

Being the Church and Doing Ministry in the time of Covid-19 ¹

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The economic and social impacts of lockdown

- Families with low incomes and those receiving benefits were initially protected from loss of income. But prices of essentials have risen.
- The voucher system to replace free school meals was poorly designed and failed many schools and families.
- Around 2.1 million new families have applied for Universal Credit.
- There have been huge income shocks for many middle-income families, many of whom previously never saw themselves as benefit claimants or users of food banks.
- Debt workers report an increasing number of approaches for managing unsustainable debt.
- Trussell Trust reports a huge rise in the use of food banks, with an 81% increase overall and 122% increase in children being supported. This has been patchy across the UK – some areas report little or no change, while other areas have been overwhelmed (one Glasgow foodbank saw a five-fold increase in demand).

The following are *the key areas of concern* expressed by churches about the long-term effects of Covid-19:

- Impact on economy and employment
- Impact on social infrastructure and services
- Increase in poverty and debt
- Increase in mental health problems

A survey of 890 leaders of churches and Christian organisations indicates that the following have been *the main responses, done as a continuation of things already being done pre-lockdown* (% of respondents in brackets):

- Emergency food provision (food banks, etc) (58%)
- Support for elderly and isolated (57%)
- Debt counselling and support (18%)
- Care for homeless (10%)

In addition, 48% of respondents had started a new community initiative since lockdown.

A significant proportion of the above respondents were *working with others* to meet the needs of the vulnerable:

- With other churches in their locality (51%)
- With local authorities and statutory bodies (39%)
- With local charities (50%)
- Working on their own (25%)
- Not doing anything (15%)

The key question: what can and should the SEC's churches be doing in these areas, and what are they already doing?

The Church online

The [Centre for Digital Theology](#) at Durham University produced, in a short space of time, a lot of research into how churches have adapted their worship services and programmes of ministry to the constraints of lockdown using the digital opportunities available.

- The initial [Everybody Welcome Online](#) report looked in late April at how churches were adapting their services to an online-only format.
- The follow-up [Everybody Welcome To The Future](#) report looked at the end of May at how the lessons from online church might be applied and continued post-lockdown.

¹ This short paper is based on research produced by CPAS, Tearfund, the United Reformed Church, the Evangelical Alliance, the Centre for Digital Theology at Durham University, Praxis, and the RSA. It was produced in early July 2020 and presented to a meeting of the SEC's Lanarkshire Regional Council in late July 2020. The data will already be somewhat dated, but the main themes and topics will still be generally relevant.

Taking our time over re-entry and the ‘new normal’

The authors of [Leading Beyond The Blizzard](#) argue that we should think of this time not as a blizzard, nor even as the onset of winter, but as a mini-Ice Age. The initial experience of lockdown and the run-up to Easter probably felt like surviving a blizzard. We have hunkered down into ‘winter’ and are perhaps now looking forward to the first shoots of ‘spring’. But what if we are about to enter a mini-Ice Age? In other words, is everything going to be a bit different for quite a long time?

“If you rush back to the ‘old ways’, you could miss the single opportunity to find a new way of doing things” (URC paper, *Ready for the new ‘normal’*).

The RSA [offers the following grid](#) to help us to think through how to stop and restart after a crisis like Covid-19:

During the crisis	<i>Things we started</i>	END We did some specific things in response to the crisis. We can set these down now.	AMPLIFY We tried some new things and they show some promise for the future.	<i>New practices</i>
	<i>Things we stopped</i>	LET GO We stopped these things and we don’t need to restart them.	RESTART These things were stopped during the crisis; now we need to pick them up again.	<i>Old practices</i>
		<i>Things we stopped</i>	<i>Things we started</i>	
After the crisis				

It is worth asking ourselves the following questions as we think about the way forward:

- How have we experienced the crisis?
- What have we found the hardest?
- What have we appreciated, and where have we found new joy amid the crisis?
- What have we learned about the world, our neighbourhood(s), and our local community/ies during this time?

(source: URC paper, *New reality, same mission*)

- *In engagement with our communities:* “What have you learned about the way you connect with people who didn’t come to your building or activities before the pandemic? In what ways was it easier to invite people to attend an online service? What have you learned about the needs of those around your buildings or where you live? What can you do differently to express more fully God’s love in word and action?”
- *In discipleship and pastoral care:* “How can we stop filling our diaries with the same old things to leave space for high-quality continuing discipleship and pastoral care? How can we maintain momentum so that discipleship and pastoral care properly belongs to the whole Body of Christ, not only those who occupy certain offices? How has lockdown changed things in terms of small groups, family worship and catechesis?”
- *In meetings:* “Might we find ways to tread more lightly on God’s earth? Have we found ways to include those whose disabilities and learning needed have previously led to them being excluded from our meetings?”

(adapted from URC paper, *Ready for the new ‘normal’*)

The implications?

Whatever the next steps, our future in the ‘new normal’ must surely take account of the social and economic impacts of lockdown described above, as well as the lessons from online church that we have acquired in a very short space of time. Covid-19 is likely to be an accelerant to existing trends and changes. Our future should be one of learning and of experimentation in mission and ministry, including reflection on what we have learned in recent months.