

Faith: The missing piece in how charities help society recover?

Pat Finlow considers how faith charities contributed to community support during the pandemic and how this will help as society recovers

ONE THING I discovered during lockdown was that I am an inveterate creature of habit. I was dismayed at my first shopping trip during lockdown as the supermarket didn't have my usual brands of pasta or teabags. After chastising myself for such first-world irritation, I reluctantly bought alternative brands.

But I discovered that I actually preferred them and so have not gone back to my original brands.

A trivial example, but the Covid emergency caused sudden disruption to many long-term habits in local authorities, government departments and global institutions, which opened the door to new ways of thinking.

These were not as trivial as my choice of tea, but significantly altered their attitudes to working with faith communities.

This is one of the findings in *Keeping the Faith: Partnerships Between Faith Groups and Local Authorities During and Beyond the Pandemic*, a report published by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on faith and society. The foreword states: "Collaboration between local authorities and faith groups has dramatically increased in the pandemic. The imperative of providing support to vulnerable families has overcome decades of wariness."

The research, conducted by Goldsmiths, University of London, contacted all local authorities and councils across the UK with a survey, the results of which were triangulated with 55 in-depth interviews.

The results are striking: not only was there a dramatic increase in the number of collaborations between local authorities and faith groups, these were seen by those authorities as overwhelmingly positive, with 91% describing their experience as "very positive" or "positive".

“A ready-made network of responsive hubs”

The report reveals that the response of faith groups to the pandemic made their previously "often hidden or unnoticed" contributions more visible, and local authorities say they have a new appreciation of the agility, flexibility and professionalism of faith groups and faith-based organisations.

It's not that collaboration with local authorities is a new phenomenon: many reports in recent years have observed this direction of travel.

For example, *Holy Alliances: Church-Secular Partnerships for Social Good* published by Demos in late 2019 drew attention to the rise in church-based social action and the "much less acknowledged rise in partnership working" between churches and non-Christian organisations.

But even as these findings were percolating through, the pandemic hit and (as the *Keeping the Faith* report demonstrates) the additional demands it placed on local authorities, sped up and catalysed these partnerships.

"A £1M PILOT FUND WAS ESTABLISHED TO ENABLE FAITH-BASED GROUPS TO DEMONSTRATE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ISSUES SUCH AS FOOD POVERTY"



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AN OUTPOURING OF COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Meanwhile, the pandemic also generated an unprecedented wave of voluntarism as people looked for ways to help others in their communities.

This phenomenon was illustrated by Danny Kruger MP in his *Levelling Up Our Communities: Proposals for a New Social Covenant* report. This told how, as soon as lockdown was announced, his local church kickstarted a scheme to support the vulnerable and within a week had 344 volunteers vetted and ready.

He notes that over 4,000 similar mutual aid groups, both faith-based and not, sprang up during lockdown, and the "task for official systems was to quickly catch up, to support the mutual aid effort, and to plug it into the government's public health and welfare policies". The outcomes of the *Keeping the Faith* report show that many of the co-ordinating groups were faith communities.

This observation begs a question: what was it about faith groups that enabled them to coordinate so much of this response?

This question is explored in another report entitled *House of Good*, authored by State of Life, an organisation which specialises in social impact analysis. It concluded that the 40,000+ church buildings in the UK, which support over 33,000 social action projects, constitute a "ready-made network of responsive hubs who are already central to providing care and looking after the wellbeing of local communities".



Photo: istockphoto/janeempbell121

London, United Kingdom – 18 June 2016: Street Pastor. A group of Street Pastors were helping out at the Jo Cox vigil. An example of how faith groups can act to help communities in difficult times.

In findings that echo those in *Keeping the Faith*, they identify a range of activities run by and through churches to benefit the wider community, which included: food banks, drug and alcohol support clinics, debt counselling, after-school care, crime prevention, healthy living support, IT training, lunch clubs for the elderly, housing and homeless support and mental health counselling, and observe that “the social impact of church buildings goes far beyond those who worship in them”.

These findings demonstrate that as the pandemic hit, the engine of faith-based action was already running so groups were able to draw on their pre-existing systems and connections.

Hang on, you may say, I thought – like Elvis – the church had left the building? Well, yes and no. During

lockdown, all faith communities had to close their doors to public gatherings, but their extensive networks of relationships continued and in many cases they were able to adapt their activities to respond to the fast-changing environment. For example, repurposing buildings for food preparation and distribution and more latterly, as vaccination centres.

“ During lockdown, all faith communities had to close their doors ”

Surveys conducted by other faith groups show similar adaptations. In *The Neighbours Next Door* report, the Muslim Charities Forum highlights

the work of dozens of Muslim charities running foodbanks, supporting NHS staff and stranded students, providing PPE, distributing hardship funds and offering mental health support.

The Sikh Network similarly reports a surge of compassionate outreach and when restrictions were placed on Sikh Gurdwaras, many took the Sikh principle of *Langar* (free kitchen) out to the most vulnerable, serving over 150,000 meals a week. One notable example was the provision of food for lorry drivers, stranded on the M20 in Kent when borders closed in December 2020.

The cumulative impact of these findings demonstrate that the infrastructures that pertain to faith helped to give shape and structure to the community spirit that emerged during the pandemic.

IS IT JUST 'LOVE IN A TIME OF COVID?'

But what of the longevity of these new-found relationships? Are they akin to a holiday romance or will they go the distance?

The Keeping the Faith report helps to answer this question as it found that 76% of local authorities expect the new partnerships to continue, albeit with some minor adjustments.

But, what sort of activities and what form should these new partnerships take? The long-term recovery from the devastating personal, emotional and economic impacts of the pandemic will need a different range of activities and skills than were needed in the early crisis.

Some answers to these questions are provided by the University of York in its report Churches, Covid and Communities: Experiences, Needs and Supporting Recovery. This research aimed, in part, to supply evidence for government about the importance of church activities that contribute to the life and wellbeing of local communities.

Respondents to its survey (both regular attenders and non-church folk) were clear that access to activities run by and in churches was vital if the adverse impacts on mental and physical wellbeing were to be addressed.

While its focus was on Christian churches, the report helpfully included an extensive appendix of reports by other faiths and secular organisations, which concurred with these findings.

PART OF BUILDING BACK BETTER?

Kruger's Levelling Up report was commissioned by the prime minister who asked him to consider how the community spirit so evident in lockdown could be built upon to contribute to the recovery phase and to the government's levelling up agenda.

Among his recommendations, Kruger proposed a "New Deal with faith communities, by which government supports a greater role for faith groups in meeting social challenge". A year later, the government announced that a "New Deal" between faith groups and government was indeed being forged.

In order to facilitate this, a £1m pilot fund was established to enable faith-based groups to demonstrate innovative solutions to issues such as food poverty and poor mental health and the aspiration was for local public services to routinely invite faith groups to co-design solutions to social problems.

BUT IT'S NOT ALL SUNLIT UPLANDS JUST YET...

The Keeping the Faith report also recognised that some residual mistrust and antagonism to religion remains in some town and city hall corridors. This "faith hesitancy" was also noted in Kruger's Levelling Up report and was echoed in the outcomes of regional consultations carried out by FaithAction, a national network of faith groups.

“We can now quantify the economic and social value of all churches”

But the respondents in the FaithAction consultation spoke of their own responsibility to "be clear about what they offer and to be able to evidence it effectively to show what their value is and how much of a resource they can be to their local authority".

This awareness has been growing among faith groups and is evidenced by a myriad of webinars, conferences, video-call discussions and consultations taking place, led and supported by organisations like FaithAction, YourNeighbour, Cinnamon UK and others. These have resulted in resources and toolkits to help faith groups better understand the context in which they are working and to enable them to apply their experience most effectively.

One resource frequently recommended is the APPG's Faith Covenant, which comprises a set of ground rules for collaboration between faith groups and local authorities and helps build mutual understanding and avoid potential pitfalls. This has already been adopted by a number of councils and local authorities.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF PARTNERSHIP

The National Churches Trust is the latest in a long line of organisations wanting to put a number on the contribution of faith to social impact and so commissioned the House of Good report. This utilised the government's own methodology, HM Treasury's Green Book which is the UK government's own guidance on how to evaluate the efficacy of a policy and its economic and social value. It places specific emphasis on "welfare economics", explaining that: "Economic appraisal is based on the principles of welfare economics – that is, how the government can improve social welfare or wellbeing."

The report explains that by using this methodology, "we can now quantify the economic and social value of all church buildings to the UK. Not the bricks and mortar but the welfare and wellbeing they create in our communities."

The numbers are staggering. Even using the most conservative parameters, they calculate the total value that church buildings generate is £12.4bn per year (averaging approximately £300,000 per church), of which £10bn is in social value and wellbeing. The report's authors point to the relevance of these findings for the government's levelling up agenda.

The report is available online, and will undoubtedly be a useful reference for groups looking for evidence of impact when considering partnership.

TAKING A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Unfortunately, space doesn't permit a review of reports tracking similar changing attitudes in the humanitarian and international development sector.

So I'll give the final word to Samantha Power, the new head of USAID in the Biden administration, who tweeted: "Fresh off call with @USAID faith-based partners. We cannot defeat #COVID19 without them. They're on the ground distributing vaccines in places like #India, working with local religious leaders to fight vaccine hesitancy & advocating for more dev assistance here at home." ●