



# The role of the Church in, through and beyond the pandemic



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*Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.<sup>1</sup>*

These lyrics, written by John Lennon, reflect a truth found in the book of Proverbs: 'Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails' (19.21 NIV). Or, as Jeremiah prayed, 'Lord, I know that people's lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps' (Jeremiah 10.23 NIV).

Sometimes it feels like we are living in the chapter of a dystopian novel. These are momentous times. Times in which all things that can be shaken are being shaken 'so that what cannot be shaken may remain' (Hebrews 12.27 NIV). Covid-19 has had seismic impact on all spheres of human activity worldwide and demonstrated to all people (including all politicians) the fragility of our plans.

Shattering the secular myth of progress, the crisis has affected peoples' sense of control, bringing fear for today and foreboding of tomorrow. As with all previous global upheavals, not many people saw this coming. For governments caught by surprise, the responses to the pandemic have been varied. Although some, such as Sweden, have taken the 'herd immunity' approach, most – on the basis of scientific and medical advice – have opted for a lockdown and social-distancing approach in order to protect healthcare systems while a vaccine is sought.

The problem is that this virus does not behave like normal viruses. We are learning that it affects the whole-body system. It is questionable whether the virus originated from the wet market in Wuhan. It

is still unclear how it spreads, or whether immunity can be achieved or sustained, or even how many people have had it or have got it. As Professor of infectious diseases, Paul Garner has observed of the 'weird as hell' symptoms, which he himself experienced: 'The virus is certainly causing lots of immunological changes in the body, lots of strange pathology that we don't yet understand. This is a novel disease. And an outrageous one. The textbooks haven't been written.'<sup>2</sup>

It has been clear for some time now that the economic impact of the pandemic will dwarf the impact of the virus itself. This means there are two distinct stages or sequences that confront us – the pandemic and the post-pandemic brave new world. Each will require distinct roles and responses and it is important that, in order to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that the crisis brings, the Church responds, rather than reacts, to what is happening and to what will happen. So, how are we doing? How is the Church responding in the first phase, and anticipating the second phase?

## Responses to the pandemic

Let us look at the role of the Church *in* the pandemic. The lockdown and social-distancing has affected every church in the UK. No longer able to meet together, our fellowship is now through online worship services, Bible studies and courses. With conferences, festivals and events cancelled, there has been a proliferation of webinars and seminars – and 'Zoom-fatigue' for many leaders. While some

## NOTES

1. John Lennon, 'Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)', 1980 from the album *Double Fantasy*.
2. Luke Harding, "Weird as hell": the Covid-19 patients who have symptoms for months', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2020.
3. Daily Hope Phone Ministry: 0800 8048044. Also visit: <https://faithinlaterlife.org> for further resources.
4. Carol Glatz, 'Googling 'prayer' has skyrocketed with coronavirus spread, expert says', *Catholic News Service*, 4 April 2020: <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2020/04/googling-prayer-has-skyrocketed-with-coronavirus-spread-expert-says/>
5. S Shehadi & M Partington, 'How coronavirus is leading to a religious revival', *New Statesman*, 27 April 2020. See [www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2020/04/how-coronavirus-leading-religious-revival](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2020/04/how-coronavirus-leading-religious-revival)
6. Blessing UK: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtI3mNj5U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtI3mNj5U). This sung-prayer based on the priestly blessing in Numbers 6.24–26, has even been acclaimed by the Prime Minister. See [www.pointsoflight.gov.uk/the-uk-blessing/](http://www.pointsoflight.gov.uk/the-uk-blessing/)
7. H Sherwood, 'British public turn to prayer as one in four tune in to religious services', *The Guardian*, 3 May 2020. See [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

parts of the Church have struggled with the loss of access to buildings, amongst evangelicals this seems to be less of an issue and contrary to some media reports, we have found that there is not a great clamour for a relaxation of rules on mass gatherings. In general, like society at large, the Church has sought to follow official advice.

In this season, the advocacy work at the Evangelical Alliance has been focused on ensuring that the government's emergency powers are proportionate, time-limited and subject to parliamentary scrutiny, and that the elderly and those with learning disabilities are valued and respected in relation to the quality of care and protection they receive. Alongside our civil liberties concerns regarding plans for tracking and proximity apps, we have also been involved in a range of government roundtables and forums on the vital role of charities and faith groups during the crisis.

Across the UK, in all our engagement with various government bodies and departments, it is encouraging to note that we have been met with a heartfelt gratitude for what the Church is doing to support and augment the emergency work of the authorities – many of which are stretched to the limit. From our contact with MPs at this time (yes, we contacted every single one of them!) we have also found a deep appreciation for the key role that the Church is playing in communities during the pandemic.

From our engagement with our member churches (yes, we contacted every single one of them!) we have heard innumerable stories of the Church supporting vulnerable and isolated people. This involves delivering food and medicines, providing shelter, supporting key workers and their families, resourcing parents to home-school, and supporting the elderly in their homes. The latter has been a priority for the Church because 2.5 million older people have never used the internet. In response, a church on the Isle of Wight started a local radio station to reach those who are house-bound, fearful and in need of comfort and hope. Initiatives to address loneliness provide vital support for those who cannot or do not engage online. For example, the 'Daily Hope' phone ministry, set up by the Church of England, offers music and reflections as well as full worship services over the telephone line.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the courageous chaplaincy work in hospitals across the UK, the Church has also been playing an important role in dealing with deadly impact of the virus. My wife and I recently attended the online funeral of a friend – a beautiful young woman whose untimely passing left behind a husband and two children. With hundreds mourning remotely via Zoom, the ceremony at the graveside was unbearably sad, but it also demonstrated the key role of pastors, priests and Christian counsellors at this time. These

ministries help people deal with pain, suffering and bereavement. They have immense social and spiritual value and all involved in them deserve our prayers and support.

Both nationally and internationally, online prayer networks, WhatsApp groups, etc. have been very busy during the pandemic. A number of studies

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have suggested that more people are praying at this time. This includes people of faith and people who ordinarily do not pray. A researcher in Denmark has found that globally, 'search intensity for "prayer" doubles for every 80,000 new registered cases of COVID-19'.<sup>4</sup> In the UK, one Christian bookshop reports that Bible sales have increased by 55 per cent and Google searches for 'prayer' have skyrocketed.<sup>5</sup> No doubt the extraordinary 'Blessing UK' video has helped.<sup>6</sup>

Most notably, and perhaps understandably, it is becoming clear that the shaking of our society is being accompanied by a softening of hearts to the gospel message. At the Evangelical Alliance we are receiving many reports in which family, friends and neighbours are more open to conversations about God and the Bible. Even complete strangers are looking for a God-angle on things. I recently found myself in a conversation about Jesus and the book of Revelation with the owner of a farm shop. Completely unprompted and without any knowledge that I was Christian, he asked whether I thought the virus was a biblical event. It took over 30 minutes to pay for my fruit and veg!

Church buildings may be closed, but the Church is very much open for business. Many churches seem to have adapted well to the new technological demands. It is not uncommon for pastors to report that online attendance of streamed worship services is exceeding normal Sunday attendance figures, sometimes by three or four times as much. A recent poll showed that one in four British adults had tuned in to at least one online religious service during lockdown.<sup>7</sup> It seems that people are looking for hope, for comfort and for answers, and online sermons are proving to be appealing and accessible for many who would not ordinarily enter a church building. Undoubtedly, this presents a number of challenges for discipleship, but it is an encouraging sign of the enduring power of the gospel in dark times. It also suggests that aspects of digital church will be with us long after the virus has moved on.

On the whole, the Church is playing an important role in communities throughout the UK – meeting

needs; supporting the authorities; giving comfort and hope; sharing the gospel; and praying.

## The Church and the developing socio-economic crisis

However, an unprecedented economic upheaval is fast approaching. How the Church anticipates this and prepares for the role it will need to play will determine its broader influence in the dramatically changed social landscape of the next decade and beyond. Ignoring, denying or diminishing the scale of what is ahead are not viable options for followers of Jesus who care for all those made in God's image.

Globally, the poor are disproportionately vulnerable to the economic cataclysm, which is set to 'acutely affect' the jobs of 1.6 billion workers – that is nearly half of the global workforce.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, the US Federal Reserve forecast unemployment in America to rise to 30 per cent by mid-2021. This 'conservative estimate' is particularly alarming when one considers that US unemployment peaked at 26 per cent in the great depression of the 1930's.

In the UK, the Office for Budget Responsibility is predicting similar numbers to the Fed, confirmed by the daily news reports of escalating job losses. This prompted the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to declare that the UK is facing a recession on a scale 'we have not seen'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Daniel Hannan, a political commentator, observes that 'a new generation is about to learn what mass unemployment feels like'.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the mathematical certainty of this next season it seems that many in our society, being traumatised and wearied by fighting the virus, are reluctant to acknowledge what is on the horizon. Journalist Allison Pearson describes the situation like this:

*This is like that moment on a beach in Sri Lanka when the ocean suddenly recedes. Families are still playing on the sand, children laughing, but the giant wave is building, gathering pace and strength. Soon it will overwhelm them, destroying everything in its path – human beings, houses, businesses, jobs, bars, hotels, hopes. The economic tsunami is coming, you can be sure of that.*<sup>11</sup>

The role the Church is playing in dealing with the impact of Covid-19 is a wonderful testimony to the love and compassion of God. This is what it means to be salt and light. Even so, there is an urgent need for church leaders to prepare Christians for the challenges and opportunities that are coming. This will require a change of tack and focus. It will also require prophetic imagination and courage.

In the decade ahead there is no question that the Church will have a critical role in addressing poverty issues such as housing, hunger, debt, welfare and despair. As the pandemic has shown, the Church is

well placed in civil society to meet these challenges. However, as we approach the inevitable post-pandemic cultural reset, if Christians are once again going to play a key social role, there will need to be a concerted, even obsessive, focus on the issues of employment and enterprise.

To date, there has been very little attention given to job creation as a strategic missional priority for the Church. Given the pressing demands of the pandemic this is in part understandable. But without more explicit acknowledgments of the hard realities we will all face, the voice of the Church is perhaps restricted to cheerleader mode. At worst, an exclusive focus on telling good news stories can look a lot like virtue signalling.

The void may be a reflection of the socio-economic nature of the UK Church, which our 2015 *Talking Jesus* research has shown to be more than 70 per cent middle-class.<sup>12</sup> Generally without a lived experience of material lack, it is possible that most church leaders and their congregations may simply be unable to imagine or understand the impact of a depression. I was born and raised in Bootle, North Liverpool, at a time when multiple deprivation indices had it ranked as the poorest place in the UK. I left school in a period of high unemployment. It was a desperate and distressing time. Consequently, I am under no illusions about what lies ahead and what must be done.

Jesus was clear that people need to be regenerated, but he also calls for his people to change the world by demonstrating signs of his coming kingdom. Cities and communities need to be regenerated. Economic renewal requires political leadership, but at heart it is a grassroots phenomenon, of innovation, inspiration and determination. If the Church can rise to the challenge of encouraging social and business entrepreneurship for employment it will play an important historic role. Through and beyond the pandemic this is the most practical and powerful way in which to help people and to shape the future. It is a prime opportunity to recast our relational priorities, both to God and to each other, in such a way that the 'new normal' reflects biblical principles and virtues.

This is not an impossible dream. The Church has played this role many times before. Most recently, the great evangelical social reformers of the nineteenth century provide us with encouragement for this task. Shaftesbury, Howard, More, Wilberforce, Butler, Cadbury, William and Catherine Booth, Barnardo, Mueller and many others understood the dignity of work and the value it plays in individual and social renewal. Like them, if we remain rooted in the Word of God and vocal for the gospel, I believe that God will grant us the compassion, creativity and resilience we need to radically transform our society, for his glory and for our healing.

## NOTES

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9. Alex Morales & David Goodman, 'Sunak Sees U.K. Recession on Scale 'We Have Not Seen'', *Bloomberg*, 19 May 2020, at [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-19/sunak-predicts-u-k-recession-on-scale-we-have-not-yet-seen](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-19/sunak-predicts-u-k-recession-on-scale-we-have-not-yet-seen)

10. D Hannan, 'No one is immune from the economic storm to come' *The Telegraph*, 17 May 2020, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/17/no-one-immune-economic-storm-come1/>

11. Allison Pearson, 'Is this a life worth living – or merely an existence?', *The Telegraph*, 5 May 2020, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/briton-nervous-nelly-europe-need-deal-coronaphobia-fast/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/briton-nervous-nelly-europe-need-deal-coronaphobia-fast/)

12. 'Talking Jesus: perceptions of Jesus, Christians and Evangelism in England', published by Evangelical Alliance, Church of England, Hope, March 2015. See <https://talkingjesus.org/2015-research/>