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WELCOME

By faith

We want to encourage you in this edition with more stories of God's unwavering

love being demonstrated through our churches in communities around the country.

KingsGate Church in Kingston tells of the provision of God amid the pandemic, enabling the church to work with others to identify and meet great needs (p. 13). The Hill Church in Swansea shares that the best is yet to come after serving 70,000 meals through its initiative Matthew's House (p. 14). Meanwhile, some of our 'digital church' stories include accounts of church becoming more accessible (p. 24), lives being transformed (p. 26) and missional opportunities opening up (p. 28). What good news.

But among these good news stories are solemn calls to do a sober analysis of the great challenges and changes we face (p. 4), and to take steps now (p. 6) so that we're able to adequately express the love of God in the future. To do this, we'll need to make a choice, says one contributor: serve, extend and grow, or conserve, insulate and protect (p. 8). For this difficult but exciting journey, he says, "will demand from us levels of prayer and faith we have yet to live out".

As you prayerfully consider your next steps, we hope this issue offers encouragement and guidance.

Yours truly,

Naomi Osinnowo
Editor



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DETERMINED IN DOING GOOD

This year has had the potential to overwhelm and exhaust us all. For some, this year hasn't merely been a disruption, it has involved sickness, loss and grief. Some are struggling with mental health conditions, loneliness and job losses.

In June the World Bank estimated that 71 million people globally will be pushed into extreme poverty due to the impact of COVID-19. It has been so encouraging to see the church responding with care and compassion to those in need, offering practical and spiritual support and adapting to a rapidly changing landscape. This may have felt like the longest year, but as Christians we're called to keep pressing on, to persevere in our faith and in being the church that reaches out to a hurting world.

Paul's exhortation to the Galatians about enduring is particularly apt for us as Christians now: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). In these uncertain times, how do we ensure that we persevere and not become weary in doing good? I believe we can take some lessons from the book of Nehemiah to help us answer this question.

We are introduced to Nehemiah in Persia; he is a Jew who holds a prestigious role in the royal household. After 70 years

in exile many of the Jews had returned home to Judah to find the city of Jerusalem in ruins. By the time we meet Nehemiah the temple had been rebuilt but the city walls still lay destroyed, leaving the city completely exposed to enemies.

Eyes opened

Nehemiah's brother and some others travel from Judah and upon enquiring about Jerusalem Nehemiah finds out about the state of his beloved city (Nehemiah 1:3). His eyes are opened to the situation. But Nehemiah doesn't just hear from others, when he goes to Jerusalem, which we can read about in the second chapter, he sees for himself the ruins of Jerusalem's walls.

In order to persevere in this season, as Christians we need to keep our eyes open to what is happening in our communities, seeing not just COVID-19 statistics and information, but the struggles of those around us and the effects of the pandemic. God calls us, His people, to have our eyes open spiritually, to see situations and people as He does, to hold unswervingly to the hope that we will reap a harvest – that across our communities and our country eyes will be opened to the love and goodness of God.

As soon as Nehemiah hears about the state of Jerusalem he prays for days and seeks God about the situation (Nehemiah

1:4). It is through spending time in God's presence that we can have a vision for what is possible. We persevere as we see not only what is, but what could and should be in individual lives and across our country.

Hearts broken

Once Nehemiah learns about the city ruins in Jerusalem, he weeps. He is moved by what he has heard. The sheer scale of the pandemic and associated injustices in our world have the capacity to render our hearts hard through being overwhelmed and feeling helpless. But if we are to model our lives after Jesus, we can have soft hearts – broken hearts that are filled with compassion.

Jesus was moved with compassion for the crowds that followed Him, and often when He healed people we see that He was moved with compassion for them. When Jesus goes to Bethany after the death of Lazarus, He sees Mary who is weeping and is Himself deeply moved and weeps too (John 11:33, 35). God gives us a heart of flesh that needs to remain soft to Him and to those in need.

William Booth, who founded The Salvation Army with his wife Catherine, was asked what the secret of his success was, to which he answered: "I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me. There have been men with greater brains



There's a lot we can learn from Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem as we persevere in doing good amid the pandemic, says **Catherine De Souza**, who leads City Church Cardiff with her husband.

“It is through spending time in God's presence that we can have a vision for what is possible.”

than I, men with greater opportunities. But from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and caught a vision of all Jesus Christ could do with them, on that day I made up my mind that God would have all of William Booth there was.”

We keep our hearts soft by ensuring we are filled with compassion and the love of God – and love always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Feet hardened

When Nehemiah prays to God about the city walls, he prays with the expectation that God will use him in the answer to his prayer. He asks for God's favour with the king because he has in mind what he is

going to ask of the king so that he can go and help the people of Israel.

Perseverance by its very nature requires action. This is what we see Nehemiah do: in chapter two we read that he leaves for Jerusalem and inspires the people to join him in rebuilding the walls – he takes action. Nehemiah perseveres in the face of repeated opposition, challenge and injustice. Missionary Jackie Pullinger once said, “God wants us to have soft hearts and hard feet. The trouble with so many of us is that we have hard hearts and soft feet.”

Having hard feet means being prepared to go to those who are hurting, to reach out to those outside of the church, to respond to the need we see around us.

The author of Hebrews encourages us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1); perseverance and movement go hand in hand.

Just as Nehemiah persisted in his rebuilding vision, we need to harden our feet as we go in response to the need in our communities. The momentum of perseverance inspires us to keep going, to keep acting, to keep reaching out.

None of us know for certain what the future holds, but in uncertain and challenging times we can persevere by having our eyes opened, our hearts broken, and our feet hardened. Let us not grow weary in doing good for there is a harvest coming that will see this country changed.



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If Christian leadership can rise to the challenge of encouraging social and business entrepreneurship for employment, it will play an important role through and beyond the pandemic, says **Dr David Landrum**, director of advocacy, Evangelical Alliance.

FACING FACTS & SHAPING THE FUTURE

We live in strange and unsettling times. Times in which it seems everything that can be shaken is being shaken “so that what cannot be shaken may remain” (Hebrews 12:27).

The global pandemic has stopped the world in its tracks. Locking entire nations down, it has relieved people of any sense of control they might have had. Across the UK, the church has responded admirably to the trauma. Loving our neighbours, meeting their needs and taking opportunities to introduce them to Jesus – the unshakable rock of ages, the hope of the nations. No doubt these works of amazing grace will continue. But it’s now time to look ahead. Like the leaders of the tribe of Issachar “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32), now is the time to prayerfully scan the horizon, and to plan strategically.

In these dystopian times, neither ‘gloom and doom’ nor a ‘hope-grope’ will help God’s people with this task. Only a sober analysis of the great challenges and changes we face will enable us to see and seize the great opportunities ahead.

The pandemic has accelerated and intensified a range of political and technological trends, such as: the move towards a cashless society, the move towards a surveillance society, remote working, localism, big tech power, artificial intelligence, media misinformation, identity politics, mass hysteria, culture warring and civil disorder. COVID has quickened these trends, but we can expect them to quicken further because the economic impact of the virus will dwarf the impact of the virus itself. Indeed, with countries now needing to reassess globalisation and dependency on each other, some are describing the situation as “the end of the world economy as we know it”.

In March, 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 1930s. In the UK, the Office for Budget Responsibility is predicting similar numbers to the Fed. The now daily news reports of escalating job losses has prompted Chancellor Rishi Sunak to declare that the UK is facing a recession on a scale “we have not seen” and political commentator Daniel Hannan to observe that “a new generation is about to learn what mass unemployment feels like”.

However, despite a broad consensus of opinion that an economic cataclysm is a mathematical certainty, it seems that many in our society are in denial. Insulated by the furlough scheme and other emergency measures, and perhaps understandably wearied by the lockdown, people are



fearful and reluctant to acknowledge what is on the horizon. As journalist Allison Pearson observes: “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, which is why the UK needs to get over its coronaphobia – and fast.”

There is always a possibility that the economy might confound these apocalyptic predictions and find a rhythm of recovery. Nevertheless, given the scale of what seems to be unfolding, it would be wise for evangelical Christians to hope for the best and plan for the worst. This will require prophetic imagination – and courage. Without more explicit acknowledgments of the hard realities we will all face, the voice of the church can appear to be restricted to cheerleader mode. At worst, an exclusive focus on telling good news stories can look a lot like virtue signalling. This progressive optimism 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. Generally absent of 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 rapid mass unemployment.

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 – and I left school into a desert of unemployment. It was dreadful, and many people were forced to leave the city to find work. Consequently, I am under no illusions about what lies ahead and what must be done. More recently I’ve been encouraged by our Changing church research which showed that 97 per cent of church leaders say they are deeply concerned about the long-term economic consequences of crisis. This concern now needs to be converted into missional action.

Business as mission

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. This means cities and communities need to be regenerated too. As Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon affirms: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (29:7).

In the decade ahead there is no question that Christians 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. This ‘safety net’ role is vital, but it is also reactive. If evangelicals are to influence the inevitable post-pandemic cultural reset that is ahead, we will also need to be proactive. This means that, if we

are once again going to play a key social role, there will need to be a concerted, even obsessive, focus on the issues of work, employment and enterprise.

Economic renewal is a slow process which requires political leadership. However, at heart it is a grassroots phenomenon, of innovation, inspiration and determination. If Christian leadership 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.

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 and the daunting scale of the unfolding economic upheaval, this is in part understandable. Yet, to “renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations” (Isa 61: 4) is not an impossible dream. Indeed, the church has played this public leadership role many times before. Most recently, the great evangelical social reformers of the 19th century provide us with inspiration for this task. Shaftesbury, Howard, More, Wilberforce, Butler, Cadbury, William and Catherine Booth, Mueller and many others understood the dignity of work and the value it plays in individual and social renewal. We have much to learn from people like Josiah Wedgwood, the evangelical businessman who God blessed to build a huge pottery empire, and whose motto was ‘doing well and doing good’.

Today, there are many workplace networks and ministries in the UK that can help and advise churches and individual Christians to develop a focus on business as mission. And we have much to learn from the missional work of the church overseas in relation to micro-financing, start-ups, trade networks, mutuality, innovation, and ethical investment.

Like our illustrious predecessors, 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 not only weather the storm ahead, but to also take the opportunity to radically transform our society – for His glory and for our healing.

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To date there has been very little attention given to job creation as a strategic missional priority for the church.

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Churches have done exceptionally well in responding to the pandemic, but with much uncertainty and change on the horizon, responding doesn't go far enough, **Dr Tom Sine** and **Dr Dwight Friesen** tell Naomi Osinnowo.

Diligent and determined, church and Christian leaders in the UK quickly adapted amid the challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic.

Anecdotal evidence as well as research have revealed that when church and office doors shut at the end of March, new ways of operating, serving, helping and ministering were promptly underway.

For Dr Tom Sine and Dr Dwight Friesen, authors of *2020s Foresight*, the rapid response both here and in the US, where they're based, to the crisis has been commendable. Leaders and their congregations or teams have stepped up to meet needs and stepped in to fill gaps, all the while ensuring that the word of God continues to be preached and taught.

But as the west moves further into restoration phase, still with much uncertainty ahead, Tom, who has worked with churches and non-profits for 30 years to enable them to anticipate and creatively respond to new challenges in tough times, and Dwight, a theology lecturer

at the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, urge leaders and the wider Christian community to rethink their modus operandi. They believe that if the church "simply lives in action", we will not be able to adequately express the love of God to a host of new challenges that are coming our way in the decade ahead.

"Church leaders care very deeply about their communities, but in seminary they are rarely trained in how to either anticipate change or broadly research best practices. For example, every major corporation has a plan to deal with the next recession. I have never come across a church or a denomination that has a plan in advance to deal with the next recession," says Tom.

Simply living in action and not planning ahead will fail the church and those we seek to serve, Tom and Dwight explain during our chat over Zoom one Friday evening. They say that these are turbulent times, with COVID-19, the recent race-related protests and the climate crisis, not to mention the growing number of people in Britain and the US in our

neighbourhoods who don't have enough income to sustain themselves. And this, they feel, is likely to be a growing need in many of our communities.

Dwight puts it like this: "As Christians we believe we're part of a story – God's unfolding story. There's always a past, a present and a future. Traditionally, most Christians focus on the past (scripture and our respective traditions) or the present (living and serving), but seldom dutifully consider the future, with the exception of eschatology, and more specifically an eternity with God as our final destination. But if we're to be faithful to our neighbours, we're to learn to anticipate what is coming our way and do something about it now.

"There's an invitation to follow Christ by anticipating what's coming; we're not to think it's always going to be like it is now or how it was yesterday. Long after the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has been resolved, for instance, the economic crisis will linger. The economic impact is just beginning to be felt, meaning we have time to activate through a new

set of practices and establish in advance a tapestry of care that will make our communities more resilient in future.”

Time to change tack?

Anticipation, reflection, innovation – these are the three vital practices, or the new “three-step dance” as they put it, Tom and Dwight recommend church and Christian leaders now use to underpin their strategic planning. This, they say, will enable them and those they work with to thrive and be effective witnesses to Christ in a decade which is likely to be characterised not only by change, but accelerating change.

In their study book *2020s Foresight* they explain that to anticipate is to look ahead and consider “how new issues are likely to face those you work with in the next five to 10 years”. They write: “We encourage you to anticipate how the context is likely to change in the coming decade, not only for those you serve, but also for your church or organization. Take a cue from business innovators, urban planners, and environmental designers, who use the step of anticipating to identify new challenges and opportunities before they start planning.”

To reflect is to think deeply about “the aspirations and biblical values of your faith”. They write: “Many faith leaders tell us that too often they assume that their theological or ethical values will automatically permeate their group’s planning. However, we need to recognize that it can be very easy to lose track of the powerful undercurrent of popular culture and market forces subtly shaping even our ‘Christian planning.’”

And, last, to innovate is to “spend time and resources broadly researching best practices in your respective fields – before you start planning”. They write: “As a consequence of research, leaders are able to harvest a broad range of innovative ideas from all over the planet. When they see a major new challenge racing toward them, they already have a reservoir of innovative responses to draw on.”

Dwight clarifies that *2020s Foresight* is written so it puts some very practical steps in the hands of people who can actually do the work. “It provides tools and encourages Christians to listen to their context and anticipate the future needs. You can innovate creative and appropriate responses in your context. This book is a key resource for this time – a time many of us feel lost because times are changing so fast,” he says.

Excerpt from *2020s Foresight: Three Vital Practices for Thriving in a Decade of Accelerating Change*

CHAPTER 1

Doing the Three-Step in Birmingham

Looking back on this New Parish Conference in 2017, it was easily the most memorable workshop Tom had experienced in recent years. This was due largely to the skillful leadership of Mike Royal. It occurred to Tom that Mike Royal was leading in a process very much like the three-step dance we are proposing in this book:

Step One

Mike helped workshop participants anticipate how their neighbors would likely be impacted by the coming economic cutbacks.

Step Two

Mike enabled these neighbors who were divided politically to reflect on their biblical responsibility to their most vulnerable neighbors.

Step Three

Mike enabled the leaders to use a creative process to innovate new ways for their churches to help empower neighbors before the cutbacks came.

This three-step dance in Birmingham could impact communities all over Britain facing cutbacks in the early 2020s. Now let’s fast forward to 2020. Boris Johnson has been elected as the new Prime Minister of the UK and he plans to push Brexit through in one year. However, ‘Boris Johnson’s own official government figures show Brexit will make British people much poorer.’ No sooner had President Trump been acquitted of impeachment by the US Senate on February 5, 2020, than the Democrats made a stumbling beginning in the presidential race in Iowa. The outcome of this election will not only have an impact on the American people, but people all over our planet in this time of accelerating change.

In *2020s Foresight*, Tom and Dwight use three steps (anticipation, reflection, innovation) to show Christian leaders how to research a much broader array of innovative ways to respond to new challenges in times like these. Then they show readers how to select those creative responses that most fully reflect the ways of Jesus.

With questions at the end of each chapter, the book can be used as a study book in churches, colleges or seminaries. If you plan ahead, Tom and Dwight might be available to make a Zoom visit to your study group. Contact Tom at twisine@gmail.com.

RISING ABOVE THE storm



Amid this crisis we have two options: serve, extend and grow, or conserve, insulate and protect – where do we stand? asks **Roger Sutton**, director of GATHER and Movement Day UK.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair” – Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.


Over the last few months I've often been reminded of this Dickens's quote as I've observed both beauty and ugliness during this pandemic. The virus has taken so many lives across our country and the world. Its secondary effects upon our own land will be long-lasting, with high unemployment, increased mental health issues, young people's futures blighted, vibrant businesses closing, and charities losing much-needed finance. We have all felt isolated, been stopped from seeing and hugging our loved ones and, for some, experienced the agony of never being allowed to say a proper goodbye as the virus takes another life.

However, this is starkly contrasted by the emergence and affirmation of the value of neighbourliness and the heroic service by those on the frontline. We learnt what we really needed and who and what was really the most important to our existence. We clapped the nurses and the delivery drivers, the doctors and the kind neighbour, and we are forever thankful for a new emergency service called Zoom.

In our new form of church life, this has also been a time of significant ambiguity. We are thankful for the agility of pastors to get us all online. We have begun to discover afresh that church was never the building but the people. At the start we were encouraged that online meant people felt they could walk into a virtual service more easily than a real building. We were joyful that people's interest in Christianity was increasing, and we felt we could begin to have the spiritual conversation alongside the subject of hand sanitisers and masks.

I've been also encouraged by the response from many churches and charities which, despite the restrictions, have not only managed to keep going but to help others. Our churches and unity movements in many cities and towns have been at the centre of supplying food, shopping for the isolated, delivering medication from the pharmacy, and making pastoral calls. For those churches who work in unity together with one phone number and one website across a city or town, this has been a very busy time. With this simple structure they were well placed to connect to the local authority and become part of the solution. As leader of the GATHER movement, which helps support these wonderful people, I've been so proud of their response as they seek to love their neighbour.

But again, is this a time of light and hope or a time of darkness and despair in the church? One of my main concerns at the moment is the resilience of our church leaders who have done so much to serve us over the last few months. Many are exhausted through the pressure of keeping things going, trying to predict the unpredictable and set vision in the midst of dense fog. They face anxiety about



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*Our cities, boroughs
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how well their people are connecting as a community. Who won't return as and when we do come back over the next year? How are we going to worship with the restrictions?

The greatest anxiety for many leaders is financially. I know of pastors who have already taken significant pay cuts and church budgets that have been reduced by over 40 per cent. Pastors were just trying to get through to the end of summer hoping it will all get a lot better but now we seem to be looking at the effects of this pandemic for at least another year. The latest findings from America is that they expect one in five churches to close over the next 18 months due to financial constraints.

Already in the UK conversations with some denominational leaders seems to reflect this perspective. Small congregations with large buildings in rural or inner-city areas are probably most at risk. It's easy to give a glib response to this and produce a Darwinian perspective about the survival of the strong, however, can we really afford to lose the presence of the church in our inner cities and rural locations? Are we really happy with hundreds of kingdom buildings being turned into the

hands of property developers to build expensive flats?

Next steps

So, where do we go now? How do we plot our course as the storm continues around us? I think we are faced with a very serious choice to make now. Shall we essentially turn in on ourselves, protect what we have and plan for contraction, or will we take the missional posture and press forward in trust and serve the city or town God has called to? Shall we hear the sensible, realistic and obvious voice that it's time to bunker down and circle the wagons and wait for the storm to pass us by. Or will we listen to another more dangerous voice?

The people of Israel in exile also had two voices to respond to in Jeremiah 28 and 29. Hananiah spoke practically and rationally; it was time to conserve, insulate and protect, so he urged them to keep themselves to themselves and pray the storm didn't last long. However, Jeremiah spoke a very different word. He urged them to serve, extend and grow even though the season was difficult. Hananiah effectively said God will bless you if you look after yourselves. Jeremiah

said seek the prosperity of the city and if it prospers you will prosper (Jeremiah 27:4-7). Can this mean if we seek the prosperity of Edinburgh, Belfast, Birmingham or Sunderland and see the place recover and renew then the people of God will themselves prosper? Can it really be better to give than to receive at this crisis point? To focus on our mission rather than ourselves?

Our cities, boroughs towns, villages and islands are in crisis; they desperately need us to minister the love of God to them in word and deed. We are entering the most difficult time in the life of our country since the World War II. This is not a time to be found missing in action. The call to mission in the New Testament was to a weak, marginalised, persecuted and poor church. However, with the Holy Spirit within them and some bravery and passion they began to turn the world upside down.

This won't be an easy journey, but it will be exciting. It will demand from us levels of prayer and faith we have yet to live out. We may be in the storm and hiding at the bottom of the boat praying for it all to end, but there is a disturbing even alarming voice coming from the sea: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid... Come" (Matthew 14:22-33).

RESPONDING IN *recovery*

The recovery from the coronavirus pandemic will be long and tough for many. Our new resource can help you offer much-needed support, says

Rachel Arnold, head of church engagement,
Christians Against Poverty.

At the beginning of this year I was busy preparing for a celebration on 4 July. No, not because of American Independence Day, but because that was going to be my wedding day.

However, as March came to an end and April moved us deeper into lockdown, it became more and more apparent that this was unlikely to happen. It was difficult and painful. My hopes and dreams for my wedding day were unravelling as quickly as new coronavirus cases were rising.

We've all had our lives turned upside down in one way or another since the start of this year: plans have changed and

aspirations have shifted. The rearranging of my wedding was, whilst incredibly important to me, just one small part of something so much more significant for many people.

Daily we hear staggering reports of thousands affected by job losses and financial insecurity. We hear of the uphill battle to find new work with a single job vacancy receiving as many as 4,000 applications. We hear of the anxiety, isolation and fear that millions are struggling with as they try to plot a course through a foggy, uncertain future. Yes, this pandemic is national, it's global, but it's also incredibly personal.

Redundancy or financial insecurity could be something that you have

experienced at this time. You may know of a friend having to cope with a sudden obstacle to their lifelong career goals, or a student at university looking ahead to beginning a career in the aftermath of a recession. You may have members of your congregation trapped by feelings of anxiety and worry, where even leaving the house is a challenge. It is likely that we can all think of somebody in our family, community or congregation who is facing a drastically different future following the coronavirus pandemic.

Perhaps you know someone struggling financially, grappling with growing debt after a sudden and unexpected dip in their finances. Someone like Elias.

Elias' story

The day we were put into lockdown I was made redundant. I didn't have a job and I didn't initially have money coming in. I'd applied for universal credit but I had to wait for that to come through. I wasn't able to pay for my flat that month. The money I had in the bank from my last salary covered my costs but two of my direct debits bounced back.

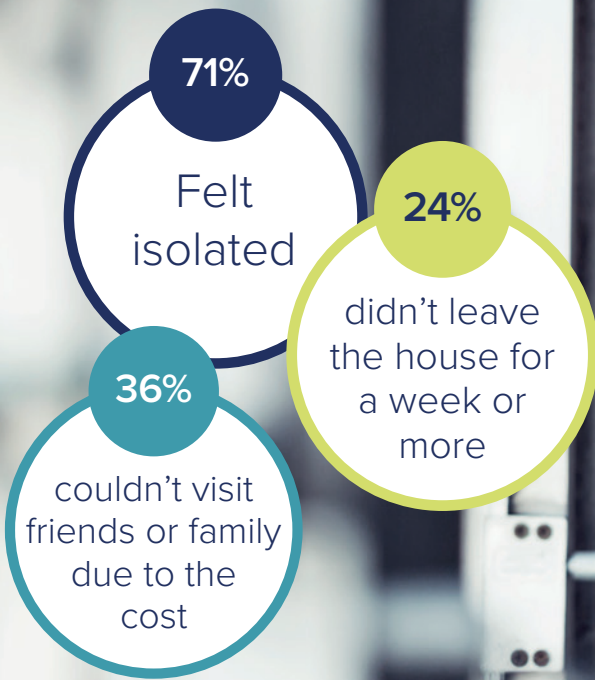
I didn't know how much I would be getting. I didn't know how it worked. It

was my first time claiming a social security payment. It was quite embarrassing for me. I've worked consistently for 40 years.

I was applying for jobs and not hearing anything because everything had gone quiet. I was on my own – I live in secure living accommodation for people aged 55 and over. I'm in a studio apartment with four walls around me. All I did during the day was go to the country park on walks and then listen to gospel

music, read my Bible, talk to the Lord and read books. That's what kept me going.

I just had to cope. It's a mindset I had to put myself in. I knew that the Lord was for me and with me. I was in a really bad space a couple of months ago but I'm doing a lot better now. Christians Against Poverty and the church have been a pillar of support, with the prayers, foodbank and everything else I've received from them.



An invitation

Christians Against Poverty (CAP) has spent more than 24 years partnering with hundreds of churches to help people in poverty, especially those weighed down by debt. Throughout that time, we have seen that for many struggling on a low income, isolation is all too common and social distance is the norm.

A few months ago, we published a report about our clients' lives and found that before seeking help 71 per cent felt isolated; 36 per cent couldn't visit friends or family due to the cost; and 24 per cent didn't leave the house for a week or more.

Most spent at least a year in this situation, a situation that now feels painfully familiar to us. Painfully familiar because we understand and empathise. You may never know what it is to be in unmanageable debt, but since 23 March you've probably learnt how it feels to have your world turned upside down, or to hardly leave your home.

Through Jesus, God shows us the power of empathy. He fully entered into the joy and pain of what it means to be human. As a result, "because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). Now, as His followers, He invites us to do the same – to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

Kick Start

Kick Start is part of CAP's response to the needs we know will exist in communities all over the UK as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. It is designed to equip you, the local church, to help people in your community get their lives moving along following the impact of the crisis.

Kick Start features nine bitesize sessions that can be delivered as a series, or just as they are, via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Google Hangouts, so that you can bring hope directly into people's homes. The sessions act as a conversation starter, packed full of practical tips on job searching, money management, habits that harm, and the emotional challenges of worry and loss.

Anyone can run a Kick Start session; there is no need to be an expert as all the expertise is contained in the video. All you need is a heart and desire to help people like Elias get back on their feet at this time.

These resources are designed to give a solid base on which people can rebuild the areas of their lives that need attention. We hope that as you respond practically to the needs of your community, you will build new relationships, lift people out of the depths of isolation and also take the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus.

How do I get involved?

We'd love for your church to run Kick Start. Even if you've never run a CAP service before, you're welcome to take part in this. We've made the whole resource free, so that as many people as possible can access it. Simply go to capuk.org/kickstart to register your church for free and get started.

We have a long road ahead in recovering from this pandemic, but we can all start by bringing hope and the love of God to those who are facing what feels like a hopeless future at this time.

Remember...

... how it felt to be separated from those around you.

Remember...

... the everyday struggles you faced.

Remember...

... how a home can become a prison.

Then recall those who are still stuck in that place, where social isolation is their ongoing reality. Let your memories of lockdown lead you to acts of love and generosity towards others.

Kick Start

BITESIZE VIDEO SESSIONS HELPING PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY MOVE FORWARD IN LIFE.

Free sessions for your church to deliver online or 'socially distanced' in your community.

Access all nine videos free today and equip your community with practical tips on job searching, money management, habits that harm and worry & loss.

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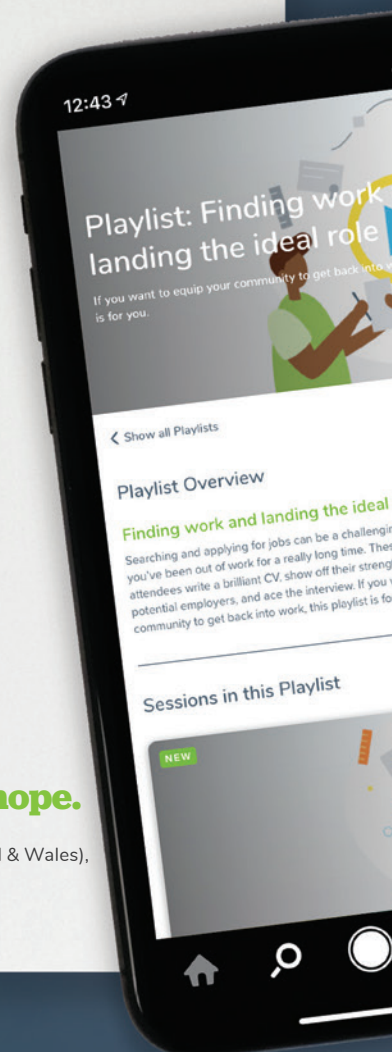
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LORD OF THE PROVISION

The pandemic has been a unique opportunity for us to demonstrate God's love to our community. We now remember what God has done as we look to His plans for the future, says **Paul Harper**, elder at KingsGate Church, Kingston.

When God did multiple miracles in 2010, to enable us to buy a building just off the main street in Kingston, Greater London, our desire was to be a church that our community would miss if we disappeared. At times that's been more desire than reality but then God set us up for 2020.

Over the last few years, we've launched events and activities to support and encourage some of the most vulnerable members of our community: ladies who've been through difficult times, the homeless, the elderly. These activities have built our relationships with people but also with our local council, NHS and care home staff, and charities and businesses looking to support them too.

In March, as services began to close and lockdown looked likely, we could see that many of the people we supported were going to have extreme difficulty providing their own food. Having an industrial kitchen and space, it seemed obvious that we should step in to help. A partnership quickly developed between Kingston Council, Kingston Churches Together, Kingston Voluntary Action and local businesses to meet the needs of those isolated and made vulnerable by the lockdown.

Kingston Council ran a triage and referral system to ascertain people's needs and allocate them to the correct service; and Kingston Churches Together and charities, supported by volunteers from all areas of the community, provided food, baby supplies, temporary accommodation

and a listening ear. Our church, partnering with Voices of Hope charity, supplied a frozen meals on wheels service for people who couldn't cook for themselves. It's been an amazing story of God's provision and people's generosity.

From having nothing but a good kitchen and a few volunteers, we bought four industrial freezers the first week. Other people and businesses donated, loaned or gave another 13 fridges and freezers. Furloughed chefs, advertising executives, admin assistants and carpet fitters gave their time. People couriered meals, collected ingredient donations, organised distribution schedules, lobbied suppliers for donations, traded surplus for things we needed, and managed a team of 100 volunteers all out of the goodness of their hearts and the desire to help their community. Many worked outside of their normal skillset, under real pressure with constantly shifting objectives, all working for the same goal and somehow making it happen.

As referrals came in, the stories of people's struggles began to mount up: the lady in her 80's who burst into tears when told meals would be delivered that night as she hadn't eaten a proper meal in three days; the elderly couple, one with dementia, who had been living on toast; the professional mother on maternity leave, who's self-employed husband's income had collapsed and they couldn't afford basics for their newborn; a single mum with three children who couldn't go shopping as her children were too young to be left at home and the supermarket wouldn't allow

her in with her children and she couldn't afford deliveries.

As the meals were delivered the joy and thankfulness flooded back. Pubs and restaurants volunteered meals, wholesalers gave or sold supplies at cost. Every week more provisions. Sometimes we just sat and laughed in incredulity at what we'd been given. One hundred chickens; 1,000 chicken thighs and 600 fillets; 1,000kg of sushi grade salmon; £2,000 worth of prepared Indian food. Other organisations gave chocolates and treats so we could give goody bags to encourage people.

At a peak we delivered 1,800 meals per week and have delivered more than 25,000 meals in total. Our auditorium became a dry goods store and packaging centre, our lobby a food prep hall, and our children's ministry area a refrigeration and distribution plant. All our offices were used for food hub admin.

The contacts and relationships formed have enabled us to start more projects. We've washed clothes for the homeless, started the BRITE box project, which provides ingredients and recipes to facilitate families cooking and eating a healthy meal together, activity boxes to help people's mental health. Now we are working with the council to create a not-for-profit co-op to provide healthy groceries for people who cannot afford them.

The pandemic has caused incredible pain and trauma for many people, but it has also been the space for us to demonstrate God's love to our community. We are focused on God's plans for the future while being thankful for what He's done in the past.



WITH ARMS WIDE *open*



70,000 meals served since we opened Matthew's House, but we know the best is yet to come for this project and our church, says **Ashley Winter**, church leader at The Hill Church, Swansea.

A few months prior to lockdown, a man knocked on the doors of our church project, Matthew's House in Swansea. Having opened our doors three years earlier to anyone and everyone in our city, we were accustomed to people of every kind walking through them – from premiership footballers and members of parliament to rough sleepers and sex workers. Hundreds of guests from every background, belief and circumstance.

But this guy was different. He was more dishevelled and confused than most. He spoke quickly and incoherently. Within seconds he collapsed on our doorstep and ceased breathing. A team member kept him alive by administering CPR until the paramedics arrived. It was a seminal moment for our project, not because we saved the man's life – he died in hospital seven days later – but rather because we kept him alive long enough for his family to reconcile with him and say goodbye. It was a sober reminder that all who receive our hospitality have a family in their story. To someone somewhere they might be a wife, a husband, son, daughter, brother, sister,

uncle or aunt. Often, for various reasons and despite their best efforts, these loved ones have been unable to maintain contact, typically due to lifestyle or other challenges. Yet, in the end and at the end, family really matters. Love matters. Time matters. Goodbye matters.

I have always been intrigued by the verse in the letter to the Hebrews which warns us not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have welcomed angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2). One irony of this verse is that the writer of it happens also to be a stranger. We don't know who it was who penned Hebrews, and we don't know whether they meant literal angels or if they were they simply referring to the legacy of hospitality amongst God's people as demonstrated by Abraham in Genesis 18. However, regardless of what conclusions you and I reach, we must agree that scripture repeatedly places value on hospitality being offered to all, especially those who are vulnerable, isolated and lonely.

For these reasons, our church took hold of an opportunity four years ago to launch a project based around the idea

of hospitality. We named it Matthew's House. Why Matthew? Well, when Matthew writes his gospel, he includes his own personal story of meeting Christ within its pages. Jesus Himself not only welcomes the ostracised tax collector into His team of disciples, He swiftly commandeers Matthew's home in order to show hospitality to others. This would've brought great honour to Matthew in the Jewish culture. Thus, the thread of his story: mercy shown through the power of hospitality amongst the broken, the bruised and those considered by many to be at the bottom of society.

This apostle's focus became our foundation for Matthew's House. We sought to create an environment that welcomed guests, not service users, cases or clients. We also saw an opportunity not only to serve our city, but to serve with our city – therefore we opened the role of volunteer to anyone. To this day, Matthew's House is led and run by its many committed volunteers, with very few paid staff. This decision has had a catalytic effect in creating a far larger crowd around our church community than if we'd limited involvement to only those who shared our faith. It has laid the way for guests to become volunteers, for volunteers to rebuild their lives, and provided countless opportunities to share the good news that we possess as jars of clay in their midst. The Hill Church has many trophies of His grace amongst us as a result.



The best is yet to come

So, how does Matthew's House show hospitality? We do it through a pay-as-you-feel café using intercepted food that otherwise would be destined for bins. We take this food and turn it into delicious home-cooked meals for hungry bellies. We also run a laundry and a shower for the homeless by means of a referral scheme. In addition, we distribute dignity packs for men and women in need or living on the streets. Future plans are in progress for friendly advocacy and our own community choir.

To date these expressions have unleashed love and hope manifested through tonnes of food, tens of thousands of hot meals, hundreds of dignity packs and showers, and countless heart-to-heart conversations. We have made friends all over our city and even further afield.

What we did not anticipate was that this project would create a community and culture that uniquely prepared us to influence the city's crisis response to COVID-19. Early in the pandemic we attended a meeting with NHS specialists and then met with government officials. We'd anticipated that we would be told what food provision was being made for the street sleepers and those in temporary bedsit accommodation. We left the meeting with our team leading the Swansea Together response involving 54 other organisations. Within days the collaboration was able to create an operation that served

19,000 meals to more than 25 locations, daily throughout lockdown.

One day, as lockdown was beginning to ease, three guests approached Matthew's House. Their first words to us were, "Thank you". They explained that prior to COVID-19 they'd been sleeping rough, but since mid-March, they'd been accommodated in bedsit accommodation. In their own words they could not have survived without our hospitality during this period; the daily meals were a lifesaver for them. They described the experience of being locked down in a single room with just a toilet and shower, how everything is more expensive and generally difficult to manage when there aren't facilities to cook or store food. They spoke openly, vulnerably and powerfully about the hope that each meal brought them, and that most of all it told them that they were not alone.

When Matthew's House was just an idea whispered into the ear of one of our founders back in 2016, he happened to lay hands on a building and prayed that God would give us a building and the resources to be a force for good and for the gospel in our city. The late David Wilkinson, founder of Teen Challenge, once said, "When we meet a human need, the world will beat a path to our door." Wilkinson's observation brings

to mind the words of John the baptist, who in referencing the prophet Isaiah, said that he was a messenger sent to make a clear and smooth path for the Lord (Mark 1:3). I see now that hospitality can lay a path upon which Jesus happily chooses to walk. There is no doubt that our presence in the city in the coming months as a place of hospitality and hope will be needed more than ever.

We were recently asked how Matthew's House's response in the crisis would affect the project, the church and our city long term. By God's grace we have served 70,000 meals since we opened and received every penny that we have ever needed. Our involvement, and leadership, during the crisis has undoubtedly raised our reputation as a force for good in our city (Titus 2:14), and I have no doubt that God will continue to make The Hill Church a force for the gospel too (Titus 2:11). As always, with our God the best is really yet to come.

“*There is no doubt that our presence in the city in the coming months as a place of hospitality and hope will be needed more than ever.*”



Tackling isolation across the globe

In these challenging times, many of us are getting first-hand experience of what it means to be isolated. Yet millions of people live so far from roads, education and healthcare that the only way to reach them is by air.

This is why Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) works with thousands of humanitarian partners to bring help, hope and healing to some of the remotest places on earth. The organisation has also been called to help fight coronavirus in vulnerable areas.

Madagascar

Transporting essential child vaccines

Every year, thousands of newborn babies in Madagascar need vital vaccines to survive childhood. Despite coronavirus, MAF was allowed to transport these vaccines in partnership with UNICEF.

'During the pandemic, MAF is doing whatever it can to help save lives,' says MAF Communications Officer Charlotte Pedersen. *'We're playing our part – flying vaccines to isolated communities and keeping them at the right temperature so that they remain effective.'*

For 2 days, MAF was able to fly 2,175kg of vaccines and syringes to provide babies with life-saving immunisation. On one of these flights to Ambatomainy, in Madagascar's Melaky region, the cargo was loaded on to a waiting ox cart!

'Villagers are very thankful for the vaccines,' continues Charlotte. *'It's one less thing to worry about when you're cut off from the rest of the world!'*

South Sudan

Bringing awareness

MAF Pilot Wim Hobo has made regular flights to the award-winning Holy Trinity Peace Village in Kuron for four years now.

Located near the border of Ethiopia, this remote village was created as an oasis of calm in the midst of war-torn South Sudan and is an established community comprising different tribes, ethnicities and faiths.

Its founder, 84-year-old Bishop Paride Taban, proved to the world that peaceful cohabitation in South Sudan is possible, and went on to achieve global recognition for his ground-breaking work.

Over the years, Bishop Paride has chartered MAF's small aircraft many times to transport him to meetings in the capital Juba and beyond. A journey that takes 2 days by car and an overnight stay in Kapoeta, takes only 1 hour 20 minutes with an MAF flight. It's the safest, quickest way to avoid danger or getting stuck in treacherous wet mud.



We have one of the best airstrips! We did most of the work with women – they are the best!

Bishop Paride Taban



Now, 20 MAF flights later, Wim Hobo is transporting cargo with a difference. Alongside items such as food, cooking oil, fertiliser and washing powder, he flies facemasks, buckets and banners bearing crucial information for the Bishop's coronavirus awareness programme.

Uganda

Delivering emergency relief

When the Kasese region of Uganda was hit by terrible flooding, MAF had to wait until it received the all clear to provide disaster relief to those who had been affected.

According to a report by Kasese District Local Government, 25 schools were either swept away or severely damaged, with 4 health centres destroyed. Farms were submerged, homes badly damaged, and hundreds of thousands of people displaced.

MAF Uganda Communications Officer, Jill Vine, wrote – 'Following a crippling ten-week

lockdown of flights because of coronavirus, a partially submerged airstrip caused by major flooding, and a record number of locusts in eastern Africa, we finally have breakthrough. We've been granted permission to fly cargo to Kasese and bring much welcome relief to the local people!'

In the wake of the destruction caused by the flooding, those affected were in desperate need of shelter, food, medicine, clean water and blankets.

It usually takes six hours to drive to Kasese, but the floods destroyed the major bridge between Fort Portal and Kasese – preventing government relief from arriving by land.

Fortunately, MAF was able to help. It's what Jill Vine and the team had all been hoping for. 'Hope,' she explains, 'has kept us all going. Hope is beautiful!'

For 75 years, MAF has been flying medical relief and life-transforming help to vulnerable people in hard-to-reach places. Flying to more destinations than any commercial airline, MAF has been asked to help fight the coronavirus in remote and vulnerable areas – and will continue to combat isolation long after coronavirus is defeated.

MAIN Relief supplies delivered to Kasese, Uganda. Photo by Dave Forney

LEFT Bishop Paride Taban. Photo by Jenny Davies

HELP US TO CONTINUE TACKLING ISOLATION

It costs just £60 to fuel an MAF flight and reach the furthest corner of the world. **Please consider giving a gift today.**

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Amid the pandemic, we have been challenged to reshape pastoral care, making it something the whole church is responsible for, not just the leader, says **Rev Kate Wharton**, Vicar of St. Bart's Roby, Liverpool.



ALL HANDS ON DECK

The past few months have changed everything. That's true for how our relationships work, how our society functions, and even how our world looks. It's also true for how our churches operate.

No matter what sort of church we're part of, the way we 'do' church has changed, certainly in the present and for the foreseeable future, and perhaps even for good. One of the things that was hardest about this change was that we didn't have any time to prepare for it. If we'd known there would be a period of time in which we weren't able to meet together in person, or even leave our homes very much, we'd have put strategies and programmes in place in advance. We'd have made sure everyone knew how to use the technology they'd need. We'd have made sure we had up to date contact details for absolutely everyone

connected to our church. But, unfortunately, we didn't really know it was going to happen until it happened.

Another challenge was that we didn't know how long the lockdown would last, or what life would look like on the other side of it – we still don't, really. If we'd known we were facing a month of life looking different, or six months, or a year, or even more, we could have planned appropriately, paced ourselves, made sure our systems would last. But, in reality, everything has been uncertain, and that isn't likely to change any time soon.

In the middle of all of this, the church had to adapt, and adapt fast. Those of us in church leadership had to work out how to do all sorts of things in all sorts of new ways, including offer pastoral care. There are two different things in play here. Firstly, the ongoing pastoral care which people have always needed and will always need. The everyday ups and downs of



life didn't go away as COVID-19 arrived. People are still experiencing relationship difficulties or chronic illnesses, people are still caring for small children or elderly relatives. Secondly, the pastoral care which is needed directly because of coronavirus – those with worsening mental health issues, key workers facing huge stress, people with financial insecurity or job loss, people who felt isolated and alone, those who were bereaved, and much more.

These types of pastoral care were needed and will continue to be needed for some time. But the additional factors meant that many more people needed pastoral care at once than might usually have been the case, and that whatever pastoral care structures a church had in place previously might well turn out no longer to be sufficient.

The whole church

In the first week of lockdown I knew that we needed some sort of structure in place so that we didn't miss things, so I did something that I have never done before and never for a moment imagined I would do: I worked through our church mailing list and I RAG (red, amber, green) rated everyone based on my assessment of their vulnerability and their needs. Different factors were involved – age, occupation, home circumstances, underlying health conditions (insofar as I knew this information). I then recruited a team of volunteers who were each assigned a number of people from the red category who they would phone at least once a week. They would offer them pastoral support and a listening ear.

This system worked well and made sure that lots of people who might otherwise have felt very isolated knew that they would get a friendly phone call once a week. It didn't, of course, account for all pastoral issues which might arise – plenty of those also cropped up for people in the amber and yellow categories. However, generally, it was easier to be in touch with those people.

I have tried to phone everyone at least once, and some far more often. I have written personally to everyone at least once. We created a new email address which we shared widely, which was solely for anyone requiring any sort of help related to COVID-19, and we made sure that a number of people on the leadership team could access it so that people would get a quick response.

It felt strange and a bit impersonal to 'rate' people in this way, but it's been helpful as a way of keeping track of a large number of people. I've noted on the spreadsheet which volunteer is connected with which person, and I've also noted when I've personally phoned someone. This has enabled me to see at a glance if someone might have been without contact

for a while. I'm sure that, in some way, this is a system which I will continue to use in future.

Small groups have helped with this too – ours are called Connect Groups. These have been vital in ensuring that people have those around them who will ask how they're doing, who will pray for them, and who will step in to offer support when that's needed. The difficulty is that in our church, as in so many others, there is a much smaller percentage of the congregation within Connect Groups than I would like, and often it's those on the fringes of church who aren't in groups and therefore can easily slip through the net.

I have found that phone calls, Zoom and WhatsApp have made pastoral care more accessible, and more doable. There is a danger in 'normal life' that pastoral care is something which is either only seen as relevant to elderly or vulnerable people, or is something which only kicks in after a crisis. During the past few months I have contacted people far more often 'just to say hi' and that's felt entirely appropriate, because everyone knows that at the moment all of life is strange and unusual. It's happened more between other people too, as everyone has reached out to friends and neighbours. I hope this is something which will continue.

Making a conscious effort to check I had contact details for everyone, and to be in touch with everyone, meant that, in the providence of God's timing, I was able to be there for one family at a very difficult time. We have a woman who attends our church with her mother and her young granddaughter, but not her daughter. As I collated the address list I realised that I didn't have a phone number or email address for any of them, as they'd never filled in any contact forms. I tried various means to find their details and asked people to let them know I was trying to get in touch. Eventually, I had a call from the daughter, who I'd only met once. She told me that her mum was in hospital, seriously ill with COVID-19. I was able to get the whole church praying for her, and to keep in touch with the family regularly. After six weeks in hospital she is now home and is doing well. I would hate to have missed that opportunity for the family to know that the whole church was caring for them and praying for them.

Pastoral care is sometimes seen as a less exciting aspect of church life than, say, evangelism or discipleship. Some of us who are church leaders may feel that it isn't our major gift. However, I think we are all clearly instructed by Jesus, like Paul, to "take care of my sheep" (John 21:16). We may not feel that we have much to be thankful for where COVID-19 is concerned, but if it has made pastoral care more normal, more natural, and more manageable, and something that is the task of the whole people of God, not just the church leader, then that can only be a good thing.

Good news FOR THE CITY

Serving our cities is best done when we work together, Love Southampton has shown amid the pandemic. But as we continue to practically demonstrate the gospel, let's not lose sight of the need to share it in word too. By **John Risbridger**

It was Thursday morning, the “best day of my week” as we used to tell each other. But this Thursday was different: the usual people were there but, instead of chatting over cooked breakfast, our guests, mainly homeless and vulnerably housed people, were queuing outside for a bag of food to take away and eat alone. The cloud of COVID-19 was beginning to cast its shadow. A few days later, the Prime Minister announced that the country was in lockdown.

As our guests left, we never imagined that six months later, we would look back on the development of an extraordinary partnership between churches, the city council, businesses and charities, which would see many Christians volunteering to deliver £125,000-worth of food over three months to the most vulnerable people in our city, and hundreds seeking our help. It all came together under the umbrella of ‘Love Southampton’, and we believe it’s helping change the landscape of our city for years to come.

From the start, local church leaders believed that though our buildings were shut, the church was to be open and alive, stepping up to serve our community. The challenge was clear: we had to focus on loving God, loving each other and loving our city, but the vision could only be fulfilled if local Christians came together. Several leaders began to meet on Zoom to share a vision for a coordinated response as one church in Southampton.

Around the same time, a smaller team from a few different churches, with masses

of experience of local community action, started to connect regularly to talk, dream and pray together. How could we bring Christians together to be such good news for our city that people would believe there is hope and that the local council, media and community could not fail to notice? That was the challenge and we were determined to rise to it. For years Paul Woodman of City Life Church had been bringing people together to serve the city under the banner of Love Southampton, and we sensed God was assembling a team with the skills we needed for a new, exciting chapter in that story.

As the vision to serve the city grew, church leaders were asking how their churches could be open while their buildings were closed. For much of the global church this is not a problem, but switching so quickly from a ‘gathered-church’, ‘building-centric’ approach to a ‘scattered-church’ and ‘online’ one, was a huge challenge for us. We all learned quickly, however, as people pulled together and, however much we’ve missed gathering physically, a lot about online church has been good. New people have heard the gospel because online church and Alpha are even more accessible. New prayer is happening as people flood into Sunday night Zoom prayer events – including a wonderful cross-church prayer event each month. Small groups have thrived, becoming a spiritual lifeline to many, including to the keyworkers serving on the front line of the COVID-19 response.

To make the vision of serving the city a reality, Love Southampton needed to be a catalyst to bring people together, a brand

to bring confidence and a voice to ensure our community heard a compelling narrative about the church as good news for the city. We focused on six areas: the hungry, vulnerable families, seniors, those sleeping rough, refugees and asylum seekers, and people with mental health needs.

Each area had local Christian mission projects with relevant expertise, so we established a website to connect the projects to those who needed help, and to volunteers who wanted to serve. Soon it was being used by individuals and by the city council.

As our focus on the city sharpened, support came in. The most striking thing was lots of people wanting to volunteer. Sue led a team preparing lunches every day for the street homeless. Andy coordinated a whole team of volunteer delivery drivers. A Christian professor of social work, with vast experience of working with government, offered his time to the team. Businesses donated food for us to

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As the vision to serve the city grew, church leaders were asking how their churches could be open while their buildings were closed.

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distribute. Sanjay raised money for a commercial freezer to store it. One church offered its building as a pop-up foodbank, another chose to second staff rather than furlough them. A council official asked to join our team meetings. There were opportunities to work with people we could never have accessed before, for example from the Muslim and Hindu communities, to ensure that all who needed help received it.

The future is different

We have been loving and serving our city for years, but COVID-19 gave us a new vision for what that looks like in practice – much of which will last beyond the crisis. We have learned that the church is in a unique position to mobilise volunteers. Many are now returning to work, but the impact has been huge, and 15-20 per cent remain. Relationships between churches, organisations, businesses and the council have moved to a new level and will be crucial for the future.

Where in the past the church has sometimes been viewed with suspicion or even hostility, there is now growing friendship and trust with the city council, as we have demonstrated our commitment to serve people regardless of their beliefs, background or lifestyle. This has created the opportunity to tell a different story of the church as good news for the city, both in what we do and in the message we proclaim.

Better together

In a throwaway comment, a local official said to us that he wouldn't worry if the council disappeared, because he knew the churches would step up to look after the city. Of course, in reality, many agencies have contributed significantly, but it was great to hear.

While COVID-19 was at its peak, Christian keyworkers worked tirelessly to serve the community, and we were proud to support them as churches. The Amber project, reaching out to on-street sex workers, provided much needed care at considerable personal risk and a BBC report of their work received over half a million views. In addition, some of the things done through churches and organisations under the Love Southampton umbrella have included providing food for thousands of families, homeless and vulnerably housed

people, as well as self-isolating households and victims of domestic abuse.

On one food delivery to a desperate family, a child said to her mum, "Look Mum, we've got toilet rolls." We were glad we could help them. The key lesson is that we are better when we work together – both as churches/Christian organisations and as we build trust with local agencies and business.

Rediscovering prayer

Prayer has played a crucial part in our journey through COVID-19. It has opened doors that were previously shut, brought favour in place of suspicion, brought unity instead of division, and sustained faith where we were weary. Lockdown forced us both to slow down to pray individually and to discover new ways of praying together. We can't afford to lose that ground in the future.

Rediscovering church

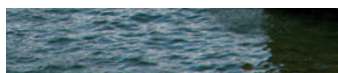
We have had to rediscover how to be church without the use of buildings. Church as small group, church online, church in homes, church in gardens, church as community, church as support for everyday discipleship: God invited us to rediscover forgotten riches and discover new ones. We can't afford to lose those riches in the drive to get back to our buildings.

The challenge that remains

For all the lessons learned, the greatest challenge is still the challenge facing our local churches. Serving our city together is very important to God in its own right, and is best done when Christians work together. However, it is crucial that the vision to serve the city practically does not become an alternative to overt evangelism, but something that complements and strengthens our verbal witness to Jesus. That is a challenge from which we must not shrink, as churches or as individuals.

We have heard of similar stories in other cities and would love to hear from you either to share your story or share more about ours. Please email us on info@lovesouthampton.org.uk.

Written by John Risbridger, minister at Above Bar Church, Southampton, for the Love Southampton team.





A BOND OF COMMON HUMANITY

As we continue to work towards greater ethnic diversity and integration in the church and wider society, what might we keep in mind? asks **Hephzibah Egede**, pastor of RCCG's Garden of the Lord parish, Cardiff.

This year has been extremely challenging for individuals, families and society at large. The pandemic has tragically resulted in a significant loss of lives, jobs and livelihoods. It has adversely affected the wellbeing of individuals, families, the national and global economies. The pandemic has also radically altered the way we live and relate with people.

Old wounds of racial and ethnic hostilities have resurfaced in the industrialised north this year. The world watched and heard George Floyd utter his last words, "I can't breathe," which sparked protests and calls for racial justice for black and minority communities in the US and in other countries in the industrialised north. The developing south has also had its fair share of ethnic and religious violence, resulting in significant loss of lives and devastation.

The state of the world demonstrates the utter failure of communities to understand that while we are different, we still share a bond of common humanity. So, as we approach the end of the year and move into 2021, how can we, as representatives of Christ, utilise biblical principles to celebrate ethnic and racial diversity and equally promote integration and common humanity?

Biblical expressions

God loves unity and diversity. The creation story in Genesis 1 demonstrates the diversity of God's creation. Yet, the Bible also appeals for unity and integration in the church and wider society. In Psalm 133:1, the psalmist declares the beauty and delight of brotherly unity. Similarly, the Lord Jesus Christ in His prayer for His church in John 17 placed a premium on unity. Acts 2:1 also highlights the importance of unity. It is a precursor to experiencing the fullness of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The appeal for unity is still relevant today. Ephesians 4:3 encourages God's people to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This must be our guiding principle in our relationships. We must do all we can to promote and foster a sense of oneness, peace and community. This is possible if we allow the Holy Spirit to guide and lead us in all we do.

Modelling diversity

It is often said that unity in the Spirit is not the same as uniformity. The Bible celebrates diversity in unity. In 1 Corinthians 12, the church is likened to the anatomy of the human body. The human body has a variety of organs and parts which differ in size, shape and function. Yet these organs and parts must operate as one if the body is to function and thrive. Some

may argue that not all parts of the body are equal or important in functionality. While this may be true, the reality is that the body is still one and every organ no matter how small has a part to play.

Properly cared for

To demonstrate the interconnectivity of the human body, every part feels pain when one part is hurt. This is why 1 Corinthians 12 warns against the danger of not providing care and attention to parts of the body that are considered as insignificant. If the body is to function properly, all its parts must be valued and properly cared for. In celebrating diversity, this does not mean that any part of the body gets to do what it likes. To function properly, all parts of the body must remain connected to the head. Christ is the head of His body, the church. As head, He provides the church with direction, leadership and nourishment which foster true integration and unity among members.

Common humanity

The example of the unity and diversity of the human body provides us with an understanding on why the themes of respect for ethnic diversity and common humanity are key to promoting societal cohesion, integration, peace and wellbeing. In a time of increasing racial and ethnic tensions, more focus should be given to the truth that all human beings are equal. No race or ethnic group is superior or inferior to another. As the psalmist declares in Psalm 139:14, we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made".

Yet in recognising our common humanity, we should not ignore the uniqueness, richness and beauty of our ethnic diversity. Instead, we should celebrate who we are and rise above ethnic tensions. Our love for God should motivate us to break down all dividing walls of ethnic and racial hostilities. Instead, we should seek to build healing walls of mutual love and understanding, and strive for a more compassionate, loving, fairer, just and equitable society.

God's love gift

The John 3:16 blessing can only happen when we begin to value people and appreciate that we are all created in the image of God. John 3:16 shows us how much God loves all humanity. The blessing of eternal life offered through Jesus Christ is God's love gift to everyone – none is excluded from God's love. He invites us to accept His gift of salvation and eternal life. As we accept the John 3:16 blessing, the dividing walls of ethnic and racial tensions and intolerance begin to crumble and melt away in the light of God's love for us.



DIGITAL CHURCH: FIVE LESSONS FROM LOCKDOWN

I believe the church will need to now fully adopt the ‘click and the brick’ model as we walk through these unusual days, says **Mark Pugh**, lead pastor, Rediscover Church, Exeter.

I wasn't convinced of the merits of digital church when we began our journey seven years ago. Why would anyone want to watch this relatively small church on their screens? Would it become too tempting an option for people to stay away and watch from the comfort of their own home? These concerns were real, but they were quickly overcome by stories we began to gather.

As well as providing an opportunity for ill or holidaying members of our congregation to stay connected, we noticed new people joining us. Some were exploring faith, intrigued enough to click on a link and watch a service but possibly not intrigued enough to visit a service in person. We began to make connections with them and had the joy of leading many to Jesus. We also noticed we were attracting housebound believers. I'm sure our lockdown experience has enabled us to have a greater understanding of how it must feel to be unable to attend church services, but there have been a significant number

of people who have been living with this reality for years, and those who found us were expressing a deep gratitude.

For some people this ministry was proving to be a lifeline and to others it was a stepping stone on their faith journey. We noticed that many who visited our building for the first time had engaged with us online and felt like they knew us. It became clear that our welcome mat was not at our front door but theirs. We began to dream how we could use this in a more intentional and missional way and proceeded to leaflet every home in the city with an invitation to join us online. We began to use sponsored ads on social media and also regularly encouraged our members to invite their friends and family to visit online. We noticed that people who watched us two/three times online were likely to visit us in person, so it made sense to encourage them to begin their journey via the online services.

The church experienced significant growth over the following years, and I'm

convinced our online ministry was a key catalyst. As we became more confident in its fruitfulness we invested more in equipment, created a suitable studio space and trained up more volunteers. There is much we still want to improve and add, but we keep doing so step by step. We also began to experiment with online small groups, prayer meetings, use of video calls for team meetings, and leading countywide and national prayer gatherings online. We love in-person gatherings but began to see lots of wins for complementing these with online options.

So, by the time lockdown kicked in, we were in the fortunate position of having much already in place and were therefore privileged to assist hundreds of churches in developing their new online adventures. But we have still been learning so much ourselves during these past six months and are really excited about taking these lessons forward in the months and years ahead. Here are five key lessons we have learnt and are learning.

1 Going live creates connection

A friend was telling me how many retakes he often does to perfect his sermon for a pre-recorded online church service. I encouraged him to remove that option: “Go live,” I said. “Make it real.” We’ve had people move with their families from other nations to join us after engaging with us online. I asked one of these families, “What was it that you found engaging about our church online?” Their answer was, “It wasn’t all perfect and polished – it felt real.” It’s humbling. I would love everything to be perfect, but when we edit our imperfections out of the final mix we edit something of our character.

We also love to create 360 circles of communication in our broadcasts. We ask questions like, where are you watching from? What is God saying to you? How can we pray for you? Answers are sent in via our chat rooms, and they are then interacted with by the person on camera to create a live connection.

2 Many people explore online

We ran four Alpha courses during the lockdown. Many who joined us seemed ‘further back’ on a faith journey than the in-person courses we’ve run in the past, and it has been a joy to establish these new relationships and see a number become Christians.

One such person went through the online Alpha course, followed it up with our next steps foundation course and then applied for membership. The first time I met him in person was in a socially distanced queue of volunteers unloading seven-tonnes of food for a social relief programme we run. This was his first time meeting us in person and his first time in the church building, but we felt like we knew him. He is now involved in our daily Bible reading plans, our daily discipleship rhythms, and has joined our camera team.

3 Faithfulness beats viewing figures

At the end of our online broadcasts I have little idea whether it went well or not. In the absence of the measures we learn to use when meeting in buildings, we are often only left with the cold statistics of the viewing numbers. There have been weeks these numbers have shrunk by hundreds and our team has held soul searching post-mortems to work out why. Some of these have given us helpful learning opportunities, but some of them have been unnecessarily depressing. I’m normally full of expectation and believe the best, but there have been moments when I’ve thought, what is the point? Here is the point: we faithfully serve the Lord!

4 Succinct communication strengthens services

Pre-lockdown our services were one hour and 45 minutes. We are about to reopen our building again for Sunday services and they will now be no longer than one hour each. We have had to cut the waffle, remove the repetition, tighten the transitions, and concentrate the preaching.

We have always worked to improve our preaching communication, but the lockdown has taught us we can say in 20 minutes what used to take 40 minutes. It requires more work, clear focus and discipline, but it is possible – and given people’s limited attention span, it has a greater chance of finding attentiveness in the listener.

5 Developing community rhythms helps

I see the importance of community in the process of making disciples in the Book of Acts. The early church introduced rhythms, values and practices as a community and did them regularly together. I’m more excited about our developing daily rhythms than I am about our Sunday livestreams. Each morning many of our community join us for live rhythm broadcasts and activities. Each day we share communion together, take five minutes to invite the Holy Spirit to fill us, and share Bible reading plans on YouVersion. We have also started experimenting with interjecting thanksgiving moments on our social media feeds and broadcasting breaking prayer items in response to big news items.

Our desire is to fuel a Christ-centred community who are helping one another grow closer in their relationship with the Lord. We regularly hear testimonies from both new and longstanding Christians who are growing in intimacy with the Lord as these rhythms provide the daily backing track for our lives.

A different model

During the early days of internet shopping, when asked in an interview why they had enjoyed such a successful year, the national retailer replied, “We have embraced the click and the brick.” It’s a model virtually all high street retailers have now adopted where a customer can order online and pick up in store. I believe the church will need to now fully adopt the ‘click and the brick’ model. Choose one and we will miss out, but choose both and I believe we will step into a bountiful harvest as we walk through these unusual days.

We've always wanted to run services online, and the lockdown forced our hand. Now, our goal is to get better at using the digital space to seek and save the lost, says **Jenny Farrington**, leader at Crossgate Church, Preston.



SEEK AND SAVE, *digitally*

C OVID-19 has brought about a shift in how we look at everything: how we live, how we shop, how we work, how we relate to others, and how we worship.

Before lockdown we had always planned to venture into online services to increase our reach and provide a service for those who couldn't come to our physical services: the older generation, the sick and those members who travel. We were inspired by bigger American churches such as Craig Groeschel's Life.Church; it works on a multi-campus structure and broadcasts live services at multiple times throughout the weekend. Then lockdown hit and forced our hand, which turned out to be the best thing that could have happened.

During the five days that followed the UK entering lockdown, we built a new website with a homepage that would be easy to find, easy to work, and make it easy for people to access our online services. From the beginning we saw ourselves as key workers: we were providing an essential service to our city. So each week small teams of people came into our church building to film a live Sunday morning service. We replicated our physical Sunday morning experience with a worship set, giving slot, notices and a 20-30 minute preach. We wanted to be a visible presence to show our congregation week by week we were there for them, standing with them and praying for them through these unprecedented times.

Even our kids and youth ministries had to provide something for the number of children and families they served, and the humble mobile phone had everything they needed to film themselves and upload it to YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and the like.

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From the beginning we saw ourselves as key workers: we were providing an essential service to our city.

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Looking ahead

We want to become a church with one location and many services, so during lockdown there's been a shift in focus to small groups online. The church is now more than a physical building filled with people; it's a living body, seeking and saving the lost. And we discovered more transformation had taken place online than we've experienced during a physical meeting. With our online Freedom in Christ course, for example, it seemed, compared to meeting physically, people were more honest, open and willing to share simply because they were in the comfort of their own home. We may, therefore, continue running Freedom in Christ, Alpha and other courses such as Fresh Start online.

For us, being online has allowed for deeper authenticity; at a physical Sunday morning service, it is too easy to wear your 'Sunday morning face'. By talking to a camera, in the comfort of your own home, your emotional walls are down, and you can speak into people's needs by calling them in, calling them deeper into a relationship with God. These honest and frank conversations about our Christian journey, be it during a service or in a small group, are essential during these times, which have been unbelievably tough.

Next steps

Going to the next level is always a challenge. Complacency can kick in and the numbers (views, hits and likes) can get to you. Yes, we have overcome some major technical issues and readjusted our building to suit the change in how we serve, but we've still got a lot to learn, and each week we must ask ourselves the questions, what is our purpose? How can we do better? How can we reach people who may never step foot in a church?

As we move forward, one area of focus will be getting smarter with our search engine optimisation (SEO). Are we answering the big questions that people are searching the internet for? Are we speaking into racism, climate change, mental health? Craig's church buys advertising on key words typed into Google, as it actively seeks out people heading towards wrong decisions. Someone searching for porn or adultery, for example, may get a pop-up link about marriage counselling or freedom courses. After all, we are here to seek and save the lost.

For me, no online service will ever compete with physically being together as a church family, but right now the power of being able to meet online invites many others to the table who may never have come. This online shop window allows people to see who we are, and like our lead pastor Ron Farrington said, "We have to have an understanding that God is not limited to four walls. The Holy Spirit can still work and change lives even when we're not in the same room."

We've learnt...

... to keep it simple. You don't need to be all-singing, all-dancing in the technical department – a mobile phone will work wonders. People are not seeking polished and professional performances; they need authentic, real and honest conversations inviting them to meet the God who seeks to know them. A handful of trustworthy volunteers who share the vision of reaching the lost will take you far.

We've overcome...

... a lack of equipment, poor internet speed and, the biggest of all, a dearth of experience. This was new territory for everyone, yet we had more skills in the house than we realised. Volunteers from across our church stepped up to learn, serve and in some cases retrain. Our latest recruit has been an 80-year-old man.

We've seen...

... multiple salvations through our online Alpha course, as well as more overflow into other areas of church life designed to help the whole person: Christians Against Poverty, Christian Essentials, Fresh Start, Life hurts-God heals and many more. Lives transformed through our online Freedom in Christ course, which has received extraordinary feedback.



FROM ORDINARY TO
extraordinary

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OM in sharing the Good News of Jesus
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In mid-March, 50 people attended a service at Deniz's Turkish-speaking church in north London. Four weeks later, at the height of the UK's lockdown, more than 1,600 Turkish-speakers tuned in for a live-streamed service. **Jane Knoop**, editor at Operation Mobilisation, reports.

MINISTRY UNLOCKED

“**N**ot many people think of the UK as unreached with the gospel,” says Deniz as he shares why he moved from Bulgaria to the UK in 2018. “Yet there are hundreds of thousands of Turks in this country who have no idea about the message of the gospel and the reality of God’s love for them.”

There are an estimated 500,000 Turkish-speakers living in the UK – 96 per cent Muslim, according to Operation World – but very few Turkish-speaking churches. Deniz felt compelled by God to respond to this missional opportunity by joining Operation Mobilisation (OM) in its pioneering ministry among the Turkish community in north London.

This has been a hope-filled experience for Deniz and the team, but not without its challenges. Interestingly, the main stumbling block has been a lack of time rather than interest in the gospel. “Many in the community have poor English and struggle to find jobs paying a fair wage,” Deniz explains. “People often work up to 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week.” With such busy working lives, building meaningful relationships and nurturing opportunities to share the good news of Jesus has been a slow, steady investment.

On 22 March, Deniz locked the doors of his church to help curb the spread of coronavirus. He had no idea this would mark the launch of a new, vibrant era of ministry among the Turkish diaspora, not just in north London, but across Europe. “This was the start of the biggest opportunity we’ve had to reach Turkish people with the gospel,” Deniz says. “Praise God that when doors are closed, He opens new ones.”

Unexpectedly, lockdown ushered in a much-needed resource: time. Hundreds of Turkish speakers began engaging with online services, including many who had never contemplated setting foot in a church before. “The hunger people have been showing for Christ is fascinating,” Deniz comments, “and now they have the time to explore.”

Alongside livestreamed services, Deniz began running Bible studies over video call. “There was one guy I chatted with on the phone for over an hour,” Deniz recalls. “He had moved to England and found his life was just work, work, work. He was wondering ‘what am I doing here?’ and asked questions about my faith.”

Whenever possible, Deniz and the OM team are making time to meet people in person. “One man who was part of an online Bible study said he wanted to start

following Jesus, but he didn’t want to do this over Zoom,” Deniz shares. “I drove 50 miles so I could pray with him in person.”

But Deniz knows the catalyst for these new opportunities is their online ministry. “Coronavirus has started a new wave of Turkish people seeking hope and truth,” Deniz acknowledges. “There needs to be somewhere they can go online – in their own time and from their homes – to safely ask questions, listen to stories and find answers.”

Convinced this is God’s calling, Deniz cycled 2,000km to raise money for a new online ministry to make the truth of the gospel easy to understand for Turks across Europe. The Turkish Christian Apologetics Centre website will be launched in October, in partnership with the European Turkish Christian Network. This will be a platform for interviews, debates and accessible teaching on the Christian faith, all in Turkish. With the support of Turkish-speaking churches from across Europe, the vision is to connect seekers with Turkish-speaking Christians and communities in person. “Lockdown was the confirmation we needed that it’s time to do something new,” Deniz explains. “God is clearly working in people’s hearts through online ministry. We must follow His lead.”

LET'S PRAY EVERY STEP OF THE WAY



Prayer is not an optional extra; it is a vital lifeline that we all need if we are to carry Jesus' presence and minister comfort, hope and healing in these challenging times, says **Jane Holloway**, national director, World Centre of Prayer.

Each of us has our story of how the lockdown impacted us. My belief in the importance and power of prayer was tested when eight days into lockdown, my elderly mother's health (I am her main carer) suddenly deteriorated, which meant she was rushed off to hospital.

As I called out to God and asked for prayer backup, I realised afresh how much I needed my Father's help and how easy I had become used to trusting others rather than in God alone. Fortunately, I was able to pick her up later that day. The doctors reassured me that the new medication should work (it was not COVID-19 related) and she remains well today.

In the last 25 years there has been a remarkable mobilisation of prayer and worship by the Holy Spirit which involves thousands and thousands of Christians, from different denominations, organisations

and houses of prayer, around the world. As the pandemic was declared, this worship and prayer army was joined by many more here in the UK (and in other nations) as churches, organisations and individuals started to pray and call out to God.

Churches found their Zoom prayer gatherings were better attended than ever. Some city prayer gatherings, which normally attracted a few hundred people, now had thousands connecting in. Calls to prayer for seasons of prayer, days of prayer, and prayer at set times of the day were made from denominations and organisations. The Tearfund survey showed around three million new people started praying; 24-7 Prayer saw a surge in demand for their resources and use of Lectio 365 app; Neighbourhood Prayer Network saw more than 52,000 prayer requests posted and prayed for in the first four weeks of lockdown; and our Virtual House

of Prayer saw an upsurge in membership as prayer requests were posted. And this prayer momentum has continued through lockdown easing.

Lockdown was in fact an 'unlocking time', enabling us to connect online and pray with others in our families as well as with other believers in our community, across our country and around the world. We at World Prayer Centre – a house of prayer with a heart for the nations – have been delighted to include guests from overseas nations into our online Prayershift and Watch + Pray prayer times. With up-to-date information this has enabled us to stand in the gap for our hurting nation and the nations with informed intercession. We are part of the International Prayer Connect and so through online platforms we have been able to publicise international prayer events, sometimes joining with thousands of others on one call, and unite together to pray for healing, justice, peace and spiritual awakening in this time of dislocation, pain, grief and shaking.

I believe we are beginning to see the stirrings of green shoots of spiritual awakening in our UK nations (and the same is happening in other nations as well), with the number of those buying Bibles, logging on to online services, starting to pray, and responding to the call of Jesus through



INSPIRATION. CONNECTION. INFORMATION.

World Prayer Centre

www.worldprayer.org.uk

Hope Spaces

[www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/
328363/HOPE_Spaces.aspx](http://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/328363/HOPE_Spaces.aspx)

International Prayer Connect

www.ipcprayer.org/ipc-home

Virtual House of Prayer

www.facebook.com/groups/WPCVHOP

evangelistic preaching and online groups such as Alpha (see page 26). And there is a growing sense that our prayers over many years are beginning to be answered. Will those shoots bring the desired harvest now? We do not know, but we continue to call out for God's mercy, grace and healing, asking that the church in its different expressions across the UK will continue to creatively share the good news of Jesus, enabling many to find the God they are searching for. Hope Together and 24-7 Prayer's Hope Spaces is one such resource which was starting to be used effectively before the pandemic and is now available online.

Christians who have been long-time followers of Jesus are rediscovering that prayer isn't an optional extra but is indeed a vital lifeline that we all need if we are to carry His presence and minister comfort, hope and healing in these challenging times. Without being able to meet face to face to pray, new ways of praying are evolving. Some of our 'old ways' of worship, thanksgiving, confession, blessing, asking, intercession and lament are being refashioned and refitted for this new season. In order to gain more of God's perspective and know how to stand in these days of battle, we need to be able to lift our eyes off the crisis and onto our ascended Jesus. I have found new ways of worship involving silence, declaring and reading God's word, the appreciation of nature, art which are more suited to my situation, as well as using the music and lyrics of talented song writers nationally and globally.

John Mark Comer's book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* has brought new insight into the disciplines of slowing, silence, solitude and Sabbath, and reminded us that waiting on God, with God and for God's timing, is a necessary part of walking through any storm. The reality of our situation has seen a rediscovery of the prayer of lament, as we walk through the valley of pain, grief, dislocation and hardship

as it emboldens us to ask God the big questions that erupt inside of us at this time.

And as we continue to journey through this pandemic with all the unknowns ahead of us and all the other transitions happening across our UK nations and approach the season of Advent and Christmas, how can we encourage each other to keep on keeping on seeking God's ways and wisdom?

Let's continue to cultivate rhythms in our week's activities/work which enable us to spend time with God in reading, meditating and praying from God's word so that we are living in His love and praying for His promises, His ways and His will to be done.

Let's encourage each other to be accountable in how we pray (and care and share) for our neighbours, friends, work/communities contacts so that many of them will be able to engage with Advent and Christmas events online or in person and find out more/come to know Jesus.

Let's be bold in reframing how we encourage and facilitate prayer to continue and deepen within our churches – household based and in corporate prayer – via Zoom or in person, in order to use different styles and ways to pray.

Let's ask the Holy Spirit what are the prayer assignments that He wants us to engage with and what are the

issues He wants us to contend for – locally, nationally and globally? The pandemic has exposed so many huge issues of justice that need to see God's people praying into in order to see breakthrough.

Let's ask our heavenly Father to fill us with the faith to pray big prayers in these days. In one of our recent WPC team prayer meetings on Zoom, we were led to the story in Joshua chapter 10, when Joshua prayed for the sun to stand still and the moon to stop. "The sun stopped in mid-heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded a human voice, for the Lord fought for Israel." As we reflected on this most amazing event we were stirred to cry out to God. Our God is sovereign. Our God is mighty. What are the prayers He is inviting us to pray today for our situation, location or nation that will release His power, His glory, His hope and His love?

By **Gavin Calver**, CEO
of the Evangelical Alliance

STAYING POWER

He had trained for four years for this. Now was his moment to shine. The 400-metre Olympic final was just one race away. The crowds were on their feet, the metres eaten up under his – 100, 150 metres...nearly half way there... Suddenly, something happened to change the course of history for this young man: a searing pain through his hamstring brought him down to his knees in despair, and the medics got ready to come onto the track.

This moment in history is not remembered because a young Derek Redmond failed to win the 400 metres at the Barcelona Olympic Games of 1992, but because here at the semi-final, in the midst of sudden pain, Derek responded in the most heroic way. He did not stay down on his knees clutching his thigh, waiting to be carried off on a stretcher, but instead rose in front of a crowd of witnesses both in the stadium and on television, and began to hobble his way in pain towards the finish line.

As he hopped along in agony, a man dramatically broke through the security lines and ran over to help Derek finish the race. The guy put an arm around his shoulder and spoke encouragement into his ear to strengthen his resolve. As the two men finally neared the finish line, he stood back to let Derek cross the line on his own. As he did so, more than 65,000 people gave him the most incredible standing

ovation. The sound was deafening. It was the greatest noise made in that stadium at any point during the games. Even though Derek finished last, a long way behind everyone else, the reaction of the crowd was as if he was the outstanding winner. It later emerged that the man who helped him hobble towards the line was in fact his dad – a father helping his son at his lowest and weakest moment.

This year has been marked with unexpected 'suddenlys', hasn't it? We were running along and then everything changed – way beyond what the prophets had warned, far beyond what the media predicted. And we were left on our knees with a choice to make. Do we get up and keep going in the midst of this crisis or do we stay here and be moved to the side?

This has been my first year leading the Evangelical Alliance and I had no idea what the early months would entail. If you had asked me back in 2015, "Where do you see yourself in five years?", I would not have answered, "In the middle of an earth-shattering, global pandemic, that has stolen many lives from the race."

Rising to our feet in these months has been a challenging task for everybody. James's words about trials in the Bible have been extremely relevant and helpful in this season: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love

Him" (James 1:12). The Lord is calling us to keep standing and to keep persevering in these days.

However, despite the continued pain and challenge of this season, there are always opportunities for the Lord to do something remarkable. There is always a choice over how we respond. This is a unique season for the gospel: there is a stronger sense of togetherness and community locally, and a sense of appreciation for our loved ones.

In the challenge of this season it's such a huge comfort that our heavenly Father is not sat in the crowd watching us facing all that we are in right now. Just like Derek's father, He cuts through the pain and the crisis and comes to our side. No matter what hits us, no matter how we feel, we can keep going and finish the race that Christ has called us to. Perhaps, like Derek, our greatest achievement will be in simply keeping going against the odds and in the face of numerous challenges.

This is not over yet, but let's seek to be a people who aren't defeated by the challenge but instead fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus, who has gone before us, endured a road of suffering and won the victory. Let's dust ourselves down, get up and keep going. And when it feels really difficult, let's not forget that wonderful promise, made time again throughout the word of God, that He, our God, is with us.

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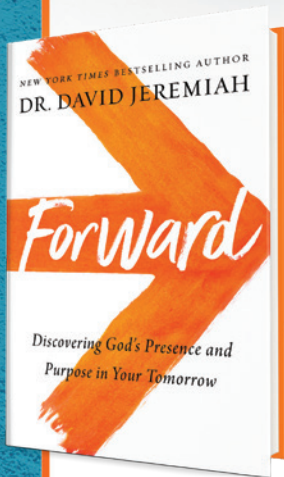


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