

One day it will all be over and we will return to our normal lives. And when that day comes and the people of the nation ask their established church, 'Where were you when we needed you most?' What will our answer be?

Were we hiding in our big vicarages, skulking away, too frightened to show our faces? Or were we there for the nation when the pandemic hit? Did we stand up boldly to be the Church Jesus wants us to be? Did we do all we possibly could within government regulations to go on serving the people of this nation, especially its poorest, and offering worship? I suspect the whole future of institutional Christianity in our nation will depend on the answer we give to that question.

It is clear that today a nation is calling out to its Church. Government has listed clergy as keyworkers. Even with their doors closed, it wants churches to go on for as long as possible being places of prayer and service. The nation needs its Church in this time of anxiety and grief to be alongside the suffering and to speak hope to all. The challenge is to lay aside a spirit of timidity and, whilst staying safe and acting wisely, be there for our people.

Those who minister on our urban estates can once again lead the way and there is plenty of evidence that they are. For so many residents, the margin between managing and struggling is a very narrow one, so urban estates tend to exaggerate issues and problems that are better hidden or less acute in more affluent areas of the country. It is a truism that any national or global crisis will always hit the poor hardest. Estate practitioners are at the cutting edge of this and often have to pioneer or improvise new approaches, which is why ministry to estates has so much to teach the wider church.

One problem that many estate clergy and church leaders are facing is that livestreaming and over-dependence on technology doesn't work. Many estate residents simply don't have access to the technology and others, especially older people and churchgoers, struggle to make it function. It's not enough on an estate to hide behind a computer and it is impressive to see the imagination that estate churches are showing in both meeting need and sticking rigidly to the regulations around social distancing. Three especially pressing issues will demonstrate what I mean.

First, food and hunger. Even before the Coronavirus, this was a big issue on many estates because zero-hours contracts (cynically abused by employers who choose to pass profits on to shareholders rather than their own staff) combined with a punitive benefits regime, meant that the indignity of foodbank dependency had become the norm for many. Now those jobs have mostly disappeared. Schools are stepping up as best they can but often struggle to provide a hot meal. Some foodbanks have been forced to close and others lack donations. In the midst of this lockdown there is a genuine risk of serious malnutrition or worse on our urban estates.

The response from many of our estates churches is heroic and where it is at its best it is rooted in strong partnerships with agencies, local authorities and other denominations. Unsurprisingly it is those churches who invested time in building such partnerships before crisis struck who are doing best. So for example on the Grange Park Estate in Blackpool, Matt Rowley from the Blackpool Church Army Centre of Mission is working with the local

community centre and other Christian groups to deliver food parcels to families who are struggling. They are left at the end of the front path so there is no direct social contact, and the good relations that the centre had already built with families means that Matt and his team know just where to focus their efforts.

A second especially acute problem on many estates at the moment is isolation and poor mental health. Associated with this is a risk of drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence as people endure many weeks shut in together.

Church support in this area is rooted in a style of ministry that is relational and spontaneous rather than programmatic and over-organised. The best estate practitioners will spend vast amounts of time simply being with people and getting known within the close-knit networks of relationships that still strongly exist on many estates. Because time had already been invested in building such relationships, support can now be offered even at a time when we are prevented from mixing socially. So some churches are phoning round older people on the estate who they know are alone. Others are doing the shopping. One church in Blackburn is dropping off activity packs. This is critical service and a real lifeline for the isolated.

And a third area of concern at the present time is family life. Without school and shut in together in small, cramped houses and flats, family life can be a near intolerable challenge. Schools are providing work and activities, but often parents struggle to help their children.

I was especially struck by a story from St James's Church in Over Darwen who were in touch with a family whose son has autism and so is finding it very difficult to adjust to changed routines. He was refusing to do his school work at the same table at which the family ate their meals and this was becoming a source of huge pressure. So the local church found a folding table, cleaned it to within an inch of its life and delivered it whilst wearing gloves to the front door of the house so that a few hours later, the family could take it safely inside. The boy is now happily doing his schoolwork and peace is restored. This is typical of the sort of practical, relational, spontaneous ministry at which our estates churches are so expert.

But all of this begs a question. I am only able to tell these stories because there are worshipping Christian communities on these estates with able leaders who long to serve. In February last year the General Synod voted to have a loving, worshipping serving Christian community on every significant housing estate in the country.

But who knows what the financial health of the Church of England will be once we emerge from this crisis? If change comes to our common life as a result, let us pray our estates do not lose out; for the residents who live on those estates have a desperate need for the hope the Gospel brings.

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