a social, political and economic system which in times of stress does not distribute that stress equitably. On the ground where they serve, our evangelists have seen the fault lines evident before pandemic widening and growing more destructive as the weeks and months have passed. Yet in the midst of that suffering, theirs is also a story of seeing God at work, reconciling the world to himself in love.

Like many, many parish churches, the experience of Church Army has been one of a yet more demanding ministry, but a transforming ministry - journeying to new places, finding unlooked for opportunities, receiving support and funding from those not previously associated with our work. It is telling that 44% of those volunteering with Church Army over this period were not regularly involved with a church community. Our evangelists have prayed hard, loved deeply and 'had a go'. They have developed new skills and grown in courage. I pay tribute to them and join them in thanks to God.

Challenges still abound for us all but, in addition to the practical lessons about mission and ministry, elements of this report are perhaps important to bear in mind as we face into those challenges. Being persistent and courageous in service and evangelism has the capacity to make us more of the people God intends us to be. It can certainly push the buttons of our insecurities, but it can also open us to the grace that helps us confront them. The more we engage outwards, the more care we must take to resource the life of faith and be diligent in our care for each other. We do not all do things in the same way. We are in many ways a mixed bunch, a mixed ecology perhaps, but being open to partnership and collaboration in our response to God's missional call can make a strength of that very diversity. There is not only one way of doing things, yet there is one God and Father of all.

I thank Church Army's Research Unit and all who have contributed to this study for a timely and valuable report.



Ven. Dr. Peter Rouch
CEO, Church Army

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Undertaking mission and evangelism during an international pandemic has been an incredible challenge, throwing into question many things we had previously taken for granted. Covid-19 has dramatically changed not just the routines of our daily existence, but also how many of us experience and engage with faith, worship and what it means to be part of Christian community.

Building on our previous *Mission Under Lockdown*¹ report, which was based on research conducted in the first few months of the pandemic, this report explores the experience of Church Army *centres of mission*² (CoM) across the British Isles and Ireland in the period April 2020 – March 2021. These 12 months were a time of considerable flux, uncertainty, and upheaval and, with different restrictions and levels of lockdown, the experience of each region and nation was different.

In view of these differences and the unprecedented nature of the past year, Church Army's Research Unit (CARU) were keen to research the experiences of centres of mission in a relational and conversational way. During the 2020/21 reporting period, there were 29 active centres of mission, and we were able to arrange video call conversations with Evangelists from 26 of these. These conversations were structured around an agreed reporting template, with Evangelists also given the opportunity to share written responses in advance.

The questions we asked were structured around three main areas – the impact of the pandemic, the Centre of Mission's response, and wider reflections from the past year. Our report considers each of these three areas in turn.

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

During 2020/21, Evangelists in centres of mission had to react and respond to multiple changes. The nature of these changes varied depending on context, locality and the needs of local communities but included considerable changes to workload and working patterns, and a need to be extremely flexible to changing demands, restrictions, and governmental guidance. Despite this upheaval, there have also been moments of joy. Three of the new centres of mission we spoke to had begun their work during the pandemic.

The Evangelists we spoke to also told us about the impact of the pandemic on local communities and churches. They spoke powerfully about their first-hand experience of seeing increasing numbers of people experiencing poverty and financial and food insecurity, as well as a greater number of adults and young people experiencing mental health issues or distress. They also told us how the churches they work with had responded to the pandemic by providing practical and pastoral support as well as online worship. However, some Evangelists also identified tensions regarding the question of whether to continue to provide online worship as well as recommencing offline (or in-person) worship.

¹ [churcharmy.org/our-work/research](https://www.churcharmy.org/our-work/research)

² [churcharmy.org/our-work/centres-of-mission](https://www.churcharmy.org/our-work/centres-of-mission)

MISSION IN A PANDEMIC - CENTRE OF MISSIONS' RESPONSE

During the reporting period, there were 29 active centres of mission, and we were able to interview 26 of these. Four of these, however, were not active for all of 2020/21 (some were only launched midway through the year) so were limited in what they could report. But the Evangelists we did speak to provided us with lots of rich material about their activities and impact, which was both quantitative and qualitative in scope. The full report explores this in more detail, but some brief statistical headlines and commentary are provided below.³

Social Impact

- 19 centres of mission reported involvement in some form of **food provision** during the pandemic, providing more than 23,800 food parcels with at least 3,100 families / households benefiting.
- 11 centres of mission reported helping to provide **other essentials** (e.g. clothing, furniture, baby equipment) for vulnerable individuals and families, with an estimated 1,500 people benefiting.
- 22 centres of mission reported providing **emotional support**, keeping in touch with an estimated 3,100 people benefiting.
- 6 centres of mission reported supporting **social events and community activities** (online or offline) during the pandemic, with activities attracting an estimated 310 people.
- 12 centres of mission reported running **support groups** or other activities focused on identified groups. The typical attendance at these groups totalled an estimated 440 people.
- 12 centres of mission reported providing **activity packs or gift bags** for children, young people, and families, with an estimated 3,000 packs distributed.
- 8 centres of mission also reported running groups and **activities for children, young people, and families**, with the typical attendance at these groups totalling an estimated 420 people.
- 7 centres of mission reported helping provide **emotional and educational support in schools in a one-to-one or small group setting** to an estimated 420 children and young people.
- 3 centres of mission reported involvement in **environmental projects**, including community litter picking and helping to develop a community garden.

Faith Impact

- 6 centres of mission told us of examples of **creative outdoor evangelism** which used an estimated 5,300 physical objects (e.g. knitted angels), outdoor messages and artwork seen by countless people.
- 4 centres of mission reported engaging in **prayer walking** outdoors.
- 15 centres of mission reported running **online services**, with an estimated total typical attendance of 700 people.
- 11 centres of mission reported running additional **prayer activities**, with a total typical attendance of 200 people.
- 8 centres of mission reported posting **devotional thoughts and reflections** online and on social media, with an estimated 19,700 views.
- 7 centres of mission reported running **seasonal events and evangelistic activities**, particularly around Christmas and Easter. These events engaged an estimated 2,200 people.

³ As we were only able to interview 26 of the 29 active centres of mission, total beneficiary figures have been adjusted to represent the numbers of people engaged across all 29 centres of mission.

- Centres of mission Evangelists helped people in their communities mark **grief and the end of life** in lots of different ways.
- 11 centres of mission reported providing **assemblies and spiritual support** in 22 schools. The most common example of this was assemblies.
- 7 centres of mission said they had run **faith-sharing courses** (Alpha and equivalent) in 2020/21, with an estimated 80 people engaging.
- 9 centres of mission reported running **discipleship or Bible study groups**, with an estimated 150 people (both adults and young people) engaging.
- Although we did not explicitly ask them about numbers of people becoming Christians or making faith commitments, 8 centres of mission volunteered information about people who had made some form of **faith commitment** in 2020/21. At least 27 people had become Christians in or through these centres of mission.

'[Name] was "in a state" after a relationship breakdown led him to a very low point. The team provided him with some food and got to talking with him. He felt overburdened by his past (he had been a drug dealer). The team asked if he'd be interested in volunteering with them. Volunteering gave him something to focus on and over time he got more involved with the Centre of Mission and has now given his life to Christ.'

KERRY DIXON, LEAD EVANGELIST, DUNDEE CENTRE OF MISSION

'I've been working with someone for two years and then in the Bible study in October she felt ready to become a Christian which was amazing. It shows how important it is to invest in those relationships and how often it takes more than two to three years for people to really feel our presence.'

CHERITH WITHINGTON, PIONEER EVANGELIST, LIVERPOOL CENTRE OF MISSION

- 18 centres of mission reported fresh **expressions of Church** or new worshipping communities that met (either in person or online) during the pandemic, engaging an estimated 620 people each month.

Resourcing and enabling others

As part of Church Army's DARE strategy, all centres of mission are involved in advocating, resourcing, and enabling evangelism, which is often addressed through volunteering opportunities, supporting other individuals, and doing outreach with local churches. The restrictions of pandemic living have meant that volunteering and outreach work have looked very different. However, centres of mission have continued to provide support and resources to individuals, communities, and churches. Although some resourcing and enabling activities were heavily restricted or stopped altogether for a period, many Evangelists commented on the encouraging work that they were undertaking behind the scenes.

During 2020/21, centres of mission worked with an estimated **463 volunteers**. 56% of volunteers were regular churchgoers, while 44% were not.

REFLECTIONS FROM A PANDEMIC

We also asked Evangelists to reflect on their learning from the past year as well as the questions and future challenges they were wrestling with.

Evangelists identified a plethora of ways in which their experience of evangelism and mission in a pandemic has contributed to their learning and further reflections. The development of online ministry is probably the most obvious piece of identified learning. However, there have also been far more subtle and nuanced expressions depending on their context and the needs of the local community. This has been evidenced by many Evangelists identifying a change in working style, trying new things, exploring what pioneer ministry in a time of pandemic means and discerning and (re)learning to trust where God is at work in their mission and ministry.

As centres of mission continue to work during a time of continued uncertainty and changing restrictions, *Mission in a Pandemic* also identifies some of the challenges and questions that Evangelists are facing or exploring. From resourcing volunteers, future financial sustainability, re-establishing or creating community, or youth work, there are no easy or straightforward answers. However, these questions do provide an essential and important snapshot into what it means to be a Church Army Evangelist in a Centre of Mission in the changing world of today.

Report compiled and designed by
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