

CHURCH IN ACTION 2020/21: A SURVEY OF CHURCHES' COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC



Forewords

Rt Revd Christine Hardman

Bishop of Newcastle

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Matt 22:37-39)

The past year will stand out in our memory as one of radical change and of needing to learn to live in a new landscape. The Covid-19 pandemic drastically transformed our daily life, and our understanding of what it means to be Church. Stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions meant that Jesus’ call to ‘love your neighbour’ has become grounded in the hyper-local. No longer able to meet in person, churches across England found ways to continue to worship and serve their community together, whilst remaining apart.

The unequal impact of the pandemic has made us more acutely aware of poverty in our midst, even in wealthier parts of the country. Tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the Church’s mission. Despite the enormous challenges, many churches are living out their Christian faith by doing more to support their local community, offering help, advice and care for the most vulnerable.

I hope and pray that we will be able to meet together again soon, but that we retain some of what we have learnt during this past year: the importance of community, showing our love for God through loving our neighbours in very practical ways.

+ Christine Newcastle



Rachel Whittington

Executive Director, Church Urban Fund

‘Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.’ (1 John 4:11-12)

These words from the Apostle John remind us of the fundamental calling of the Christian faith – to love God and love our neighbour. For over 30 years, Church Urban Fund has encouraged and equipped local churches to demonstrate the love of God through social action.

In 2020, this call to love our neighbour was tested in ways that none of us could have anticipated. The enormous challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic – from illness to isolation to financial loss and social strains – have compelled churches to radically adapt the ways that they live out their calling in communities.

Whether by organising food deliveries and phone calls for vulnerable people, forming new partnerships with local authorities, campaigning for improved food security, or mobilising volunteers from the wider community, churches across England have shown the love of God tangibly and tirelessly.

As the recent *Growing Good* report by Theos and CUF reveals, when churches demonstrate these traits of generosity, adaptability, and perseverance, they build meaningful and lasting relationships that enable communities to flourish.

I trust that this report will provide insight into the very real challenges that communities and churches are facing, alongside inspiring stories that motivate our continued faithfulness in loving God and neighbour.

Rachel Whittington



Executive Summary

The year 2020 was like no other in living memory, dramatically affecting the way churches engage with members and the wider community. This special survey in the Church in Action series, completed by over 1,000 Anglican clergy, examines how churches have responded to the unique challenges generated by the pandemic. The key findings are:

- Church leaders report that a number of social problems have become much more widespread in their communities, particularly isolation/loneliness and mental health, as well as food poverty, unemployment and debt.
- The social and economic effects of the pandemic are being experienced unequally, with the most acute effects being felt in the most deprived areas.
- **Nearly 8 in 10 churches are running or actively supporting a food bank or related provision, in some cases for the first time** - and nearly 7 in 10 are offering pastoral support, mostly by adapting existing activities to be Covid-secure. Other group-based activities for older people and families have been adversely affected by the restrictions.
- Many churches have demonstrated remarkable commitment and ingenuity in responding to the pandemic, by finding new and creative ways to serve and bring together their community, as exemplified by the case studies in this report.
- The pandemic has generated a number of challenges for church-led social action, including lack of funding (cited by 38% of clergy), lack of time (48%), insufficient volunteers (61%), and difficulties in adapting to Covid-19 restrictions (73%). Lack of funding is a particular issue in more deprived areas.
- In spite of these challenges, **37% of church leaders said that their parish was doing more in response to rising need**, including the provision of practical, emotional, financial, and digital support.
- At the same time, the pandemic has also created opportunities for churches to work more closely with local authorities and with local charities and businesses in fruitful ways, in some cases leading to new partnerships that clergy hope to build on beyond the pandemic. **28% of churches reported that they are now working more closely with local authorities.**
- A number of clergy reported that the pandemic had caused their church to become more outward-looking, and this is reflected in changing attitudes to mission and social action. Nearly two-thirds of clergy (65%) now agree that "tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the mission for our church", up from 54% in 2017 and 44% in 2011.



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Introduction

2020 was a year like no other in living memory. Institutions of all kinds were dramatically impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and churches were no exception. Church-based social action changed in its scale, nature, and approach, as churches responded to the needs and unique challenges posed by the pandemic and multiple lockdowns.

To better understand how church social action changed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Church of England and Church Urban Fund (CUF) collaborated on a survey of Anglican parishes in England. The online survey captured information on the social issues parishes are facing, how churches are responding to these issues, the unique challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has created for social action, and church leaders' concerns and priorities for the year ahead.

A total of 1023 clergy completed the survey in October and November 2020, with support from the Church of England's Research & Statistics team.¹ Respondents reflect a broad and representative cross-section of Anglican parishes in terms of region, context, and levels of deprivation (see Appendix).

Some of the questions in the 2020 survey were repeated from the 2011, 2014, and 2017 waves of the *Church in Action* survey. However, given the highly unusual context of 2020, the research team decided to significantly modify the 2020 survey to focus more specifically on how churches have adapted their social action during the pandemic. We also conducted four case study interviews with participating clergy to highlight examples of creative church responses to the pandemic.

¹ The survey was sent to all incumbent status clergy – the most senior clergy in a parish or group of parishes (benefice). Incumbents were asked to respond to the questions in relation to their parish. Those with responsibility for more than one parish were asked to respond on behalf of the parish they live in.



Issues affecting communities

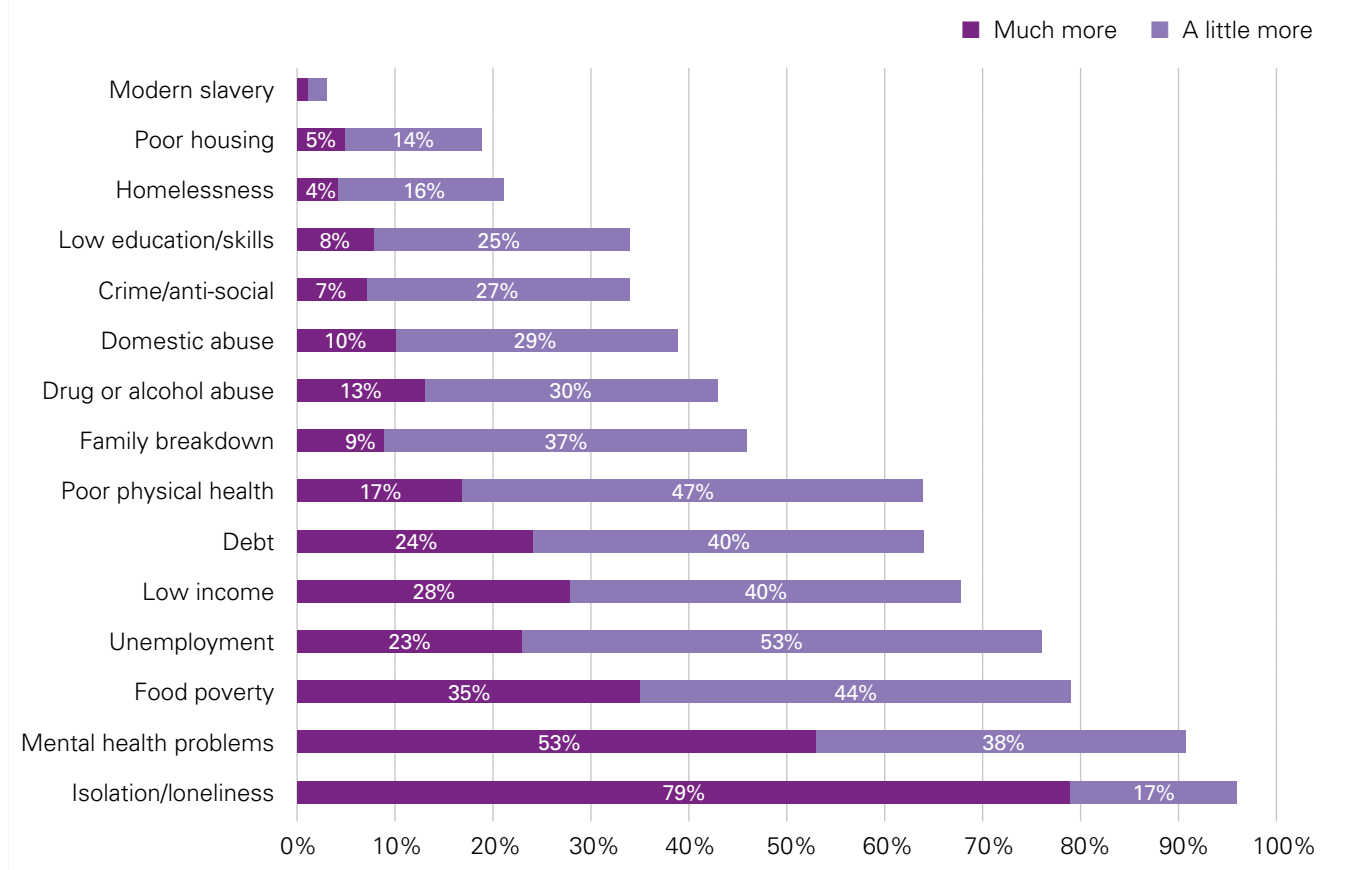


We started by asking church leaders about the social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their local community.

Over 90% of respondents said that loneliness/isolation and mental health are affecting people “a little more” or “much more” than before the pandemic (see Chart 1). When we carried out our last Church in Action survey in 2017, loneliness and mental health were already the most commonly cited issues experienced by people in their parish. This latest survey reveals that the pandemic has exacerbated both these problems.

“ Over 90% of respondents said that isolation/loneliness and mental health are affecting people more than before the pandemic. ”

Chart 1: How has the pandemic affected degree to which people in your parish are experiencing any of the following issues?



Other economic-related problems, such as food poverty, unemployment, low income, and debt, have also become more prevalent as a result of the pandemic – with unemployment and food poverty, in particular, being flagged more frequently than in previous surveys. All these issues are now being noticed in a majority of the least deprived areas, where these were only rarely seen to be a significant problem in previous Church in Action surveys.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the social and economic effects of the pandemic are being experienced unequally, with the most acute effects being felt in the most deprived areas. For example, 64% of church leaders in the most deprived areas said that food poverty was affecting people “much more” than before the pandemic, compared with just 16% in the least deprived areas. For unemployment, the corresponding figures are 48% and 13% (see Table 1).

Issues affecting communities (Continued)

Table 1: Proportion of church leaders that say these issues are affecting people in their parish “much more” as a result of the pandemic, by level of deprivation

	Least deprived areas	Below average deprivation	Around average	Above average deprivation	Most deprived areas
Modern slavery	0%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Homelessness	2%	1%	3%	6%	11%
Poor housing	1%	1%	3%	7%	13%
Family breakdown	8%	6%	8%	9%	16%
Crime/anti-social behaviour	4%	3%	5%	6%	19%
Low education/skills	3%	4%	5%	10%	20%
Domestic violence/abuse	2%	3%	10%	16%	21%
Poor physical health	12%	10%	16%	20%	31%
Drug or alcohol abuse	7%	8%	8%	13%	33%
Debt	12%	18%	22%	32%	43%
Unemployment	13%	15%	17%	30%	48%
Low income	12%	19%	25%	34%	54%
Food poverty	16%	25%	31%	49%	64%
Mental health problems	39%	50%	51%	61%	67%
Isolation/loneliness	76%	75%	79%	83%	85%

These findings align with other research on the effects of the pandemic, which show that:

- People who felt most lonely prior to the pandemic now have even higher levels of loneliness, including those who are young, living alone, on low incomes, or out of work.^{2,3}
- Social isolation is affecting people’s mental well-being, which is compounded by other economic impacts such as unemployment or loss of income.²
- The economic impact of lockdown has hit people unequally, with knock on effects on their financial and mental resilience.⁴
- The longer the pandemic goes on, the more people’s resilience is being tested, with evidence that people’s ability to cope is declining gradually over time.⁵



² <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/COVID-LONELINESS-2020.pdf>

³ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/life-after-lockdown-tackling-loneliness>

⁴ <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/emerging-evidence-on-covid-19s-impact-on-mental-health-and-health>

⁵ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/wave-9-pre-christmas-2020>

Case Study: St Matthew's, South East London

St Matthew's Church – or La Parroquia de San Mateo – in Southwark Diocese is a bilingual church serving the Latino community in South London, and led by Father Hugo Adan. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the church's AGAPE outreach programme was reaching around 50-60 people each month; since the first lockdown, it has grown rapidly and is now serving more than 400 families each week.

What started as a food bank has now expanded to include English classes, legal advice, a clothes bank and job-hunting support service. The number of volunteers supporting the programme has also increased from 25 to over 70. Whilst most of the volunteers are Latino, not all are people of faith. This has provided an opportunity for the church to build new relationships and share their faith through action and conversation: *"Whilst we won't force anyone, we are shamelessly Christian"*, smiles Father Hugo.

AGAPE provides targeted support to those who are most vulnerable. *"To assume that because you are Latino you are vulnerable is wrong"*, says Father Hugo, *"Those with good English can access the services, because they know the language; they can communicate themselves. We help the people who cannot speak English, who do not have a strong network, and who don't know where to go for help."*

“ What started as a food bank has now expanded to include English classes, legal advice, a clothes bank and job-hunting support service. ”





Isabella* had lived in the UK for 20 years but never learnt English. Due to the language barrier, she worked as a cleaner in low-paid jobs for many years. During the pandemic, she lost everything. The church supported her initially by paying her electricity bills and then by helping her to find another job. She is now in a much better place and has gained legal status to live in the UK. Whilst the church community tries to help as many people as possible, Father Hugo reflects that not all stories have a happy ending like Isabella's: ***"Sometimes the burden sits heavy on our shoulders."***

The programme has needed to adapt to changes in Government guidelines. For example, English classes have proven difficult to run during the lockdowns, as their clients do not want to spend the little Wi-fi they have on classes. Out of necessity, the English teaching has had to be more informal – often outside on the street when people are collecting items from the food and clothes bank.

News of the AGAPE Project has spread through word of mouth, and Latino people are coming for help from all over London. The church has also started working with local authorities, who recognise their expertise in this area in helping to detect and prevent problems such as domestic violence and drug addiction. During the summer, San Mateo ran a holiday camp for children of the families they support, thanks to a partnership with the Mayor of London. Father Hugo hopes the project will keep expanding: ***"There is no one doing this work with Latinos in South London, so people continue to come to us from all over the city."***

* Not her real name

How churches are responding to social needs

After asking churches about the issues affecting people living in their parish, we asked them about their church's community activities and how these have been affected by the pandemic.

A staggering 78% of churches said they were involved in running or actively supporting a food bank or related provision in their area. This includes 12% of churches who have started this activity in response to the pandemic, 26% of churches who have adapted the way they meet this need, and 40% of churches who are continuing as before. Only 4% of parishes have suspended food-related provision during the pandemic (see Table 2). This represents a significant effort of churches across England to address the pressing need of food poverty.



“ 78% of churches said they were involved in running or actively supporting a food bank or related provision in their area. ”

Table 2: Is your church running or actively supporting any of the following activities for your local community, and how has this been affected by the pandemic?

	No	Yes, but suspended	Yes, but adapted	Yes, as before	Yes, started	Yes, running*
Food bank or related	18%	4%	26%	40%	12%	78%
Pastoral support	8%	23%	54%	9%	5%	68%
Youth work	53%	25%	20%	2%	0%	22%
Activities for families	26%	51%	20%	2%	1%	22%
Activities for children	47%	34%	16%	3%	1%	20%
Activities for older people	14%	69%	13%	2%	1%	17%
Night shelter or related	75%	9%	8%	7%	1%	16%
Mutual aid or similar	78%	6%	8%	2%	6%	16%
Fitness classes or sport	63%	22%	12%	3%	1%	15%
Relationship support	76%	9%	12%	2%	0%	15%
Debt advice or budgeting	82%	4%	7%	5%	2%	14%
Support for refugees	82%	4%	8%	5%	1%	14%
Education initiatives	87%	5%	5%	2%	1%	8%
Employment support	93%	2%	3%	1%	1%	5%
Prison visiting or ministry	93%	4%	2%	1%	0%	3%

* This is the sum of the three previous columns and shows the proportion of churches that have started, adapted or continued to run each of these activities during the pandemic.

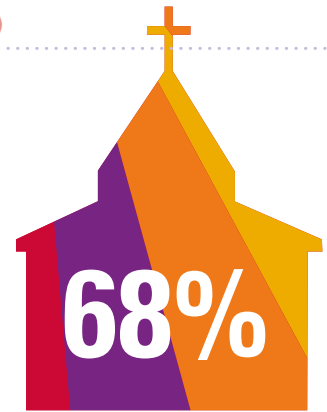
How churches are responding to social needs (Continued)

The second most common way churches have responded to the social needs in their community is through pastoral support, with 68% of churches providing this. Given the increased burden of loneliness and mental health problems, the provision of pastoral support has been a vital way for churches to serve individuals who are isolated and struggling.

Because of the extensive restrictions imposed on in-person activities, churches have had to pause a number of initiatives that they would normally run in the community. For example, 69% of church leaders say they have suspended activities for older people, and 51% have suspended activities for families. Community initiatives such as lunch clubs for older people or parent-toddler groups do not lend themselves to online delivery.

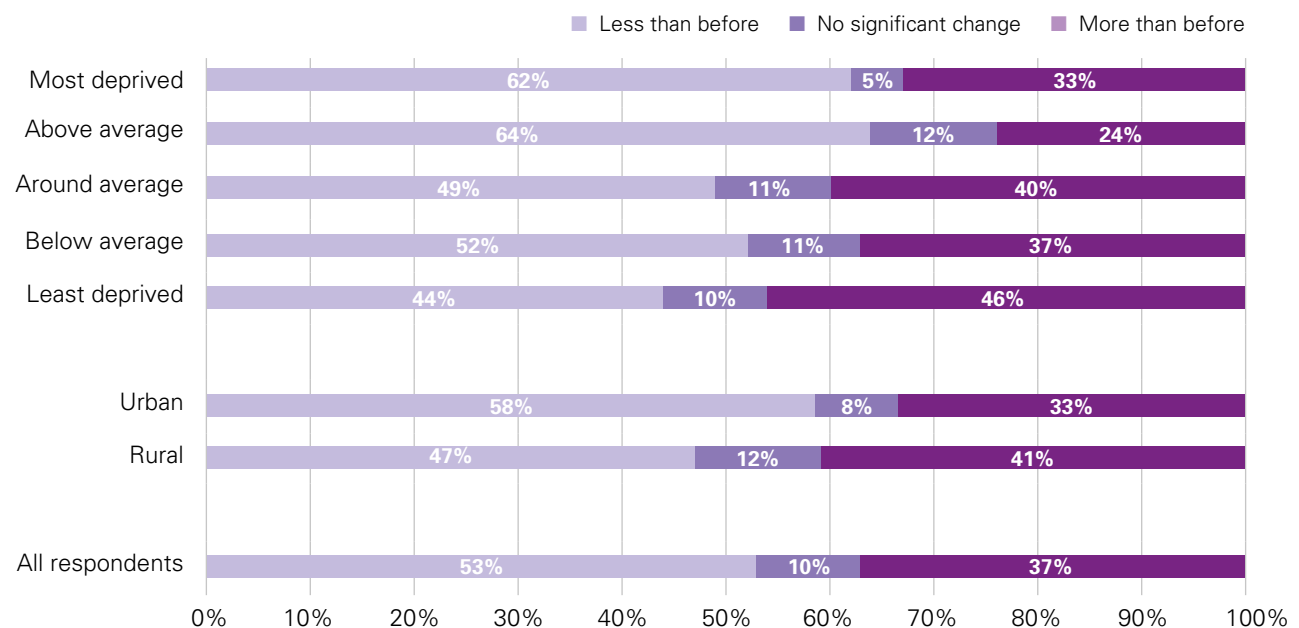
Despite all the obstacles to community provision, churches have shown enduring commitment and creativity in response to the pandemic. Nearly a quarter of churches have started a completely new activity during the pandemic, and more than half have adapted two or more of their existing community activities in order to continue meeting the needs of their local community.

Remarkably, 37% of respondents reported that their church is now doing more to support people in their parishes than they were before the pandemic (see Chart 2). Churches in the most deprived areas were more likely to report a decline in their activity than those in the least deprived areas (62% vs 44%), whilst rural churches were more likely than urban churches to be doing more than before the pandemic (41% vs 33%). Churches who were already doing more in their community before the pandemic were also more likely to have stepped up their activity in response to the pandemic.



“ 68% of churches are providing pastoral support in their community. ”

Chart 2: Overall, how has your church’s level of support to the community changed as a result of the pandemic?



Case Study: Christ Church, Higher Bebington

Every Spring, Christ Church Higher Bebington in the Diocese of Chester delivers Easter cards to 7,000 houses in the area. At the last minute, they changed their 2020 card into an information leaflet, featuring a list of local volunteers who could assist by collecting prescriptions, helping with shopping, dog-walking or simply being a listening ear. Days later, the UK went into its first national lockdown. The majority of state-run initiatives had not yet started and the country was unprepared for the challenges ahead.

Christ Church was immediately overwhelmed with need: *“It got to the point where people who hadn’t even received the leaflets started to respond”*, says the rector, Revd Mike Loach. He remembers one occasion when he gladly drove 20 miles to take a dog prescription to an extremely elderly and vulnerable gentleman.

The team at Christ Church didn’t stop there: *“Our ‘Men in Sheds’ group built a ‘remembrance cairn’, which was essentially a wooden pyramid with holes in it. People were encouraged to take a stone, write the name of a loved one on it and place it on the cairn.”* The remembrance cairn proved so popular that people, many of whom had never set foot in the church, were knocking on the vicarage door to ask for more stones.

When the church decided to host a scarecrow festival in the Autumn, the community responded with over 70 handmade figures made by local residents and schools. The figures were spaced along the pews, and Mike laughs as he recalls how full the Church would look on a Sunday morning. It proved so popular that the community has requested Christ Church run the festival again next year.



Following the success of some of these initiatives, the church continues to find ways of connecting with people to **“bring a bit of hope.”** The flagpole was adorned with colourful flags to help spread some cheer in the midst of challenging circumstances, and during Advent, with support from the local council, Christ Church was decorated with Christmas lights running the length of the perimeter; a 6-foot tall stable, complete with wooden cut outs of Mary and Joseph, was also backlit in order to be visible from the road.

Through all of these initiatives, the church has shared hope, joy, and solidarity with their community. For Christ Church Higher Bebington, the Gospel is at the heart of this work. Mike reflects that when people see and experience the good work of the church in the community, this also opens up opportunities for engaging with people’s questions and needs: **“I can’t think of a better model for mission in this day and age than that.”**



“ Mike reflects that when people see and experience the good work of the church in the community, this also opens up opportunities for engaging with people’s questions and needs. ”



Adapting ongoing projects and initiatives

Clergy overwhelmingly highlighted churches' use of Whatsapp, Zoom and Facebook to adapt projects and initiatives during the pandemic. It was not just church services that went online, but a whole range of activities from youth groups and assemblies, to small groups, marriage preparation courses, choir and ringing practice and even parish nursing. Some churches have taken it upon themselves to provide technology to older and more vulnerable people: "We have worked hard to make sure that those who can get connected with digital communication and services were able to do so."

Church leaders noted that the activities of their churches flexed and changed depending on Government advice and guidance. Where possible, churches organised socially-distanced gatherings, often with a focus on supporting vulnerable groups, including parents and babies/toddlers, asylum seekers, the homeless, those struggling with mental health or the bereaved. When the rule of six was introduced, churches adapted to smaller gatherings to strengthen a sense of community: "We are rolling out a scheme for pastoral care called 'egg boxes' to try and put people into groups of six, extending our pastoral care network as far as we can."

"The small co-operative at St Barnabas has expanded massively from supplementing the food of 10-15 people, [to] now feed[ing] 100+ a week."

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"We have worked hard to make sure that those who can get connected with digital communication and services were able to do so."



A number of clergy also began doorstep visiting, so that they could continue physically connecting with people. In many cases, church buildings have remained open for private prayer.

As mentioned above, the need for food banks, soup kitchens and food-related provision has increased sharply during the pandemic. In some cases, food banks remained open for people to visit. In other cases, churches mobilised to deliver food directly to those in need. This has included deliveries of raw ingredients and non-perishable items, as well as frozen meals or ready-to-eat food, such as "afternoon tea packs... for the elderly and isolated". One respondent wrote: "Wandsworth Foodbank which is based at St Mark's has seen need more than double during the pandemic, and changed its model in the space of one week to a home delivery model... During the first lockdown, the Foodbank supported 1200 households across the borough, 7 in 10 of whom had never had to use the Foodbank before."

Some churches accessed additional funding to adapt their initiatives:

"The small co-operative at St Barnabas has expanded massively from supplementing the food of 10-15 people, [to] now feed[ing] 100+ a week. To accommodate the project, we've been awarded grants to do some fairly major building work." Churches have also organised deliveries of other goods to vulnerable people, including clothing, toiletries, activities for children, and parish magazines.

Launching new projects and initiatives

Whilst many churches concentrated on adapting existing activities, some churches also started up new initiatives. The open-ended responses from clergy highlighted four key areas of support that churches have launched during the pandemic:

- 1. Practical help** – volunteers supporting others with practical help, through shopping, dog walking, collecting prescriptions, delivering goods or carrying out small maintenance tasks.
- 2. Emotional and spiritual support** – often through befriending or listening services. Setting up phone support lines and “phone buddies” was a common example.
- 3. Financial aid** – through in-kind support like food deliveries or, in some cases small hardship grants.
- 4. Digital support** – many churches supported their local community to get online and connected, either through the installation of WiFi, provision of digital skills training or by purchasing devices (e.g. tablets) for those in need.



In terms of new practical help, many churches started initiatives around food poverty, including churches that had not previously run these kinds of projects. New projects included ‘Community Fridges’, ‘Little Larders’ or ‘Pop-up Pantries’, and the delivery of food parcels, hot meals or freezer meals.

“ We began serving hot meals every day, about 50 a day, delivered hot to local people and to the maternity ward staff at the local hospital. ”

“ The Wycombe Food Hub (WFH) was started as a consequence of finding quite large numbers of local people who were going without meals due to job loss or other consequences of Covid restrictions. ”

A smaller number of churches also started providing guidance and signposting related to specific material needs. This took the form of legal support and skills training for groups such as asylum seekers and refugees, those struggling to find jobs, and homeless people. For example, *“We live in the catchment of Gatwick Airport so have seen many people who experienced job losses and reduced hours. We are working with the local council to set up a Hub for those who need a cuppa and a chat with local business-folk about getting through hard times / help with CVs etc.”*

Facilitating fun, joy, and celebration has been another key contribution of churches to the wellbeing of their communities during this incredibly difficult period. During school holidays, many churches provided activity packs or socially-distanced events where permitted. Gardening was another popular recreational activity to bring the community together in a Covid-secure way, with a number of churches opting to start gardening initiatives: *“God’s Acre’, a gardening project,...has enabled the isolated and those struggling in lockdown to garden in the church yard.”*

Launching new projects and initiatives (Continued)

Churches have also developed creative ways to mark festivals and holidays such as Easter, Christmas, VE/VJ Day, Harvest, and Remembrance Sunday. For example, one church created *“a town-wide Christmas video carol service, with contributions from local public figures... posted on YouTube.”* Church leaders emphasized the importance of marking these events to help people retain a sense of ‘normality’: *“Recognising that people need connection and hope, we have arranged COVID safe community events for Harvest, Remembrance, All Souls and Advent.”* Some clergy noted that these gatherings had attracted more attendees than they would normally expect, either from passers-by or, if held online, from people logging on from outside the local area: *“Live streaming services, which is completely new to us, has led to a significant number of regular new worshippers, from all corners of the world.”*

New ways of ‘doing church’ were created from necessity. Church leaders across the country reported innovative ways in which churches had risen to the challenge of worshipping together in the midst of a global pandemic. This included several churches joining with a local radio station, beginning ‘Forest Church’ or using other media to engage people: *“We created a local TV show during the main lockdown and recorded it onto DVDs for those without internet.”*

Many churches had a valuable resource to offer during the pandemic: the physical space of the church buildings and grounds. Church buildings, because of their size and ability to be well-ventilated, lend themselves to being a Covid-secure space. Church leaders shared a number of accounts of their buildings being used by the local community for gatherings, rehearsals, and even medical purposes, such as antenatal classes: *“[We are] working with GPs to provide space for exercise for those who are identified as [lonely]. It’s social prescribing.”*

As churches often stand in prominent positions in villages, towns and cities, a number of congregations adorned their church building with flags, posters, artwork and even ‘yarnbombing’ as a *“form of visual outreach and encouragement”* to local communities.

Finally, there were a range of other interesting examples, where new and innovative ideas had been tried. Some churches have taught English as a foreign language online, others have opened up ‘prayer lines’ for people to self-refer to. One church had a ‘yellow card scheme’ in place where, if a household needed help, they could *“display a card in window and a church member or parish councilor assigned to that area [would] respond.”*

“ We created a local TV show during the main lockdown and recorded it onto DVDs for those without internet. ”



Challenges in sustaining social action

While churches have demonstrated remarkable perseverance and adaptability in responding to the social issues in their communities, they have also faced challenges.

One challenge is funding. Because of a drop in income for churches who are reliant on donations via the collection plate and income from renting out their buildings, as well as a decline in giving due to the worsening financial situation of their members, many churches are operating with significantly reduced financial resources. 38% of clergy said that lack of funding is a limiting factor in their social action, and in their open-ended responses nearly half said they are concerned about inadequate funding for the year ahead. One leader commented: *“Funding the community work will become acute as the initial sense of crisis fades but the economic impact roles out.”* Another reflected: *“We are really struggling to cover the cost of our parish share and the day-to-day running costs of keeping our buildings viable. We would like more freedom to respond to the needs within the wider community, enabling us to show Christ’s love to all and encourage those who have questions around faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus.”* Lack of funding is a particular issue in the most deprived areas, with nearly half (45%) of church leaders citing this as barrier to social action, compared with a third of leaders in the least deprived areas (see Table 3).



“ 38% of clergy said that lack of funding is a limiting factor in their social action. ”

Table 3: What challenges has your church faced in its community activities, as a result of the pandemic?

	Not enough volunteers	Lack of funding	Not enough time	Difficulty adapting to comply
All respondents	61%	38%	48%	73%
Urban/rural:				
Rural	60%	38%	45%	73%
Urban	61%	37%	51%	72%
Area deprivation*:				
Least deprived	54%	32%	53%	76%
Below average	63%	37%	48%	73%
Around average	63%	33%	44%	70%
Above average	60%	41%	49%	74%
Most deprived	63%	45%	47%	71%

* Based on the average Index of Multiple Deprivation scores of super output areas within each parish.

Challenges in sustaining social action (Continued)

A second challenge churches have faced in their community engagement is a declining volunteer base. 61% of church leaders said that they do not have enough volunteers available to do the social action they want to do. One factor driving this decline is the reality that a high proportion of church volunteers are elderly. As one respondent put it: *“The majority of volunteers are over 70 and they are vulnerable as long as the pandemic continues to pose a risk.”* Some church volunteers in younger age brackets have also had to step back from volunteering, due to increased challenges in balancing work and childcare at home.

For many clergy, the greater pastoral and operational demands associated with keeping their churches going during the pandemic have reduced their capacity to engage with the wider community. 48% reported that there is ‘not enough time to respond to wider community issues, given the time required to care for my own congregation.’ One church leader explained: *“My own time has become seriously stretched. There is far more involved with keeping my congregation connected, as many have not returned to church, so I am trying to provide for them digitally and individual contact whilst putting in even more hours than normal due to doubling the number of Sunday services so the congregations can spread between the two. There simply aren’t enough hours in a day and exhaustion is always a worry.”*

The added responsibilities of transitioning services online, keeping up with government and Church of England guidance, and responding to internal pastoral issues has stretched clergy, particularly those who are covering multiple parishes. With less volunteer support, clergy are at increased risk of burnout.

Unsurprisingly, 73% of clergy said they have faced difficulties adapting activities to comply with social distancing guidelines. Because church social action typically involves extensive face-to-face interaction, having to adjust to an entirely different way of doing things has not been easy for church leaders and their teams. The need to rapidly move communication and activity online was cited as a major challenge. One vicar reflected, *“With so much interaction needing to happen online and via social media, it has exposed the weaknesses in my skills and the shortcomings amongst our existing volunteers.”*

Even in churches where the staff or volunteers do have the skills to adapt to online delivery, clergy reported that not all community members are able to benefit from this. Older people, people with limited or no broadband connection, and households without computers or other devices are less able to participate in online offerings.

Other clergy, however, cited the new use of technology as an opportunity that *“allowed fresh thinking”*, for example around *“the ability to offer online courses and training”* and *“greater online connection with community online forums.”* Several leaders mentioned that participation in local online forums has enabled them to learn more about other initiatives in the community, build new relationships, and get involved in wider efforts to respond to social needs. Tools such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook Live, have also facilitated, and in some cases expanded, church-led social action.



“ 61% of church leaders said that they do not have enough volunteers available to do the social action they want to do. ”



Case Study: St Peter's Highfields, Leicester

Like clergy across the country, Revd Jonathan Surridge had to reinvent how his church operated practically overnight when the pandemic first hit. St Peter's Highfields and St Philip's Leicester initially opted to run Sunday services via Zoom and Facebook, but it quickly became apparent that many of the congregation were unable to join in, because they didn't have access to the internet.

Amid this dilemma, a local community-led radio station approached Father Jonathan in April 2020, asking for help. Leicester Community Radio had been offered an FM licence, but needed a prominent position to place the aerial. The tower of St Peter's was the perfect height, and within a matter of weeks – and with the enthusiastic support of church members – the radio transmitter had been erected.

It occurred to Father Jonathan that the radio station might also provide the solution to Sunday morning worship during the pandemic. He approached a key figure in charge of the radio, Des, who is a widely known community leader of Jamaican descent. Des knew well that many families in the area struggle with extreme poverty and, when Father Jonathan explained the need to support his congregation, he was offered a 10am slot to broadcast the Sunday worship every week.

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To Father Jonathan's surprise, the Sunday service quickly became one of the most popular shows on the radio station, with over 1,500 people regularly listening online. On many occasions, people would meet Father Jonathan in the street and remark how much they enjoyed listening to his services: *"We are very homemade", he says, "I could have made it a lot slicker, but I didn't want people turning up at church later to find out it was very different!"*

The partnership has born fruit in other ways, too. St Peter's was in desperate need of refurbishment - but, without enough money to pay for an electrician and other essentials, the church remained dark and dismal. When Father Jonathan told the radio station about his dilemma, they sent their electrician in to install new lighting for free, as well as a new mixing desk and hearing aid loop.

Then, in 2021, the radio station moved into a studio within the church building on a 10-year lease. St Peter's is receiving much-needed revenue towards the cost of refurbishing the church, whilst the radio station has a permanent home to operate from, which is mutually beneficial for both parties. More than that, Father Jonathan is excited about what the church can offer the community and hopes this move will bring some vibrancy back. *"Either we stay in a rut", he says, "or we reinvent ourselves by understanding what is crucial here... sharing God's love."*

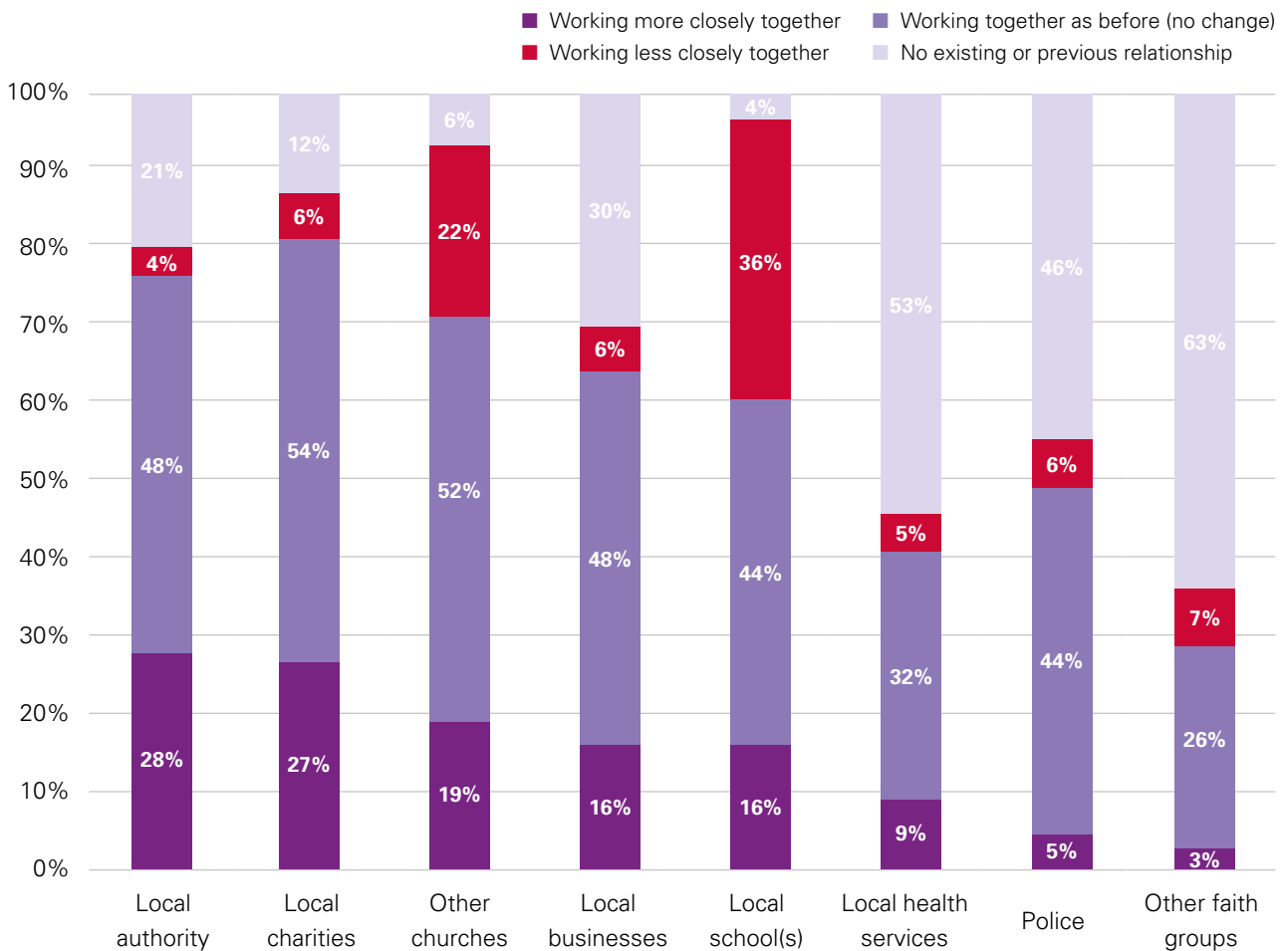
“ To Father Jonathan's surprise, the Sunday service quickly became one of the most popular shows on the radio station, with over 1,500 people regularly listening online. ”

New and changing partnerships

The pandemic has had a substantial impact on the nature and extent of social action partnerships that churches are engaging in.

In terms of closer working relationships, the most notable changes are with local authorities and charities. 28% of churches said they are now working more closely with local authorities, and 27% said they are now working more closely with local charities (see Chart 3). Partnership with local authorities has taken a number of forms, including accessing council funding, taking on a signposting or referral role with local authority services, or developing local support hubs in collaboration with the local authority and other groups. These closer working relationships have increased the visibility of the churches involved, enabled churches to feed into local authority consultations on a range of issues, and facilitated more holistic support to the community.

Chart 3: How has the pandemic affected your relationship with these organisations?



One church leader reflected on the positive developments of *“opportunities to share volunteers; growing trust and energy; strong bonds with the community, local businesses and local authority.”* Another commented that the pandemic has generated *“new opportunities to build credibility with our local community. By being a positive, creative and caring presence during this pandemic, we have helped to bridge the gap between the church and the village that had widened over time.”*

New and changing partnerships (Continued)



“ 28% of churches said they are now working more closely with local authorities as a result of the pandemic. ”

Effective collaboration is not the norm in all areas. According to one church leader: *“There has actually been competition in terms of charity here! Lots of small groups started up for food collection and distribution and didn’t seem to want to work together.”* In relation to local authorities, some clergy remarked that the bureaucratic requirements of council contracts or projects are a barrier to effective partnership.

Partnership working with some institutions has declined. For example, 36% of church leaders said they are working less closely with schools as a result of the pandemic. Many schools have had to close for long periods or develop hybrid models of teaching and instruction, making church participation in assemblies or other activities difficult or impossible. In relation to other churches or Christian groups, 22% of clergy report they are working together less closely than before, although 19% also said they are working more closely with other churches

Food poverty was by far the most commonly mentioned issue around which new or stronger partnerships have formed. This is not surprising, as we know that food poverty and food bank usage have increased dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic,⁶ and that supporting food banks was already the most common form of social action that churches were involved in.⁷ Activities have included increasing donations to food banks, starting new food banks, offering up church kitchens for food preparation, delivering food to vulnerable individuals, and in some cases engaging in advocacy to improve food security. One church leader shared the following story:

“ The food bank team has become part of the local council’s Covid-response group, and has been a strong advocate for better support for local people in hardship, and for the council to use all of the hardship funding and food and essentials funding it’s received from national government for the purpose it was intended.

The team has collaborated with others in the local voluntary sector to call for more robust and generous local welfare assistance, and support for families with children who receive free school meals, and people with no recourse to public funds. Through the Covid-response group, the food bank team have met some key influential council offers and councillors, who they hadn’t met before, and this has been beneficial in terms of advocating for people who’ve had to use the food bank to get by. ”

⁶ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-food-banks-report.pdf>

⁷ <https://cuf.org.uk/resources/church-in-action-2017>

Challenges in sustaining social action (Continued)

This is a positive example of working in partnership to tackle not only the immediate effects of food poverty, but to also address its underlying causes. Given that food poverty is the most common issue that Anglican churches are responding to (in many cases over a period of many years), churches have in-depth knowledge and experience that can inform efforts to tackle the structural drivers of food poverty. Another church leader reflected on this issue: *“Over the pandemic, we have moved from the edge of people’s thinking in terms of the response to food poverty. We now have a greater voice in the town-wide conversation both with the council and other Church/Christian organisations we now partner with.”*

A further noteworthy insight about partnerships is around engaging volunteers from the wider community. It was noted in the previous section that 61% of clergy reported not having enough volunteers. However, we know that in April 2020, 750,000 people signed up for the NHS volunteering scheme, and that only a fraction of them were called upon⁸ One church leader observed: *“The community at large have been far more willing to offer help and support to those in need.”* Some churches have seized this opportunity to engage volunteers from the wider community in their initiatives. For example, *“We have made significant relationships with local people who have volunteered to help run our food hub. This has opened doors for conversations about faith and opportunities to pray with them.”*

Thus, while churches may be struggling to find enough volunteers, particularly within ageing congregations, there may be opportunities to mobilise willing volunteers from the wider community. A recent report from Theos and Church Urban Fund highlighted this same reality and recommended that churches consider volunteering as a possible pathway for community members to engage with the church and potentially explore faith for themselves.⁹

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52418946>

⁹ <https://cuf.org.uk/uploads/resources/CUF-GRACE-Report-2020.pdf>

“

We have made significant relationships with local people who have volunteered to help run our food hub. This has opened doors for conversations about faith and opportunities to pray with them.”



Looking ahead

We asked church leaders: “Looking ahead, what are the key priorities for your church’s community work over the next 6-12 months?”

The most common sentiment expressed in response to this question was a desire to resume previous activities and modes of engagement. The words “restore”, “re-establish”, “rebuild” and “restart” surfaced frequently in clergy comments, indicating a longing to return to normal face-to-face approaches to social action.



“Worship online is important. Slowly opening up the building. Restoring the confidence of people to access our building but not to go back to how it was before. Need to focus on the changing landscape. Ministry must be out amongst the people.”

While many churches have creatively adapted to social distancing requirements in their activities, there is a recognition that web- or phone-based activities are not a fully satisfying substitute for in-person interaction.

A number of clergy commented that maintaining engagement with families with young children has been particularly difficult during the pandemic, and that being able to restart activities such as toddler groups, schools work, and Messy Church, is a priority.

For some clergy, whose churches have been badly hit by the pandemic in terms of their own human and financial resources, the priority in the months ahead is simply to keep going. **“Most of our members are elderly. For the moment, the priority is to survive, as a Church and worshipping community, and for individuals also.”** The priority for these churches is **“staying open and paying the bills.”**

While many church leaders expressed a desire for things to return to “normal”, others reflected that there is a need for their church priorities and activities to evolve rather than return to the way they were pre-pandemic.

One leader shared their priorities: **“Worship online is important. Slowly opening up the building. Restoring the confidence of people to access our building but not to go back to how it was before. Need to focus on the changing landscape. Ministry must be out amongst the people.”**





Another wrote of plans *“to look anew at our relationships with community organisations and to identify where we can share God’s love in a practical way. Also to continue reaching out to those on the fringes who have chosen to engage with online services. Re-building relationships with families in the area.”*

These comments reflect a growing recognition that the pandemic may have permanently altered relationships and ways of being church. The next phase of church ministry is likely to reflect a hybrid approach to online and in-person activities; greater emphasis on practical, incarnational presence within communities; and finding ways of engaging those who are tech-savvy as well as the digitally excluded. Rethinking the use of church buildings and exploring ways of making church property more accessible to the wider community will be part of this evolution.

As for what issues clergy have identified as priorities to respond to in their parishes, mental and emotional health concerns are high on the list. Establishing or expanding bereavement support groups, counselling, mental wellbeing groups, and other new structures for pastoral care were frequently cited in churches’ plans for the coming months. To combat the rising issue of loneliness and isolation, clergy are keen to set up or re-open Places of Welcome and coffee mornings as soon as possible, with a focus on older people and people who live alone.

As mentioned above, food poverty has been a focal issue for church social action during the pandemic. Building on this work is therefore a priority for many clergy. Continuing with food collection and provision and establishing new food banks were commonly cited priorities. Others mentioned plans to address underlying causes of food poverty through provision of financial capability courses and family cooking courses, as well as partnership in advocacy work.

“

To combat the rising issue of loneliness and isolation, clergy are keen to set up or re-open Places of Welcome and coffee mornings as soon as possible, with a focus on older people and people who live alone.”

Case Study: St Peter & St Paul Blockley, St Laurence Bourton-on-the-hill

Canon Dana Delap is well-known in the two rural communities she ministers to in the Cotswolds, having been part of many memorable weddings, baptisms, and funerals. So, it was not a huge surprise when, at the beginning of the first lockdown, the local parish council asked if she would offer emotional support to local residents. Dana was issued with a mobile, and every house in the village was leafleted with the phone number in case they needed extra support. Through her role as school governor, her close partnership with social services and this informal listening service, it was quickly apparent which families were in most critical need of support.

When all bus services stopped, access to supermarkets and other vital services became virtually impossible for those who were dependent on public transport. This became very evident when the church-run food bank was immediately overwhelmed by need. However, Blockley village has a small store, and a partnership between the shop and the church soon blossomed. Vouchers were arranged so that those who were unable to travel could still get the items they required, with the help of volunteers from the congregation and the community. These two community spaces – the church and village store – became a focal point for residents during the pandemic: *“Hundreds of people walked through the church yard in Blockley every day to get to the shop,”* explains Dana, *“It makes advertising quite easy.”*



“ Dana was issued with a mobile, and every house in the village was leafleted with the phone number in case they needed extra support. ”

Case Study: St Peter & St Paul Blockley, St Laurence Bourton-on-the-hill (continued)



Throughout the pandemic, the church continued to find ways to be together as a worshipping community. Leading up to Christmas, the church asked people to decorate 'Advent windows' to bring hope and joy. They also hosted a gingerbread hunt around the village, in collaboration with the local school. The biggest change has been within the congregation: *"Our faith has moved from the building to our kitchen tables, sometimes our beds... that's where worship now happens."*, says Dana, *"That has created a different feel to the community and a resonance with the idea that faith is something Sunday to Saturday... every day of the week."*

'Bedtime Church' was created for families with younger children. For 15 minutes on a Sunday evening, children from across the village logged onto Zoom to hear a story being read and prayers spoken. The children came in their pyjamas, and would quite often help lead the prayers themselves: *"I thought we would lose them, I thought it would be too difficult for families to take part, but it has proved popular."*

The church has also innovated in reaching out to older people. Molly*, who started coming to church when her husband Ian* died, had no technology at all apart from a corded phone. The church community bought her a tablet and taught her how to use it, something they have done for several individuals in both villages. One thing has remained evident to Dana. Now, more than ever, people have needed to feel connected, whilst forced to remain apart. Community is vital.

* Not their real names

“ *Our faith has moved from the building to our kitchen tables, sometimes our beds... that's where worship now happens.* **”**

Reshaping mission

The findings of the 2020 survey suggest that the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic may be compelling church leaders to reassess their view of and approach to mission.

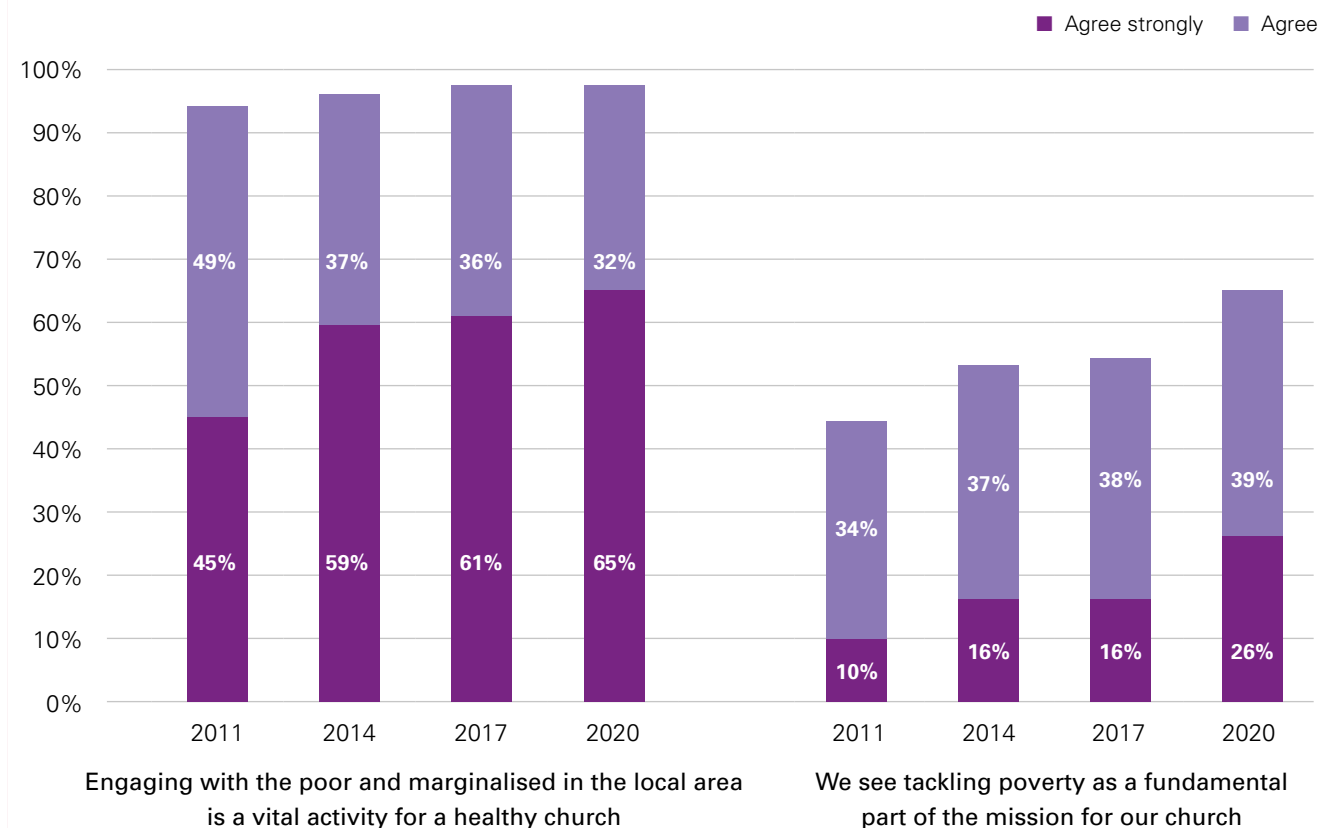
Since the first wave of the Church in Action survey in 2011, we have been tracking how much weight clergy assign to tackling poverty within their conception of mission. Nearly all church leaders (97%) agree that 'engaging with the poor is vital for a healthy church', with a rising proportion now strongly agreeing with this statement – up from 45% in 2011 to 65% in 2020.

In previous surveys, there was a noticeable gap between those who agreed with this statement and those who said that 'tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the mission of our church'. That gap continues to close over time, as churches have become more actively involved in responding to local needs in their community. In 2020, 65% of clergy agreed that 'we see tackling poverty as a fundamental part of the mission for our church'. This has increased from 54% in 2017, and 44% in 2011, reflecting the growing priority attached to social action (see Chart 4). This increase may also reflect the fact that the pandemic has made clergy more acutely aware of poverty in their communities, especially in less deprived areas where poverty was previously more hidden.



“ 65% of clergy agreed that tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the mission for their church. ”

Chart 4: Church leaders' attitudes to tackling poverty, 2011-2020



Reshaping mission (Continued)

In a recent congregational survey in Liverpool diocese, 59% of respondents agreed that their church had become more aware of the community's needs as a result of the pandemic¹⁰. We asked a similar question in this survey, with 70% of church leaders agreeing that "church members have a good awareness of social issues locally" – up from 64% in 2017.

The increased weight assigned to tackling poverty as part of church mission may also reflect that, in a time when clergy have very limited use of church buildings or engagement in gathered worship, addressing the social and material needs of their parishes has become a much greater part of their daily ministry. One leader commented, *"The church, I felt, was quite inward looking when I came to post a year ago. The pandemic has enabled us to look outwards more..."* It will be interesting to assess whether this shift in priorities continues after the end of the pandemic, in the next wave of this survey.

In terms of vision for the period ahead, these are some of the aspirations of the clergy who responded to our survey:



“ 70% of church leaders agree that church members have a good awareness of social issues locally. ”

"Turning the church fellowship towards greater involvement with the community, inclusivity and care beyond the church family."

"To continue to encourage congregation and leadership to look outwards to community, not just inwards at 'church' concerns."

"To continue to advocate for more support at local and national level for people pulled into hardship, so that people have enough income for food and essentials, and don't have to use the food bank just to get by. Also to continue to respond to an ever-changing environment and local need, which we think will be ongoing as the impact of the pandemic continues to be felt, particularly by those on the lowest incomes. Finally, to make church somewhere where everyone can find a welcome and place to belong, regardless of socio-economic background."

"To develop existing work and build on relationships. To be a beacon of light and hope but to be explicit about faith too."

These aspirations reflect the opportunity to build on new interpersonal and institutional relationships that have formed during the pandemic, and to cultivate a church culture that is more outward-looking and inclusive.

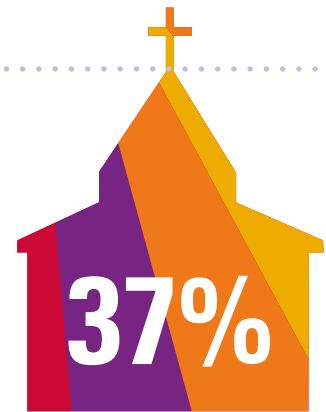
¹⁰ <https://cuf.org.uk/uploads/resources/CUF-GRACE-Report-2020.pdf>

Conclusion

Together, clergy responses to the 2020 Church in Action survey tell a mixed story of challenge and loss, alongside creativity and resilience. The pandemic has profoundly shaped social needs and church responses to those needs.

Church leaders reported that a number of social problems have become more acute and widespread in their communities, particularly isolation and loneliness, poor mental health, food poverty, and unemployment. At the same time, the realities of building closures, financial losses, and a decline in volunteers have placed significant burdens on church leaders and reduced the resources available to them. Despite these many challenges, 37% of church leaders said that their church is doing more social action than they were before the pandemic.

This report shows that many churches have demonstrated remarkable ingenuity and investment in their communities despite the challenges they face, highlighting stories of **innovative approaches** that have enabled churches to continue serving their communities in powerful ways. The pandemic has also generated **opportunities** for churches to partner with local authorities, charities, and businesses in new and fruitful ways. For churches involved in these partnerships, these have led to **new relationships** that clergy hope to build on beyond the pandemic, as they seek to cultivate a church culture that is more **outward-looking** and inclusive.



“ 37% of church leaders said that their church is doing more social action than they were before the pandemic. ”



Appendix: Sample statistics

	Church in Action 2020 sample [†]	All benefices
Urban/rural:		
Rural	43%	45%
Urban	57%	55%
Area Deprivation (IMD score):		
Least deprived	20%	20%
Below average	26%	25%
Around average	18%	18%
Above average	20%	20%
Most deprived	16%	17%
Church size*:		
Less than 50	16%	24%
50-100	40%	39%
100-150	21%	20%
150 or more	23%	17%
Region:		
East Midlands	9%	11%
East of England	15%	15%
London	11%	10%
North East	4%	5%
North West	12%	13%
South East	20%	19%
South West	11%	12%
West Midlands	11%	10%
Yorkshire & Humber	6%	6%
Total sample	1,023	6,831

* Usual Sunday Attendance † Excluding cases where the classification of the church was missing or unknown.

Authors and acknowledgments

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