



# National Conversation Report

## Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales

### Responding to COVID-19

September 2020 – March 2021



# National Conversation Report



## Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales

### Responding to COVID-19 September 2020 – March 2021

#### Executive Summary

**The Reverend Canon Aled Edwards**

Chief Executive Officer Cytûn



## Introduction

This Report, made possible by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action's Voluntary Services Emergency Fund, has garnered views from across Wales during a crucial and exceptional six-month period (September 2020-March 2021) in a nation's history. An opportunity has been given, during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions to observe how churches and other faith communities have responded to the demands of a pandemic, come together in new and innovative ways, developed unanticipated partnerships and deepened existing relationships.

Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales serves as a national ecumenical instrument enabling some 15 churches or denominations to work together, to witness to the Christian faith and to engage in social action together. Cytûn also serves a number of local groups throughout Wales, national networks and bodies in association engaged with concerns such as international development, housing, the environment, disability, education, child protection and those engaged in enabling churches of different traditions to work together.

Of itself, Cytûn is not a campaigning organisation. It has formed and enabled invaluable partnerships through the Interfaith Council for Wales and active engagement with third sector partners and statutory bodies. In a broader context, Cytûn is a member of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and reports back to the Christian community throughout the British Isles concerning its work. In the context of this National Conversation Report, Cytûn has engaged with CTBI member churches concerning COVID-19 related issues and strengthened its engagement particularly in the racial justice arena focusing on asylum seekers and refugees and being increasingly aware of the issues impacting upon people who have been trafficked into the UK or forced into modern slavery.

As a founding member of the Welsh Government's Faith Communities Forum since its inception following the '9/11' attack in 2001, Cytûn engages regularly with ministers and officials offering advice and acts as a conduit for conversation on faith related matters. Cytûn has since 1999 published regular Policy Briefings for interested partners reaching beyond the scope of member churches and other faith communities.

Traditionally, Cytûn seeks approval for its work from the organisation's members through its Board and Enabling Group crafting a rolling Workplan. Until March 2020, Cytûn's overall work was largely planned, anticipated and budgeted for. COVID-19 disrupted that familiar pattern of working significantly and Cytûn, like other organisations, has had to adapt to a different working environment with new and additional demands – many of them immensely challenging.

These challenges were further compounded in September 2020 by the Home Office

decision to place asylum seekers in the Penally Camp near Tenby in Pembrokeshire. The story of how Wales responded to that challenge requires further study especially as regards the benefits of delivering outcomes through social partnerships. This National Conversation Report will focus on the work of the rapidly set up interfaith chaplaincy team led by Rob James of the Evangelical Alliance. Throughout the period under consideration, Cytûn and Evangelical Alliance Wales worked closely together engaging fully with interfaith partners. Significant bonds were further built particularly with the Muslim Council of Wales and the local mosques. It is hoped that this discussion will encourage a further consideration of how such relationships are encouraged to flourish in ways that build upon a legacy of learning from the period under consideration. The recollections offered here by Abdul-Azim of the Muslim Council of Wales offer an invaluable insight.

Chaplaincies and pastoral provision in the public square and at major national events were restricted. Large shows and festivals were inevitably cancelled especially the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show, the Urdd National Eisteddfod and the National Eisteddfod. The paper offered by Ian Morris of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society Chaplaincy highlights how consideration has been given to strengthening the structures that enable chaplaincies to work and reflect on how communities are served following the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Building upon long established relationships established by Cytûn and some of its member churches this paper explores how some people placed in situations of risk, possible exploitation and vulnerability have fared during the months under consideration. Alison Ussery offers an overview of modern slavery in Wales. As part of this work, Cytûn asked Displaced People in Action (DPIA) to offer a substantive case study, informed by direct engagement with asylum seekers and refugees, on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and on how they were supported by faith-based organisations in Wales. The case study offered here, researched by Sarah Allen of DPIA, offers invaluable insights into the challenges confronting displaced people and on how they turned to faith communities for support. The case study highlights many practical concerns and underlines concerns regarding wellbeing and mental health.

In many ways, alongside other faith community partners, Cytûn was well placed in March 2020 to enable and facilitate responses to the rapidly changing demands imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of crucial personal and structural relationships were sufficiently robust to enable a beneficial response. From September 2020, Cytûn sought to record some of the narratives and to gather stories from key practitioners throughout Wales striving to bank a legacy of learning.

## Immediate Faith Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In response to COVID-19 the narratives set out in this National Conversation Report indicate that throughout Wales, one overarching reality emerges. Despite the restrictions and the difficulties, sometimes when confronting profound sorrow, churches and other faith communities continued to practise their faith through new and innovative ways and frequently developed crucial expressions of service and care within their communities. They continued to pastor those in their care and to find new ways of worshipping and creating liturgies under extraordinary circumstances. From the outset, they were proactive in supporting Welsh public health initiatives concerning restrictions, lockdowns and firebreaks and later played a hands-on supportive role in challenging potential vaccine hesitancy and opening up their places of worship as vaccination centres.

### A Learning Legacy

Contributors from different parts of Wales working in a variety of contexts have recorded what they did during the six months under consideration. They have offered this Report a legacy of learning that will be immensely valuable. They have also offered personal reflections for the future. Their scripts have been included in the Appendix to this Report. Cytûn is grateful to everyone who offered their thoughts and experience during a demanding period. Some key strategic trends are highlighted here in summary:

**(1) New Ways of Worshipping and Offering Pastoral Care** - The transferring of services, prayer meetings, youth gatherings and governmental committees online felt, as Sian Rees of the Evangelical Alliance describes, like moving the 'church from the Victorian era to the digital era overnight!'. That seems to have happened across the board within churches and faith communities. Abdul-Azim Ahmed highlights the development of Radio Ramadhan 2020 in his community.

Throughout Wales, services have been led from homes with worshippers sending contributions such as prayers and readings beforehand. Overall, initiation ceremonies, weddings, funerals and key faith festivals have continued despite the restrictions.

In terms of pastoral care, Nia Morris and Carwyn Siddall, from different church traditions, place on record some of the successful initiatives their pastorates and parishes undertook suggesting more creative and rewarding ways of worshipping, offering pastoral care and of working differently for the future.

Christian chaplaincies, across a number of settings in universities, the police,

hospitals, and prisons have continued to offer support and to prepare for the future. Ian Morris of the RWAS Chaplaincy highlights how technologies may be deployed in the future. Congregations renewed their involvement with local schools providing virtual assemblies.

Although the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society's Chaplaincy Team were not called upon to support visitors to the showground during 2020-21, progress was made on revising role descriptions and thought has already begun to be given how those from Wales' rural communities can be offered pastoral support in the future. Contact details have been made available to the showground staff if they need support.

Contributors highlighted examples of how community engagement had reframed priorities in terms of how places of worship are used. Providing shower facilities for the homeless offered one example.

**(2) A Sense of Loss** - Contributors have spoken eloquently, as set out by Sian Rees, of 'missing the laughter of fellowship, the declaration of doxologies, the proclamation of God's Word, the reciting of prayers, and the testimonies of God's blessings.' The loss has been immense. Sian Rees writes of churches experiencing 'mortality silence'. Something that is usually prevalent during times of war.

Carwyn Siddall records how one of the residents of Llanuwchllyn asked if it would be possible for Christians in the community to stand outside their homes on Easter Sunday evening to sing hymns to mark the prime festival of the Christian faith, enabling fellowship and proclaiming the resurrection.

**(3) A Duty of Care** – Churches and other faith communities responded quickly to the need to adapt to different levels of COVID-19 restrictions. In this they showed a deep understanding of their duty of care. Churches prepared guidance, articulated risk assessments and offered high profile advice particularly during the build up to Christmas for congregations to worship carefully or to go online. Wales wide networks such as Cytûn assisted them in some of those tasks.

Faith communities seem to have deployed a fleetness of foot in adapting existing structures such as safeguarding panels or officers in seeking to ensure that they continued to serve their congregations safely. They may have done so with resilience and grace. Many have taken advantage of the resources and advice offered by national Wales-wide faith agencies and networks, interfaith and ecumenical, as well as their own churches and denominations.

Carol Wardman underlines in her article how quickly Welsh Government set up the COVID-19 Moral and Ethical Advisory Group (CMEAG) as a panel of key experts and stakeholders to grapple with some of the ethical issues raised by COVID-19 discussing the rationing of intensive care, the ethics of 'track and trace' apps, care home visiting and issues for the disabled and those with additional learning needs. Faith voices, alongside others, have been included in these crucial conversations.

- (4) **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Concerns** - Faith communities observed together with immense sadness the disproportionate deaths due to COVID-19 in Wales' deprived communities, black and ethnic minority communities and amongst the disabled. The statistics concerning disproportionate deaths were highlighted in the Ogbonna Report exploring the socio-economic factors involved as presented to the Welsh Government in June 2020 and responded to in September. Cytûn continues to participate in the structures that have been set up to frame a *Welsh Race Equality Action Plan*.

Cytûn has continued throughout to report back to its standing Racial Justice Network. One of the Network's members, Irfan John sets out how the Urdu and Hindi speaking fellowships continued to pastor, worship and pray. He also highlights how the South Asian Christian fellowship engaged with Wales' vaccination programme. One of the major outcomes of the engagement with Welsh Government during the months under consideration was the formal admitting of representation from the One Accord network of black led churches onto its Faith Communities Forum.

- (5) **Committed to Mission** – Some churches initially experienced a doubling or tripling in the size of their congregations. The number of 18-24-year-olds attending online services had increased significantly. Some ministers noted a distinct personal change for them in terms of how they viewed ministry.

Nia Morris refers to the 'Five Marks of Mission' crafted in 1988 by the Anglican Lambeth Conference focused on: proclaiming good news, teaching and nurturing new believers, responding to human need, transforming unjust structures and striving to safeguard creation. Pastors recorded being busier than ever acting on the 'five marks.'

- (6) **Ecumenical and Inter-faith Co-operation** - Across the board, churches and other faith communities prepared meals. In one mid Wales setting, 30 volunteers helped prepare meals. Practising Muslims assisted churches in their engagement. Churches got actively involved in housing projects such as the Green Pastures Homeless Project as Anglicans and Pentecostal churches worked together in the housing arena.

The Muslim Council of Wales' contribution to this conversation highlights similar dynamics indicated by the Christian community. Efforts were made in March to make mosques safe. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020, almost every mosque in Wales had closed. As with other faith communities, mosque leaders acted quickly before legislation was enacted to ensure that worshippers were safe.

Mosques drew closer together in response to the pandemic, co-ordinating and communicating with each other, focusing on the practical steps involved. Safety Officers were appointed as single points of contact in mosques.

The Muslim community in Wales also became innovative with a group of volunteers setting up an online Radio Ramadhan service. They set up a website and a new organisation to run it. During the month, it livestreamed mosque prayers, sermons and lectures and hosted both light-hearted and serious show.

- (7) **Social Care** – Carol Wardman highlights how clergy could sometimes not be contacted during the daytime because they had thrown themselves into community action during the hours of daylight. Churches have stood at the forefront of enabling social action projects within their communities and in exercising care for the isolated and lonely ensuring the delivery of medical provisions and supplies of food to those who needed them. Faith communities worked in offering a range of services. Foodbanks were supported and open kitchens were active throughout Wales. For this conversation, Christians and Muslims highlighted similar engagements. Other faiths acted in the same manner.

A common theme in several contributions has been the provision of meals in diverse communities throughout Wales. Sunday school lunches were started in some areas. It's reported that preparing meals has enabled volunteers to gain 'a great sense of working together'. Contributions also indicate an engagement with the homeless.

- (8) **Welsh Government's Faith Communities Forum** - Faith communities acted together especially through national structures such as the Welsh Government's Faith Communities Forum and the Interfaith Council for Wales deepening friendship, mutual respect and cooperation between faith leaders. Relationships have deepened as a result. It is noteworthy that faith community engagement with Welsh Government officials has been constant and productive.

Working together on the technicalities of lockdowns and firebreaks, full use was made of the Welsh Government's Task and Finish and Ceremonies Groups. Faith leaders and Welsh Government officials held conversations with each

other prior to the Alert Level Four rules around Christmas. These conversations influenced the decision to allow places of worship to be open over Christmas if they chose to do so.

From the outset of the pandemic, faith communities highlighted the need to honour customs and requirements concerning funerals, burials and washing the deceased in the case of some faiths. In the case of some rural communities, mosques relied on the services of those outside of their localities. There were a number of challenges but ‘facilitating Muslim groups, funeral providers, local authorities, and Welsh Government to plan and manage these challenges...led to a reasonably smooth process across Wales around burials, allowing families to focus on the emotional toll of the loss rather than bureaucracy.’

- (9) Vaccination Hesitancy** – From the platform of the Welsh Government’s Faith Communities Forum, members became very involved in terms of seeking to ensure that people of faith were well informed concerning COVID-19 vaccination issues. It formed part of the Hindi and Urdu speaking fellowship’s engagement.

Partners from the Christian, Muslim and Hindu communities in particular arranged high-profile webinars. Cytûn and Evangelical Alliance Wales worked together with Cardiff and the Vale councils. Other faith communities conveyed what theologians and scientists from their communities had stated concerning vaccination. Much of this work was targeted at black, Asian and ethnic minority populations. One group to emerge from this response was Muslim Doctors Cymru. They noticed that the homeless used the mosques that had been set up as vaccination centres.

- (10) Anti-Slavery Work** – Cytûn member churches, working with an array of partners, had already acquired considerable knowledge and expertise prior to the March 2020 lockdown, concerning supporting the victims of human trafficking. In her contribution, Alison Ussery, highlighting the work of Heaven of Light CIC sets the scene highlighting the misconception that victims found in the UK are foreign nationals who have been smuggled into the UK illegally. More than a quarter of the recent referrals were British citizens. Many would be caught in labour exploitation. As the UK went into lockdown, many vulnerable and exploited people became more vulnerable with people being moved from one industry to another. The crime known as ‘county lines’ is highlighted here as a ‘very serious concern’ in Wales. It is said that young people are being groomed and recruited by gangs to act as drug mules. It has been of concern to those working in this area of concern that awareness programmes that were taking place in schools have paused and outreach services to survivors living in the community have been affected.

- (11) The Environment** - Churches found a renewed focus on Creation Sunday with congregations being encouraged to become Eco-churches enabling Eco-warriors. Alison Ussery speaks of the connectivity between climate change and human suffering. Carol Wardman highlights how such issues were discussed at the Church in Wales’ Global Issues Forum.

- (12) Asylum Seekers at Penally** – The contribution offered by Rob James in this Report sets out to record how churches and faith communities worked together at great speed to form an interfaith chaplaincy. His record and the articles and letters he has included show how people of faith sought to meet a real human need in an immensely challenging situation. Supporting the service users at Penally and the communities around them under COVID-19 restrictions represented an immense challenge. Yet, working alongside others much was achieved in offering pastoral care, providing Christmas gifts and IT Tablets for the asylum seekers so that they could communicate safely with the chaplains and others.

This work was achieved through a highly effective social partnership model of working. Reports of developments were also fed back regularly on a weekly basis to the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership’s Multi Agency Operational Group. That Group included faith community feedback as a standing item on its agenda.

Contact has been retained with some of the service users following the closure of Penally Camp as a place to house asylum seekers. Church contacts with Christians have been retained.

- (13) Asylum Seekers and Refugees** – It is hoped that the case study offered by DPIA will help to inform churches concerning caring for asylum seekers and refugees. The study sets out with considerable clarity the challenges asylum seekers and refugees encountered during the COVID-19 restrictions. They touch upon difficulties around communication data, digital devices for school children, education, health, wellbeing, food supplies and pastoral care. The DPIA case study highlights the work done by faith community groups and notes the significance of spiritual support.

## A Time for Hope

Targeted mainly at churches this conversation sets out lessons learnt from those who have offered their personal responses to different scenarios during the pandemic. They are offered here as a record at the end of a specific and difficult experience.

Creatively, contributors to this National Conversation Report have already begun to look to the future. Sian Rees speaks of looking forward to ‘societal reset’. Comments have been offered around the challenges ahead in terms of engaging with ‘new rhythms’ of living. Carol Wardman speaks of a need for a major rethink about how we operate in the world. That prospect may be daunting but contributors such as Nia Morris speak hopefully of a renewed ministry. Other contributors have written in a similar manner.

Abdul-Azim Ahmed underlines the importance of building alliances to build back better highlighting that we should do so ‘more fairly, equitably and compassionately.’ Both Alison Ussery and Sarah Allan, when considering how churches support asylum seekers, refugees and the victims of modern slavery highlight the need for being well informed. Heaven of Light CC aims to raise awareness of modern slavery issues on the ground in local communities. Greater knowledge could make a significant difference.

Alison Ussery points out that faith communities need to reach out to the organisations that look after the survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. Individuals in safehouses and community accommodation would love to have an opportunity to attend a church but might be too afraid to attend alone. Inviting people for a meal offering them food from their homeland would be a strong gesture.

It is known that the future will present churches and faith communities with significant challenges. Since they will remain first responders in many communities for both the additional provision of food and clothing banks and pastoral assistance, considerable thought will have to be given to the continuity of support in the face of possible financial hardship. Siân Rees of the Evangelical Alliance highlighted how significant changes may be required in terms of how faith communities are resourced in a challenging economic environment.

Pastorally, churches will have to contend with the challenges now posed by those who have enjoyed online services and meetings – especially those who perhaps could not easily attend worship physically but who have now regained contact during the pandemic. Concerning sustainable development, imperatives around the use of resources will also come to the fore. The days when the Christian community in Wales calls upon its leaders to travel vast distances for governance meetings may,

for the most part, be over. Time will tell whether new levels of partnership working throughout the pandemic will lead to renewed consideration of a call for structural ecumenism or will energies be applied anew to working together in specific areas of work?

Rob James’ paper on events around Penally Camp tell the story of what happened there and how the Christian community with others sought to meet a human need. Much of what was achieved at Penally was delivered through high levels of trust between church leaders and partners working alongside them. Longstanding structures and relationships built around the Welsh democratic process and the Home Office were fully deployed. New relationships emerging from local partnerships also enabled levels of care that made a real difference. Carol Wardman sets out how pre-lockdown partnerships have grown and developed.

Yet, people of faith, as Rob James sets out, had to struggle with the conviction that the decision to place the men there had to be questioned and challenged while seeking at the same time to give expression to the faith imperative to ‘love your neighbour as yourself.’ No doubt, other third sector organisations may have struggled with the same moral conundrum. Leaders within faith communities resolved that they could not make placing asylum seekers in a military camp right, but they could try to make life better for them. Evidence suggests that in part, they succeeded in doing so.

It is very much hoped that churches and other faith communities will use their networks and formal structures to reflect further on the content of this National Conversation with a view to enabling further consideration of the experiences and thoughts contributed in this Report.



## Case Study

### Asylum Seekers in Wales

Research by Sarah Allen

Displaced People in Action



*"Looking at the experiences and support needs of Asylum Seekers and Refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how have faith-based communities supported with these, as a method of recommending how churches may improve support in future."*

#### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the lives of many throughout Wales. Since March 2020, coronavirus and the series of national lockdowns put in place to slow the spread, has shaped the challenges that we face as a society. In this report, we look at the issues that asylum seekers specifically have faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore the impacts of the virus on asylum seeker's mental health, living situations and access to education, food and supplies, WiFi, digital devices, information and services. We will go on to consider some of the supports faith-based groups across Wales have been putting in place to support asylum seekers and refugees with these issues.

Though by no means an exhaustive list of efforts across Wales, the initiatives that we explore include data and devices projects, food banks, supply delivering volunteers, online events and befriending projects. Following this, we specifically explore the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees of faith have experienced spiritual support from their religious communities throughout the pandemic. To produce this report, we have spoken with members of the asylum and refugee community, as well as third sector professionals, who shared their personal experiences of these issues. We also have used many direct quotes from DPIA's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum, which meets monthly to give asylum seekers and refugees a voice on the issues that matter to them. By looking at what the issues are, and what is already being done to help mitigate these, we intend to guide knowledge and ideas on ways that individuals and faith-based groups might be able to assist asylum seekers and refugees within their own communities.

## What are the Issues?

### WiFi and Devices

*"The internet or WiFi connections to Clearsprings houses is a must. It's like a basic need now because everybody needs WiFi, to do everything in their lives" <sup>1</sup>*

A major challenge faced by refugees and asylum seekers since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic has been accessing WiFi and devices. Since March 2020, national lockdowns have led to individuals being required to stay at home and socially distance to reduce the spread of the virus. This has meant that the majority of human social, cultural and business interaction has moved to online platforms. One survey by Lloyds bank found that 80% of respondents agreed that technology had provided them with vital support during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> During the lockdowns, when alternatives have no longer been available, the internet has been a key way for individuals to participate in economic, educational social and cultural life. Asylum seekers face digital exclusion, since low levels of asylum support often make it difficult to access data or devices.

At the Wales Asylum Seeker and Refugee Advocacy forum, one asylum seeker explained that he felt that "the most difficult thing for asylum seekers at the moment is the asylum support they get from Home Office... If you want to call someone, if you want to attend meetings like this, you need to pay for data and you need to pay like 35 pounds per month."<sup>3</sup> At the start of the first lockdown, the majority of asylum seekers were receiving £37.75 per week, which by June was raised by 26p a day to £39.63 per week. It is important to note that asylum seekers also do not have a right to work to supplement their asylum support allowance. The challenges that asylum seekers have faced in accessing WiFi and devices have been repeatedly raised by asylum seekers and supporting charities since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessing internet and devices is a crucial way to maintain social contact, continue education and access information and services. The impacts of not being able to access internet in the pandemic are severe, and we will continue to explore these throughout this report.



<sup>1</sup> Anon. DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum - Aug 2020  
<sup>2</sup> Baker, C. et al., (2020), UK Parliament, COVID-19 and the digital divide  
<sup>3</sup> Anon, (May 2020), DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum



## Education

*“When it comes to this COVID, everything it became very hard... because it's not your native language and you have to adapt to the new system... Not everybody can learn by themselves, especially online.”<sup>4</sup>*

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have had wide-reaching impacts on access to education for asylum seekers. One principal issue for asylum seekers in terms of being able to continue their learning, has been that most educational establishments moved from in-classroom learning to remote teaching through online platforms such as Zoom and Teams. As discussed in the last section, many asylum seekers face digital exclusion. The transition to online learning has impacted the education of asylum seekers at all levels, from school age children, to adults studying ESOL and college courses. One asylum seeking woman noted this during an advocacy forum, expressing that: “one of the main challenges was not having the gadgets, and not having WiFi for myself and my three kids to do any work, because I'm in college as well.”<sup>5</sup> Lack of access to WiFi and devices directly impacted the whole of this family's ability to access education. Another in the forum shared his struggle in attending classes, saying that “most people don't have access for equipment, like laptop and internet... you don't have the WiFi to attend the class online with video. If you talk about five pound, you will finish it within half an hour.”<sup>6</sup> With asylum support standing at £39.63 per week, data costs have made accessing online education a struggle for many.

Lockdowns have presented challenges for asylum seekers in accessing ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). ESOL is a crucial way for many asylum seekers to learn and practise their English language skills. Welsh Government wrote in their ESOL Policy for Wales that “ESOL is essential for integration and enables learners to function independently, to advance onto further learning opportunities or work; and supports greater community cohesion.”<sup>7</sup> Online lessons present unique challenges for those who are not native English speakers. One asylum seeker shared at DPIA's forum on education that his unfamiliarity with English had meant he struggled with understanding what was being said through the computer. He also expressed that had become far harder to focus when learning ESOL online in comparison to in a classroom environment. COVID-19 lockdowns have created barriers to the delivery of quality ESOL lessons to asylum seekers, which is key since ESOL provides a crucial function in the integration of asylum seekers into the UK.

In April 2020, the Welsh Government pledged three million pounds to enable local authorities to provide digitally excluded schoolchildren with internet connections and devices.<sup>8</sup> This did mean that many asylum seeking children were

4 Anon, (October 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

5 Anon, (May 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

6 Anon, (October 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

7 Welsh Government (2019), *English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy for Wales*

8 Welsh Government (2020), *Extra £3 million to support 'digitally excluded' learners in Wales*

provided with the ability to access their school classes. Despite this, other challenges remained for educating school age children, including language barriers, low levels of digital literacy, and the increased responsibility of parents to participate in their child's teaching. In DPIA's advocacy forum in October, an asylum seeking mother noted that she had been a teacher in her home country and had a good level of English, but had still struggled to support her children's learning from home. She said that, “I qualified as a teacher... What about the other parents? What about the other families?”<sup>9</sup> She noted that many asylum seekers face the challenge of trying to understand the UK school system, alongside the teaching materials and work being provided in a second language. She noted that many asylum seeking parents also had less opportunities during lockdown to practice English during the lockdown, which had impacted their ability to assist their children with schoolwork.

## Mental Health

*“Everyone is mentally going through a difficult time with COVID, but asylum seekers and refugees are in a much more vulnerable position.”<sup>10</sup>*

COVID-19 has created huge repercussions across society in terms of mental health. A report by Mind found that “More than half of adults (60%) and over two thirds of young people (68%) have said their mental health got worse during lockdown.”<sup>11</sup> Although many groups have been adversely affected by the lockdown in terms of mental health, these impacts have been felt especially strongly by those within the asylum seeking community. The Health Foundation agrees that “Poor mental health is strongly associated with social and economic circumstances, including living in poverty, low-quality work, unemployment and housing.”<sup>12</sup> Social isolation has driven worsening mental health during the pandemic. This has been made worse for asylum seekers, because of the challenges in accessing internet and devices to be able to connect with family and loved ones. Similarly, digital exclusion has produced barriers to the community groups, volunteering and education that many asylum seekers used to occupy themselves in place of employment pre-pandemic. Additionally, many have found their housing situation to exacerbate these issues. One forum member said that “my daughter has mental health issues. The challenge has been the fact that we are confined in a first floor flat... her mental health has not been well, because it's a small space, there's no garden to go out.”<sup>13</sup>

On top of these drivers of ill mental health has been increased difficulties in accessing mental health support. Five individuals in DPIA's advocacy forum in

9 Allen, S. (2020), *Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes: October, Point 7*

10 Anon, (Jan 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

11 Mind (2020), *The mental health emergency: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted our mental health?*

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

13 Marshal, L. et al. (2020), The Health Foundation, *Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities*

January 2021 reported having struggled accessing mental health services during the lockdown, with one individual sharing that since seeking NHS mental health support he had had two appointments cancelled and was still waiting to be seen.<sup>14</sup> It was clear from the voices of this forum on healthcare, that many shared the sentiment that mental health has been a serious challenge for asylum seekers during COVID-19. As one member put it “I’m the third person here in the group to come and talk about mental health issues today and say that I am having difficulty accessing it... I do feel like this is an emergency. I do see that these things should be tackled as priority.”<sup>15</sup>

### Accessing Information and Services

*“We have people from all sorts of places, speaking all sorts of languages. So where would they go if they don’t understand the language in the booklet, or if they want specific information?”<sup>16</sup>*

One issue that many asylum seekers have faced throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns has been difficulties accessing accurate, up to date and translated information. The outbreak of COVID-19 has made it vital for individuals to be able to access health related information, such as social-distancing rules, lockdown updates and guidance on preventing transmission of the virus. The suspension of many in-person services such as schools, foodbanks and charities, also created a need for information on the changes to how to access these. One forum member felt that the information on local services that she had received through the door of her asylum accommodation had all been “too general”, and felt that there was “certainly a lack of information available for those who are not speaking English.”<sup>17</sup> Lack of information access, both through digital means, or the provision of leaflets, creates issues for asylum seekers’ abilities to access services, or take the correct health precautions. In addition, as A. Ray et al. put it in the BMJ, “reliance on information by word of mouth exposes some to inaccurate information that could put them at increased risk of exposure and/or adverse health outcomes.”<sup>18</sup> When one forum member was asked whether he felt that there was health information on isolating and social distancing that was accessible and translated, he responded that, “just to say the truth for me, there is none.”<sup>19</sup>

In terms of accessing services and support during COVID-19, lack of information has not been the only barrier to asylum seekers and refugees. Changing modes of service delivery has produced further barriers for asylum seekers. As previously

<sup>14</sup> Allen, S. (2020), *Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes: January*, Point 22

<sup>15</sup> Anon, (January 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

<sup>16</sup> Anon, (June 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ray, A. et al. (2020), *The BMJ Opinion, Offline and left behind: how digital exclusion has impacted health during the covid-19 pandemic*

<sup>19</sup> Anon, (June 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

mentioned, a lack of devices and data has contributed to this issue where services have moved online. In addition, phone and online communications are often untailored or unsuitable for those with lower levels of English. One forum member, when talking about accessing support services over the phone, expressed that: “A lot of people, they don’t speak English, so they can’t explain the problems now facilities are closed. I saw a lot of people having this problem. They can’t address their problems. Maybe some people can but the majority can’t.”<sup>20</sup>

An additional way that many asylum seekers’ access to services has been altered throughout COVID-19 is the move of many businesses to cashless transactions. Contact-free options have been encouraged to reduce the spread of the virus. The Aspen Card on which Asylum Seekers receive asylum support is not contactless. This has meant that many asylum seekers have been unable to access services where contactless payments have become the only option. One member noted that “saying no cash is a good way to prevent a virus circulating among the community. But how about those who cannot have a bank account? How about those who cannot use their Aspen Card online, or purchase a ticket?”<sup>21</sup> This was seen in Swansea, where forum members reported bus drivers refusing cash payments in the early stages of the pandemic. Although this issue was resolved in the case of Swansea’s busses, this has continued to be an ongoing issue with asylum seekers being able to access other services, such as online food deliveries or shopping.

### Accessing Food and Supplies

*“The prices have just gone like up like mad. You have to either decide to buy food, or to buy sanitiser... food is life, sanitiser is life, which one do you go for?”<sup>22</sup>*

Many asylum seekers’ ability to obtain essential food and supplies have been negatively impacted since the outbreak of COVID-19. This has been for multiple reasons, including increased prices, new items becoming essential such as PPE, and difficulties for some in accessing shops. Research by the Nuffield Foundation found that grocery prices rose by 2.4% at the beginning of lockdown.<sup>23</sup> Multiple asylum seekers expressed during the May Advocacy Forum that increases in food prices had left them struggling to be able to afford the basics. One noted that many asylum seekers and refugees shop at corner shops or international food stores, which he felt had shown more price increases than larger supermarket chains.<sup>24</sup> In addition, items that have now become seen as essentials, have added an extra strain to an already tight budget. These additions include items such as hand-sanitiser, face-masks, data and devices, school supplies and home activities for children. For

<sup>20</sup> Anon, (May 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

<sup>21</sup> Anon, (August 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

<sup>22</sup> Anon, (May 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

<sup>23</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2020), *Grocery prices rose by 2.4% in the first month of lockdown*

<sup>24</sup> Anon, (May 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker’s Advocacy Forum*

many, a combination of increased prices and additional items to add to their already limited budget, has created a problem of choice, where individuals are forced to choose between multiple key items. As one member said in the forum “food is life, sanitiser is life, which one do you go for?”<sup>25</sup> Government guidance suggests that accommodation providers should ensure all residents have access to hand sanitiser, and face coverings, however, when we asked the forum, none said that they had received this.<sup>26 27</sup> Whilst Universal Credit allowances were raised by £20 a week to mitigate the financial impacts of the pandemic, asylum support was raised by £1.85 a week.<sup>28</sup> Many have seen this as insufficient to allow individuals to meet essential living needs during the pandemic. One forum member said “it is quite degrading; would it not be better to leave it the way it is then insult us with raising this by 26 pence?”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to financial issues in obtaining food and supplies, many asylum seekers have also experienced practical issues in access to these during the lockdowns. As mentioned in the previous section, the Aspen Card on which asylum support is given is not contactless. It cannot be used for online transactions, and those on Section 4 Asylum Support additionally cannot withdraw cash from the card. This creates a number of difficulties, as without a bank account, asylum seekers cannot order online food deliveries. Those on Section 4 are also unable to withdraw cash, so are limited to chip and pin machines. As one advocacy forum member explained it, “those who have section four support have to go to the shop by themselves, losing the chance to use a volunteer to shop for themselves if they have to isolate.”<sup>30</sup> This has therefore created challenges for many on asylum support to access basic supplies when isolating due to COVID-19 symptoms or health issues. This pressure for individuals to leave isolation to access supplies is something that puts the health of both the individual and the wider community at risk.

## Living situations

*“You can't control other people's activities... Some people suffer from asthma, while others have difficulties that may expose them more to danger. So they are worried about other housemates who are not keeping the safety measures.”<sup>31</sup>*

There are multiple ways in which asylum accommodation has exacerbated negative experiences of lockdown since the outbreak of coronavirus. We took a look earlier in this report at how living conditions have impacted the mental health of some individuals whilst in lockdown. Another way in which asylum accommodation

25 Ibid.

26 Public Health England (2020), *COVID-19: guidance for providers of accommodation for asylum seekers*

27 Anon, (June 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

28 Freedom From Torture (2020), *Joint-letter on increasing asylum support rates in response to the COVID-19 crisis*

29 Anon, (June 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

30 Anon, (May 2020), *DPIA Refugee and Asylum Seeker's Advocacy Forum*

31 Ibid.

has created issues for asylum seekers throughout this period is the lack of ability to social distance within shared accommodation. A large proportion of those in asylum accommodation who are single adults or single parent families live in shared accommodation. Those in shared accommodation often have to share facilities and live in close quarters with other residents, making it challenging to observe social distancing guidelines. In addition, many individuals in the forums have reported housemates breaking social distancing guidelines, not solely purposefully, but also as a result of not understanding lockdown guidance. One member expressed that because of this “you cannot really look after yourself in terms of social distancing, or other safety measures that you may want to take. People have been so worried.”<sup>32</sup>

## What have faith communities been doing and what more could they do?

So far, we have explored some of the primary ways in which asylum seekers have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Faith-based groups across Wales have played an active part in supporting asylum seekers and refugees with these issues. In this section we will look at just a few of the ways that these organisations have helped throughout Wales. We will also consider ways that faith-based groups may continue to support asylum seekers and refugees and create a community of welcome and sanctuary in Wales.

## Data and Devices Projects

As we explored earlier in this report, digital exclusion has been a fundamental issue for asylum seekers throughout the lockdown. A lack of access to devices and data has impacted on individuals' abilities to access support services, information, education and attend social gatherings to maintain their mental health. Many charities across Wales stepped in to help pick up on this issue and support asylum seekers and refugees to alleviate their digital exclusion. Two projects designed to tackle this issue in which faith-based groups have been involved are DPIA's Digital and Data Project and the Gap Centre's (Newport) devices project. DPIA's digital and data project gave asylum seekers and refugees a new phone or tablet if they didn't have one. In addition, they provided data to those who needed this. The project began with a large donation by St David's Uniting Church which provided 12 phones, 7 data packs and 3 accessory packs.<sup>33</sup> Since then, further donations by other groups and individuals provided 164 smart phones, 284 tablets and 302 data packages to refugees and asylum seekers across Wales.<sup>34</sup> One woman who accessed

32 Ibid.

33 DPIA (2021), *Digital and Data Fund*

34 Ibid.

this project said that “I got the mobile phone on Saturday. I am so grateful. Now I am back online. Thank you so much for your help. I am so grateful. Kindly say a big thank you.”<sup>35</sup> The Gap Centre in Newport supports refugees and asylum seekers. They were formed by the Bethel Church and continue to be strongly partnered with the church. They contributed by purchasing WiFi devices to circulate around the refugee and asylum seeking community in Newport and also by providing TVs and a DVD library.

In March 2021, Welsh Government funded 6 months of WiFi to be put into asylum accommodation across Wales. However, some will still not be able to access a device, and as it is a temporary measure, in 6 months’ time the issue of not being able to afford phone data will resurface. As such, churches can continue to support these issues by donating to pre-existing projects, such as those set up by Gap Centre, DPIA, Oasis or Phone Credit for Refugees. They can also write letters to MPs and the Senedd in support of extending this 6-month period, or in petitioning the Home Office to provide WiFi in asylum accommodation.

### Food banks and volunteer deliveries

Another way in which faith-based groups have supported refugees and asylum seekers has been through providing food and supplies and organising volunteers to bring supplies to those who have been isolating. Many faith-based groups have helped in this way, with some not only supporting asylum seekers and refugees, but others in the community who also require these services. In Newport, The Gap Centre provided food packs. In Cardiff, Rainbow of Hope has been delivering food parcels. In Swansea, with the support of St James’ Church, Swansea Asylum Seeker Support (SASS) has been delivering food and volunteers running errands. Swansea Mosque has also been running a foodbank to assist all members of the community. Many of these organisations have specifically catered their support towards asylum seeking and refugee communities by recognising and catering towards cultural differences in food. An asylum seeker we interviewed noted on this subject that “in the other food banks usually you find canned food, or soup or things that not many people want to eat who comes from Asian or Middle East area. But Mosque Food Bank was practical, they gave rice and the sort of food that people eat... it has been very popular and appreciated.”<sup>36</sup> Delivering packs like these is an essential way of supporting asylum seekers and refugees with the issues surrounding accessing food and supplies. It also helps alleviate issues such as data and devices, as spending less on food can allow more of an individual’s budget to be spent on other needs. There are many ways groups and individuals are able to support these efforts. They could find local foodbanks that cater to asylum seekers to donate to, either financially or by giving food, unwanted clothes or gadgets. They could also volunteer, by assisting

<sup>35</sup> Anon., Communication with DPIA, 2020

<sup>36</sup> Anon., Interview with Sarah Allen, 2021

with the distribution of these food packs, or going on supply runs for those who are isolating. As with all of these issues, individuals can also speak to their MP or sign petitions to express that the £39.53 a week for asylum seekers is not enough and should be raised.

### Online Events & Befriending Projects

An essential form of support for individuals and their families throughout lockdown has been the ability to meet online and connect socially. Online events such as befriending projects and community groups are essential in allowing social interaction, thereby helping individuals maintain positive mental health throughout lockdown. For many asylum seekers, online community groups are also important as they allow individuals to practise use of their English and helps with the spread of important news on coronavirus and accessing support and services. There have been many online engagement groups that faith-based groups have been involved with throughout lockdown. In Swansea, a telephone tree service was set up by SASS with the help of church volunteers. In Cardiff, Space4U, which was founded by people of faith at Trinity Methodist Church, has been running weekly friendship Zoom meetings. The Gap Centre in Newport has been running a befriending project, people are paired up to check in on each other remotely, and groups such as sewing classes and a mums and babies group. One asylum seeker we interviewed on his experiences said that “Online activities like gathering, talking, chatting, playing music, music or whatever can help in this kind of situation, because I know that asylum seekers or refugees during the lockdown, they didn't have anywhere to go, or any other activities in the house. So making them busy would be beneficial for their mental health”.<sup>37</sup> There are a multitude of these projects happening throughout our communities to connect people throughout the pandemic. Faith-based groups can ensure that community groups and events they run are accessible to asylum seekers via helping with data costs to join, or via signposting individuals to projects that can supply digital devices such as phones and tablets. There are many ways individuals can get involved, such as by joining their local FAN group, becoming a befriender with the Gap Centre or becoming part of the SASS telephone tree service.

### Spiritual Support

In addition to secular online community events, faith-based groups have been able to support asylum seekers and refugees who are of faith throughout lockdown through moving their communities online. In this way, many asylum seekers and refugees of faith have benefitted from receiving not only community, but the spiritual

<sup>37</sup> Anon., Interview with Sarah Allen, 2021

support that faith groups are able to provide. A major issue that this can help with is mental health, through creating a sense of connection throughout the lockdown period. In addition, being able to continue practising their faith, surrounded by a community of faith, has helped many to build resilience and give the strength needed to face some of the other issues we have discussed. One refugee from Swansea that we spoke to was of the Buddhist faith. She said that, “temples have started their chantings, dharma sermons online... since then there has been children's Sunday schools, meditation, medic meditation sessions, to upkeep the spiritual wellness... it actually helped us as the ordinary people to keep ourselves strong and it's a massive service even though it feels as simple as hosting an online session.”<sup>38</sup> In this way, many asylum seekers and refugees who are of faith have been assisted spiritually throughout lockdown by faith-based groups. Church groups can ensure that they are providing this kind of support to asylum seekers and refugees by making sure their services are accessible. This could be by ensuring asylum seekers and refugees have the digital devices and internet access needed to access gatherings remotely.

## Conclusion

Throughout this report we have explored some of the main ways in which the Coronavirus pandemic has presented issues for refugees and asylum seekers. Faith-based groups across Wales have been active in recognising these, and in creating and contributing towards projects which have supported individuals with these challenges. In continuing to support asylum seekers and refugees, one of the most important things churches can do is to stay informed about the issues that these individuals are facing. Listening to refugee and asylum seekers' voices and gaining knowledge of the issues they have experienced, is what has informed which initiatives were set up in reaction to the new challenges posed by the pandemic. It is our hope that this report allows for a better understanding of these issues, and how churches may better be able to support asylum seekers and refugees within their own communities.

38 Anon., Interview with Sarah Allen, 2021

## References

- Allen, S. (2020a), *Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes: October*, <https://www.dpia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Wales-Forum-Minutes-20.10.2020.docx.pdf>
- Allen, S. (2020b), *Wales Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum Minutes: January*
- Baker, C. et al. (2020), UK Parliament, *COVID-19 and the digital divide*, <https://post.parliament.uk/covid-19-and-the-digital-divide/>
- DPIA (2021), *Digital and Data Fund*, <https://www.dpia.org.uk/projects/digital-data-fund/>
- Freedom From Torture (2020), *Joint-letter on increasing asylum support rates in response to the COVID-19 crisis*, <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/news/joint-letter-on-increasing-asylum-support-rates-in-response-to-the-covid-19-crisis>
- Marshal, L. et al. (2020), The Health Foundation, *Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities*, <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/emerging-evidence-on-covid-19s-impact-on-mental-health-and-health>
- Mind (2020), *The mental health emergency: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted our mental health?*, [https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5929/the-mental-health-emergency\\_a4\\_final.pdf](https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5929/the-mental-health-emergency_a4_final.pdf)
- Nuffield Foundation (2020), *Grocery prices rose by 2.4% in the first month of lockdown*, <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/grocery-prices-rose-by-2-4-in-a-month-at-the-beginning-of-lockdown>
- Public Health England (2020), *COVID-19: guidance for providers of accommodation for asylum seekers*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-providers-of-accommodation-for-asylum-seekers/covid-19-guidance-for-providers-of-accommodation-for-asylum-seekers>
- Ray, A. et al. (2020), The BMJ Opinion, *Offline and left behind: how digital exclusion has impacted health during the covid-19 pandemic*, <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/07/03/offline-and-left-behind-how-digital-exclusion-has-impacted-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Welsh Government (2019), *English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy for Wales*, <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-11/english-for-speakers-of-other-languages-esol-policy-wales.pdf>

Welsh Government (2020), *Extra £3 million to support 'digitally excluded' learners in Wales*, <https://gov.wales/extra-3-million-pounds-support-digitally-excluded-learners-wales#:~:text=Press%20release->

---

## Appendix

### Reports: A Partner Response

#### Siân Rees

Director of Evangelical Alliance, Wales

Gatherings of Christians invariably elicit many sounds. There is the laughter of fellowship, the declaration of doxologies, the proclamation of God's Word, the reciting of prayers, and the testimonies of God's blessings. Arguably however, none of these have been so sorely and widely missed in Wales, 'the land of song', over the course of the last year as the sound of a congregation singing together in worship. Not only do the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of a song succeed in conveying the worship and adoration of our hearts; they reveal our spiritual wellbeing and generate a deep sense of unity as we join in a corporate expression of love to our heavenly Father.

Although places of worship have invariably remained closed over the course of the last twelve months, it can never be said that our *churches* have shut. Derived from the Greek word, 'ekklesia' from which we get the Welsh word, 'eglwys;' the word 'church' refers not to a building, but to a gathering of God's people and these gatherings have continued, albeit online, throughout the course of this pandemic.

When lockdown was first announced in March 2020, one north Waleian pastor described the process of transferring services, prayer meetings, youth gatherings, and governmental committees online as having, 'moved the church from the Victorian era to the digital era overnight!' It was certainly a dramatic learning curve for many who until that point had never created digital content, experienced live streaming, endured the weariness of Zoom, or faced the challenge of caring pastorally for their flock online. However burdensome the weekly cycle of preparing, recording, editing, and streaming has been, it has undoubtedly ensured that Christians are spiritually fed, remain connected to their spiritual family, and have had the opportunity to worship, yes in song, from the comfort of their living rooms.

A marked change in spiritual hunger became apparent very early on in the pandemic with many referring to an increase in 'mortality salience,' something which is normally only prevalent during war time when people have an acute awareness of their own mortality. Many churches initially experienced a doubling or tripling in the size of their congregations as people who would not normally attend a service in person tuned in to broadcasts on Sunday mornings. Online Alpha and similar discovering Christianity courses flourished as people sought safe spaces to ask the

bigger questions of life. Research undertaken by the Evangelical Alliance in October 2020<sup>39</sup>, showed that the number of 18–24-year-olds attending online services had increased significantly.

Church leaders have been nothing short of heroic in terms of the speed of their response to the challenges of the day and their willingness to embrace different levels of restrictions. They have shown a deep understanding of their duty of care towards their congregations and have utilised the help of multiple volunteers to carry the burden of social action projects within their communities. Churches have most certainly been at the forefront of caring for the isolated and lonely and have ensured that medical provisions and supplies of food are delivered to those in need. One example of a church who have gone above and beyond during this season, is Gateway Church, Abergavenny<sup>40</sup>. Led by Pastors Chris and Lyra Vaz, they have provided tens of thousands of meals and Christmas dinner hampers for local care homes, hospitals and ambulance stations; they have provided school bags and stationery sets for youngsters returning to school and even set up their own Community Hero Awards to honour those in their town who have helped others during the pandemic.

Truly, people of faith are navigating the challenges of this season with resilience and grace. This is not only true for Christian communities, but across communities of faith as has become apparent in the meetings of the Welsh Government's Faith Communities Forum and the Interfaith Council of Wales. Who would have thought that the chaos of a global pandemic would further catalyse such a depth of friendship, mutual respect, and cooperation between faith leaders? Working with each other and with the outstanding civil servants of Welsh Government's Equality Branch has been a joy. We have learnt immeasurable amounts from one another in terms of interfaith literacy and our meetings, although serious in content, have been characterised by empathy and on occasion, a necessary light-heartedness. Regular engagement has uncovered a *modus operandi* which is primarily based on relationship and communicating with one another regardless of the formality or informality of the setting. This 'Welsh way of doing things,' has secured the smooth outworking of the regulations around the reopening of places of worship and facilitated cooperation on other projects, such as the establishment of a chaplaincy team for the men currently accommodated at the Penally Asylum Processing Centre.

One deep source of pain for faith leaders during this pandemic, has been the disproportionate suffering and loss of brothers and sisters from BAME communities to COVID-19. We have also been concerned that some parts of our demographic have been wary of the vaccination on ethical grounds. Both Christian and Muslim faith leaders have therefore drawn on the expertise of Public Health Wales professionals and senior faith leaders to host Vaccination Q&A webinars exploring

39 [Executive summary - Evangelical Alliance \(eauk.org\)](#)  
40 [Gateway Church Abergavenny | Welcome](#)

questions around its' ethicacy. Mercifully, the percentage of adults receiving the vaccination appears to be growing. However, despite this silver lining, the nation of Wales is undoubtedly in a season of mourning and lament and this will need to be marked more formally when social distancing restrictions ease.

Looking ahead, I sadly anticipate a season of both financial hardship and acute mental health issues for many. Clearly, people of faith will remain first responders for both through the provision of food and clothing banks and pastoral assistance. The Church always responds to need with both spiritual and practical care. Here at the Evangelical Alliance, we have been hosting roundtables for entrepreneurs discussing how Christian businessmen and women might help with job creation during the forecasted economic tsunami.

The book of Ecclesiastes talks of 28 different seasons of life and reminds us that each season is 'under the heavens.' As we dare to look to the future, now is the perfect time for us to reimagine what life beyond the pandemic might look like. What better time for the people of God to dream of a better future for our communities, to facilitate conversations around the bigger questions of life and establish new rhythms of living that ensure the physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of all. The Church already has all the infrastructures and structures in place to be at the forefront of rebuilding lives and communities as we emerge from this pandemic. We have the human resources, the heart to love and serve, we have networks that governments can only dream of, our safeguarding measures are already in place, we know how to care for the isolated, the vulnerable, the shielded, and the broken.

Our corporate 'song' as Christians may well have changed when we finally regather for worship. For some it will be a song of lament, others gratitude and relief. Never again will we take for granted our religious liberties or our right and ability to gather for worship.

My prayer for churches and Christians across Wales at this time is that we would recognise the opportunity we have to be at the forefront of this societal re-set and step up in this moment to lead society into a better future - a future that is more equal, less prejudicial, more just and seeks the welfare of all.

## A Member Church Response

The Reverend Canon Carol Wardman

### A New Way of Living

As the Bishops' Adviser for Church and Society, sent home from our central Cardiff office at the beginning of the initial lockdown 'Cyfnod Clo Mawr 1', I spent about half a week worrying how to justify my existence without all the things that normally fill my time. No strolling down to the Senedd for a coffee and catch-up on the gossip; no wandering round to other organisations to plot the Church in Wales' engagement with their latest campaigns; no events where I could bump into new people; no travelling the length and breadth of the country to talk to people in different dioceses. On the other hand, for members of the Church in Wales' 'special interest groups' like the Global Issues Forum (GIF), CHASE (Church Action for Sustaining the Environment), the emerging Working Group on Modern Slavery, the long-standing Fair Trade Champions, and ecumenical groups such as the Cytûn Grŵp Ewrop, Radar (UK-wide church parliamentary officers) and Laser (Welsh equivalent) – there was no more shivering on Bangor station at 5.30 am so as to be at a meeting in Cardiff at 10.30.

It became impossible to contact clergy during the hours of daylight, as local churches immediately threw themselves into community action. Often building on existing activities, but also starting new ones, foodbanks, food deliveries, telephone befriending, support in navigating the complexities of life and signposting to other help – alongside the continuation of a lifeline ministry to care homes and the inevitable increase in funerals and bereavement support – developed a new sense of urgency.

Meetings as well as services rapidly moved to Zoom, where the new technology and altered experience seemed to flatten the hierarchy between clergy and laity, revealing nonagenarians (and more!) with a talent for operating online, and empowering volunteers – especially if their normal working lives were affected too – to take more pro-active roles in church's public engagement, and in an extraordinary level of support to specialist officers like myself.

After a fortnight, I wondered how I'd ever had time to go to the office.

### Welsh Government, Faiths and the Pandemic Emergency

Welsh Government swiftly established the COVID-19 Moral and Ethical Advisory Group (CMEAG), chaired by Dr Heather Payne (Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Welsh Government), with an illustrious cast of Welsh medics and academics (some with UK and international reputations), legal, ethical and human rights experts, specialists in

disabilities, Older People's and Welsh Language Commissioners, NGO and faith reps – and me from the Church in Wales. (A number of the names on the Zoom pictures which I had previously seen only on the spines of books turned out to belong to people of faith too, whatever their nominated reason for being on CMEAG.)

We began last March by meeting every 2 weeks, and every time we dream of reducing the frequency, something else happens; so the civil servants to whose workload the secretariat has been added keep circulating emails, papers and Zoom links, patiently answering questions on acronyms and (in my grateful experience) ferreting out additional briefings when questions from other bodies or churches elsewhere in the UK come in about Westminster legislation or specific issues. CMEAG agendas have tracked the progress of the pandemic, moving from the potential rationing of intensive care, through the ethics of 'track and trace' apps, care home visiting, particular issues for people with physical disabilities and (separately) learning disabilities; non-COVID services and rural GPs; the inclusion and establishment of regional clinical ethics committees, and – most recently, and likely to continue for some time – vaccinations, from production and distribution to overcoming fake news, scepticism and hesitancy.

The Faith Communities Forum increased its rate of meetings from 2 or 3 a year to once a fortnight. Chaired by the First Minister and attended by (at least) the Deputy FM and Communities Ministers, this is unique to Wales, 'baked in' to Welsh Government's functions, with official representation from each of the faiths and main Christian denominations, including Archbishops of Wales (Church in Wales) and Cardiff (RC). With the purpose of facilitating dialogue between faith communities and government, it smooths hiccups when legislation impacts on faith – and its existence ensures that groups responsible for specific areas of work, such as operating places of worship or schools, can move forward together with very little adverse reaction.

The contribution from genuine technical experts in the churches has been immense. There has been co-production of guidance on managing buildings, schools, community services, and advising on legal issues and pitfalls beyond the specifics of faith groups. I'm not sure if I should make public the anonymous quote reported from a Welsh Gov rep, but it was: "We couldn't pay for advice like this."

### The Church in Wales and Others

Partnerships with other NGOs has moved to a new level, both between ourselves and in relation to Welsh Government.

Pre-lockdown, The Children's Society (TCS) – which in a renewed working relationship has been in partnership with the Church in Wales on policy issues in



Wales for about 5 years – embarked on an action-research project about poverty and destitution across the UK, with Wales as one of its key areas. Thanks to the existing relationship with Anti-Poverty Coalition (Oxfam Cymru, Trussell Trust, Red Cross, Children’s Commissioner, and others – including the Senedd Cross-Party Group on Poverty), at the beginning of lockdown TCS led a multi-agency online deputation to the Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government and secured improvements to Welsh Government’s Discretionary Assistance Fund for emergency cash grants. Meanwhile, foodbanks and deliveries were included in circulation of information from Welsh Government on benefits, help for victims of domestic violence, and for those struggling with mental health.

After he and I attended a webinar series organised by the Welsh Centre for International Affairs (WCIA), the Lay Chair of the Global Issues Forum (GIF) arranged a meeting with WCIA’s Chief Executive (Susie Ventris-Field). Realising how much we had in common as bodies with both a Wales-wide and international focus, Susie was invited to speak to the GIF – and she has been a member of the Group ever since, engaging also with the CHASE group as civil society in Wales prepares for COP-26.

As the necessity for the ‘Christmas lockdown’ became apparent, an evening phone-call between myself and Aled Edwards (Cytûn, Interfaith Council and Faith Communities Forum) sounded out views on whether or not to enforce church closures this time – ahead of an early meeting next day with Welsh Government. On balance we thought not: having established how to be ‘COVID-safe’, it was best to allow each church to decide, depending on circumstances. At 8.45am next morning Aled rang again: having already been called by Deputy FM Jane Hutt MS, this was confirmed as the arrangement.

Another call around the same time – in something of a panic – came from a senior lay official in the Church in Wales, when it emerged that closure of community buildings meant that foodbanks in church halls might be threatened. The chain reaction to a rapid series of calls and emails (leaning once more on colleagues in Cytûn) resulted in provision to ensure no such disaster ensued. (Although you can’t please everybody: a colleague in a parish, up to its eyeballs in community relief efforts, had already deployed the prospective ban to prevent an unsuitable group demanding access to their hall. Discretion being the better part, I understand they kept quiet about the reprieve.)

Working from home has highlighted just how many of my key working relationships are outside the Church in Wales’ Provincial Office. Denominational barriers have become invisible, along with those between clergy and laity; what is important is to do the best for our communities in Wales, and use our leverage from there to influence for good what happens in the UK (and wider world, as far as we can reach). The Lay Chair of the GIF is fond of quoting that we in Wales “punch above our weight”, so in church terms Wales fielded 2 selectors on the panel for the

internationally influential position of Moderator of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland; in recent campaigning against proposed cuts to the UK overseas aid budget, the Church in Wales’ GIF was the first body to make formal representations to the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary (and thanks to our Lay Chair, we have a majority share on the ecumenical steering group for further action, as well as some ‘insider briefing’ from the former Chair of the Commons Committee on Overseas Development, who is one of our member’s MPs and in regular correspondence); and following a presentation to the Anglican Communion’s annual international ‘Partners for World Mission’ conference in December 2020, on a similar topic to this paper, the GIF Lay Chair was contacted by a Church of England vicar, seeking advice on establishing similar work in her locality.

## Europe

Almost the last thing to happen before Lockdown 1 was a Welsh Government-sponsored visit to the European Commission in Brussels by civil society reps (including the Church in Wales and Cytûn) to explore post-Brexit civil society relationships. Kicking ourselves all the way home for failing to take full advantage of opportunities whilst we were still full EU members, we were humbled by the strength of feeling that we should maintain contact at official level; and ironically, the virtual space, speed of communications and common agenda during the pandemic have strengthened relationships with the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and Anglican Diocese of Europe. There has been much sharing of experience via emails, webinars and online conferences on immigration, refugees, trafficking and slavery, populism, humanitarian aid, human rights, and partnership with government – as well as the experience of churches under COVID.

As the pandemic year morphed into our final departure from the EU, churches continued to be active members of the Welsh Civic Society Forum on Brexit, whilst the Forum’s secretary (from the expert Governance Centre at Cardiff University) regularly joins meetings of Cytûn’s Grŵp Ewrop. Brain-picking from amongst our relationships in Wales meant that the Grŵp Ewrop was able to provide a briefing for members of the House of Lords (including Bishops) as they debated the Internal Market Bill, supporting Anglican churches from other UK nations where civil society fora are less well developed.

## Being Pro-active

Realising that if anything good is to come out of this experience, the GIF recognised at a very early stage that there needs to be a major re-think about how we operate in the world, rather than simply returning to the status quo ante. Slightly ahead of Welsh Government’s consultation on *Our Future Wales*, in summer 2020 the GIF

began discussing issues which focussed particularly on the economy, environment, and international relationships; and – again in conjunction with Cytûn – arranged a meeting with a Special Adviser to Jane Hutt MS to discuss ‘post-pandemic restructuring’ in Wales. A paper went to Jane Hutt MS, and a response to *Our Future Wales* ensued.

When Welsh Government launched (at short notice) a specific consultation on economic restructuring, we initially re-sent our original paper on *Our Future Wales*. Sometimes wondering if anyone reads these submissions, we were astonished and delighted when the civil service lead on Wales’ future economic strategy not only read it, but identified the section he suggested we expand, and encouraged us to send it in even if it was past the closing date. We convened a small group from across the Church in Wales (and our new partner WCIA) and made an additional submission. Thinking the civil servant had done us a favour by extending the deadline, we were again astonished and delighted when he sent us a note thanking us for ‘going the extra mile’. (Reading the final report is a minority interest sport, and maybe it’s just a coincidence, but it seems to contain noticeable echoes of our ideas and phrases.)

### **Adding Our Value**

Whilst we have some expertise in applied ethics, we are very clear that the church’s USP is our values and principles, not necessarily concrete proposals. Being the church, we can hold this line; and we have found this to be valued by our partners in civil society and government.

At the heart of the Christian message is forgiveness and a new start, and of bringing something better out of what looks like a disaster – or even out of failure. Reflecting on experience of CMEAG, it is clear that medics, lawyers and policy makers (understandably) like clarity and certainty, and find failure upsetting. Churches and faith groups are not fazed by uncertainty, ambiguity, or even failure – because we have an understanding of humans as fallible beings who can’t solve everything. Both practically and pastorally, this seems to be valued as world-view, which results-driven secular bodies would struggle to embrace.

On the practical side, public bodies need support in a serious emergency, and they recognise that churches have enormous reach, both across the country and within communities; as well as expertise, experience and professionalism. Relations have always been cordial, but there has been a definite change of tone, and we have found policy makers (what I can only describe as) beating a path to our door. Our experience of being slightly on the margins, even of operating outside traditional office environments, and able to build relationships across sectors and hierarchies, has proved invaluable in a new situation which many people found isolating

and strange – from the micro level of working from home, to the macro level of international relationships.

The key will be to continue these cordial and constructive working relationships as we emerge into whatever the ‘new normal’ (as we would say, by the grace of God) proves to be.

.....

## A Mid Wales Response

The Reverend Canon Nia Morris

### Ministry since Lockdown in the Parish of Newtown – Cedewain Mission Area

Pre-COVID, I thought I had a lively and fruitful ministry ever since being ordained curate in October 2000. My curacy was busy and exciting – I was located at Rhyl and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

My first incumbency was Bala – a Welsh speaker was needed for this small rural market town. I inherited 4 churches and arrears owed to the Diocese of £30,000. All 4 churches needed urgent attention to their buildings. Within a month of being Inducted as Rector of Bala, Llanycil, Llanuwchllyn and Llangywer, it was decided to close three of the churches and have one united church – Christ Church, Bala.

We were now one church covering an area where 7 churches had at one time existed – Rhosygwaliau, Fron-goch and Llanfor being the other three locations.

Christ Church was re-ordered at a cost of £650,000 and is a multipurpose church that can be used with great flexibility for all occasions.

After 10 years of ministry in Bala – where the congregation grew and the finances were healthy, I felt it was time to move and I was appointed by the Bishop to Newtown as Rector of Newtown with Llanllwchaiarn and Aberhafesp and Mission Area Leader.

I am no longer the MA Leader and have acquired one more church – Llanwyddelan. Having been a MA Leader for the five-year term I asked the Bishop to be relieved of this role – 18 months later we appointed a Lay MA Leader.

I knew that being the MA Leader and looking after All Saints Church, Newtown – a busy and active town church surrounded by rural churches – was causing tensions within the MA and that it was best for all involved if I, as the Incumbent of All Saints, was not the MA Leader.

Before lockdown I thought my ministry was fruitful – but now I realise that there were serious shortfalls!

Recently I was preparing a sermon and I found myself pondering upon what ministry is really about?

I was reminded of the 'Five Marks of Mission' developed over 30 years ago, in 1988, by the Lambeth Conference – these were developed as a model of mission work for local churches. The 'Five Marks of Mission' are:

1. to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
2. to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. to respond to human need in loving service
4. to seek to transform the unjust structures of society
5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of earth

And so how do I as a priest and how do the churches I serve score on this model?

Pre-COVID...?

We were doing quite well on 1 & 2. No.3 - I do pride myself on being keen to develop pastoral care – and reaching out... but in honesty we were serving our church community rather than the larger community in its entirety. 4 & 5 didn't feature at all on the radar of our mission – sadly!

And now...?

Things have changed for the better. I have certainly had my eyes and heart opened by God and I have encouraged the churches I serve to develop and grow towards a new identity in the communities they serve.

At the beginning of the lock-down I contacted the local Mayor and asked – what are we to do to serve our community? I guess I was in panic!

Members of the Town Council - including our Mayor, reps from PAVO (Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations), Ponthafren (Voluntary Mental Health Support), Salvation Army – Food Bank - met and Newtown Network was established... a network of professional people representing various agencies working together to meet the needs of the community they serve.

We met every weekday morning for an hour on Zoom (which I had never encountered prior to COVID) where we discussed and planned accordingly. We continue to meet once a week to keep ourselves updated.

While some of my colleagues felt bereft and felt they had nothing to do – I was busier than ever and was really enjoying this new challenge.

What is different in my ministry and in the mission of our church?

We developed a Sunday lunch service to ensure that those who couldn't afford, or who couldn't prepare a meal – had at least 1 good and substantial meal per week. Initially we met at the Methodist Church... and now we prepare the lunches at one

of the local primary schools – We have the use of their kitchen and canteen at no cost.

There are approx. 30 volunteers involved – church and non-church members. And it is beautiful to have one of the Syrian ladies – who is a practising Muslim – help us in the kitchen. We join together for prayer during our time of working together.

This meal provision has encouraged a great sense of working together and has really helped the profile of Christian faith and our church in the community. We are supported with finance and donations of food by individuals, Salvation Army, the Town Council, Ponthafren, PAVO, Rotary, Merched y Wawr, St Asaph Diocese and we have been fortunate to receive grants from the lottery Community Funds and Moondance.

A Sunday tea is also prepared on occasions for those who live alone or who are isolated and for those newly bereaved.

We have also initiated discussion with Green Pastures Homeless Project. I met Pastor Pete (founder member) and other members of the team some years ago but felt in no position to embark on a project involving partnering with them. The truth be known I lacked confidence in myself and the church community – this is a big project and is asking a lot of those involved. But with new colleagues in the community – and with the help and support of Sarah Wheat – St Asaph Diocesan Engagements Officer – we are now in discussions re the possibility of partnering with Green Pastures – in the hope that they will purchase a house to home 4 – 5 people who are homeless – and a group of us in the community will manage. What a wonderful opportunity for us to work together as a community and to provide support to people who will hopefully see their lives being turned around for the better.

I have also been encouraged – I feel by God to attend to the care and protection of our creation. On Creation Sunday – a couple of weeks ago – I preached a sermon that needs to be lived out in our community. At our Easter Vestries this last fortnight I have been able to encourage the churches to become Eco-churches. This will not be merely a paper exercise... we have identified an Eco-warrior for the churches – and my hope is that we can encourage the youth to become involved.

Our gift for people this Easter will not be Easter Eggs – but rather an eco-friendly plant holder, some compost/soil and seeds to plant –encouraging the recipients to remember, give thanks and to pray for the beautiful creation we have been gifted with.

Services are via YouTube every Sunday with a good following, and we have certainly acquired more friends – who send messages of support, thanks and sometimes donations to help our mission.

We had a good relationship with our schools pre-lock-down especially with the involvement of Storytellers. Members of All Saints and one or two from other churches visited the 9 primary schools in our MA each term with an action-packed dramatization of a Bible Story – with a prayer to end. This involves over 1000 children and well over 100 staff receiving Christian teaching and prayers.

We are keen to continue with our school involvement and provide virtual assemblies which we send to all the schools.

We have continued meeting our children and youth via Zoom. In our meeting this week we decided to bake a cake, sell it to family members, the proceeds being used to provide an easter gift for the children who are recipients of our Sunday lunches.

Just prior to lock-down last year we had launched our building project for All Saints Church. At the open evening we had only a few representatives from agencies and groups in the community. It was difficult to ask people to complete questionnaires in support of the project as there wasn't much relationship between All Saints and agencies who provide support to people.

This last month a new questionnaire was prepared – and what a difference in the asking and response. So many agencies supporting our effort and also saying that they would make use of our premises... which will have an upgraded kitchen, toilets, shower room etc. We are keen to have a shower-room to enable us to offer a shower and a clean set of clothing to some of the homeless people we encounter here in Newtown.



I can safely and confidently say that we are heading to become a church that strives to meet the five 'Marks of Mission' mentioned above.

Both my ministry and the mission of our church has been transformed for the best.

As regards the smaller churches in the more rural areas – Llanllwchaiarn is a sister church to All Saints – many members attend both churches.

Llanwyddelan is now engaging more with others in the community who are non-church. Members are involved with the delivering of lunches and we are keen to develop a community group to encourage care of our creation. We are also looking to provide teas to those living on their own and isolated. We are also keen to develop the church as a prayer centre.

Aberhafesp – we had a very successful Fair Trade coffee morning once a month pre-COVID – with a FT shop. There is a small team of pastoral assistants that work diligently in caring for people in the community.

Tea is prepared and delivered once a month to those living on their own or who are isolated. This is a church that is keen to become Eco-friendly.

---

## A Muslim Response

Dr Abdul-Azim Ahmed,  
**Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Wales**  
**Muslim Communities and the COVID-19 Response**

In March last year, when the full extent of the globally seismic pandemic had made themselves clear, Muslims in Wales braced themselves to react to the changes that were coming. All but the most prescient would have known the full extent of the challenges the next 12 months would bring, and even suggestions that the pandemic and its effects would last 18 months or longer seemed excessive. One year on however, and despite significant difficulties, Muslim communities in Wales have responded with compassion and competency to the problems posed by “lockdown” and the pandemic.

### Making Mosques Safe

The first order of business in March 2020 was the closure of mosques. The initial work had begun before restrictions on places of worship were announced by either Westminster or the Welsh Government, with Dar-ul-Isra Mosque and Madina Mosque in Cardiff both closing their doors. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020, almost every mosque in Wales had closed, the next day, it became legislation. Mosques taking steps to close before a legal obligation underlined how seriously and competently mosque leaders were dealing with the pandemic, prioritising the safety of their community and their congregants. It is a theme that ran through pandemic.

As the Muslim Council of Wales, we communicated and co-ordinated closures, putting mosques in touch with each other, ensuring they were aware of the practical steps involved, and taking the time to speak to every mosque individually to ascertain their circumstances and situation.

This became valuable as we moved into the summer. The prolonged closure of mosques posed a challenge to the vitality and sustainability of mosques, with donations necessary for running costs ceasing during this period. In this period of closure, the Muslim Council of Wales continued planning for opening with mosques, considering the measures and means needed to keep mosques safe. This led to an appointment of a COVID Safety Officer in Welsh mosques, to act as a single point of contact in every mosque for ensuring compliance with regulations, undertaking risk assessments, and considering measures that could be taken to minimise risk. As the rest of society opened up, with non-essential retail, tourism, and catering opening up, it seemed the right time for places of worship to also be allowed to re-open. The importance of places of worship to both individual and communal well-being is well-established, and as many mosques in Wales had closed in advance of legislation,

we felt that mosque management were best placed to make careful and considered decisions about whether to open and close. The Welsh Government had by now established a Task and Finish group on reopening places of worship, and following consultation and communication, we were pleased that places of worship were allowed to reopen for August 2020. Mosques across Wales had reacted and planned carefully, introducing acts of worship and regular activities only after risk assessments and introducing necessary measures.

The tail end of 2020 saw a brief 2-week closure during the October and November “firebreak”, and the introduction of new rules for Christmas with Alert Level Four. For mosques, which are primarily volunteer-led institutions, adapting and keeping abreast of changes in legislation and regulation, is itself difficult. The Muslim Council of Wales provided, as much as possible, guidance and structure for the mosques. We also became a reference point for mosques in considering how legislation applied to their individual mosque, or how to deal with a new circumstance.

As we move into Spring 2021, the Ramadan, the most sacred month of the Islamic calendar, approaches. Ramadan 2020 saw the unique situation of mosques in the British Isles being entirely closed, leading to a difficult period of isolation during an important period of community worship. It is hoped Ramadan 2021 will allow Muslims to observe the month as they would regularly, but the danger of the pandemic has not receded, and so careful planning and adjustments will be needed.

### Radio Ramadhan 2020

One initiative that emerged from the Muslim Council of Wales’ collective response to the pandemic was Radio Ramadhan 2020. Radio Ramadan is a nation-wide phenomenon of local radio stations that broadcast on a FM channel during the month, and in previous years, the Muslim Council of Wales had co-ordinated the project. This year, a group of volunteers had the idea to set up an online Radio Ramadhan ([radioramadhan.cymru](http://radioramadhan.cymru)), and set up the website and a new organisation to run it. During the month, it livestreamed mosque prayers, sermons and lectures, and hosted both light-hearted and serious shows produced by Muslims in Wales. Examples included an evening quiz show, a news discussion show, podcasts on Muslim history, and also a Welsh language show.

Radio Ramadhan was an innovative response to a unique challenge, and helped isolated Muslims keep in contact with one another during a difficult time.

### Muslim-led Charity Services

The pandemic has been a period of uncertainty for many, especially those already facing poverty, the elderly, and the isolated. Mosques across the country, including

in Wales, stepped up to provide services. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims produced a report “Rising to the Challenge” which documented the wide range of services offered by Muslim groups. In Wales, this included foodbanks and open-kitchens (offered by mosques in Cardiff, Swansea, Wrexham, and Bangor), fundraising for PPE (for example, the £15,000 raised by Dar-ul-Isra Mosque in Cardiff), as well as volunteer response groups delivering food, prescriptions, and other emergency support. A lovely story, shared on Twitter by one non-Muslim individual, indicated how a local mosque (allkhlaas in Cardiff) reached out to offer a befriending service. As she was feeling lonely and isolated at the time, she took it up, and valued that it was only the local mosque that reached out to her in this way.

### Funerals, Burials, and Washing the Deceased

A key issue that needed to be addressed and planned for in the early stages of the pandemic was how to manage the funerals, burials, and washing of the deceased under COVID-19 regulations. This applied both to those who died of non-COVID-19 related causes as well as those who did. With a significant degree of uncertainty of what the figures for those who died from COVID-19 would look like, the Muslim Council of Wales worked with partners in local authorities and the Welsh Government to ascertain the maximum capacity available in Muslim cemeteries, and the pinch-points in processing the deceased through the various ritual and bureaucratic necessities. This included contacting all the mosques in Wales to ensure they knew the key contacts for funerals and burials. This was considerably easier in urban centres, where many funeral services were already well-established. In rural localities, many mosques relied on services and provision provided from outside the local area (at times, England), which created problems due to limitations on travel (and safety, even when allowances could be made).

A secondary issue that emerged was whether or not to wash the body. Under normal circumstances, the Muslim deceased would have their body washed by volunteers and family before burial. Due to COVID-19, this meant the volunteers for washing the body posed a risk to each other due to potential transmission of the virus. In addition, there was uncertainty around the safety of washing the body of someone who had died of COVID-19. Following research and guidance undertaken by authoritative groups, ranging from the Board of British Scholars and Imams and the British Islamic Medical Association, who consulted World Health Organisation guidelines, it was confirmed that there was a very minimal risk of transmission of COVID-19 from a deceased body, but that this should be further minimised by using appropriate Personal Protective Equipment. Muslim religious authorities had also issued guidance, with some indicating a symbolic wipe of the body bag would be sufficient during a pandemic, whereas others indicating that if a full-body-wash could be done safely, it should be done. This meant Muslims themselves were divided

on the issue. A final challenge was that as the body wash would need to be done by volunteers, there were significant gaps in legal protection. A venue, such as a mosque, could facilitate the washing of the dead physically, but would be unable to offer legal protection or insurance against liability. This became a tense period between Muslims, with some indicating it was unethical for volunteers to wash the deceased without legal protection, with others considering it inhumane to prevent willing volunteers from honouring the wishes of the deceased on the basis of a bureaucratic technicality.

Facilitating Muslim groups, funeral providers, local authorities, and Welsh Government to plan and manage these challenges has led to a reasonably smooth process across Wales around burials, allowing families to focus on the emotional toll of the loss rather than bureaucracy. Thankfully, the early days of the pandemic had a reasonably low number of deaths, but the “second spike” in Autumn 2020 had many more Muslims lost to the virus. The frameworks established early on ensured there was no scrambling or uncertainty in the process during this stage.

A secondary issue that emerged was whether or not to wash the body. Under normal circumstances, the Muslim deceased would have their body washed by volunteers and family before burial. Due to COVID-19, this meant the volunteers for washing the body posed a risk to each other due to potential transmission of the virus. In addition, there was uncertainty around the safety of washing the body of who had died of COVID-19. Following research and guidance undertaken by authoritative groups, ranging from the Board of British Scholars and Imams and the British Islamic Medical Association, who consulted World Health Organisation guidelines, it was confirmed that there was a very minimal risk of transmission of COVID-19 from a deceased body, but that this should be further minimised by using appropriate Personal Protective Equipment. Muslim religious authorities had also issued guidance, with some indicating a symbolic wipe of the body bag would be sufficient during a pandemic, whereas others indicating that if a full-body-wash could be done safely, it should be done. This meant Muslims themselves were divided on the issue. A final challenge was that as the body wash would need to be done by volunteers, there were significant gaps in legal protection. A venue, such as a mosque, could facilitate the washing of the dead physically, but would be unable to offer legal protection or insurance against liability. This became a tense period between Muslims, with some indicating it was unethical for volunteers to wash the deceased without legal protection, with others considering it inhumane to prevent willing volunteers from honouring the wishes of the deceased on the basis of a bureaucratic technicality.

Facilitating Muslim groups, funeral providers, local authorities, and Welsh Government to plan and manage these challenges has led to a reasonably smooth process across Wales around burials, allowing families to focus on the emotional toll

of the loss rather than bureaucracy. Thankfully, the early days of the pandemic had a reasonably low number of deaths, but the “second spike” in Autumn 2020 had many more Muslims lost to the virus. The frameworks established early on ensured there was no scrambling or uncertainty in the process during this stage.

## Vaccine Hesitancy

In late 2020 into early 2021, a series of vaccines developed were released and approved for use in the United Kingdom, followed by an ambitious vaccine delivery scheme. Research had however indicated that there was increasing vaccine hesitancy amongst Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority populations, a large proportion of whom are Muslim. In order to respond to this, the Muslim Council of Wales put together a group of Muslim doctors to consider the best way to ensure take-up of the vaccine amongst Muslims in Wales. This group emerged as “Muslim Doctors Cymru”, a now independent organisation in the process of formalisation. Muslim Doctors Cymru and the Muslim Council of Wales collectively organised a campaign to raise awareness of the vaccine and its importance. This included first undertaking a survey of BAME views towards the vaccine, run in co-operation with a range of charities including the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team and Race Council Cymru. The findings of the survey are being collated and presented to Public Health Wales. There were also a series of online webinars between medical doctors and religious professionals, chaired by well-known members of the public, that addressed key concerns about the vaccines and allowed audience members to ask questions. These have been held in English, Arabic, Bengali, Urdu, and Somali, attracting several hundred attendees between them.

## Building Alliances to Build Back Better

COVID-19 has been difficult, breaking down the ability for people to meet, families to get together, and for worshippers to congregate. But through the crisis, it has also been an opportunity to bring together groups and organisations digitally, building new relationships. Going forward, these new relationships will be vital in rebuilding society once the pandemic passes, ensuring we can do so more fairly, equitably, and compassionately.

## An Overview of Modern Slavery in Wales in 2021

Alison R Ussery  
Haven of Light CIC

In the past decade the terms modern slavery and human trafficking have become increasing common in media articles and news reports throughout the UK. This is a crime that involves the abuse of a human being by another through forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced criminality, domestic servitude or another form of exploitation. Men, women, young people and children become victims where deception, threats, violence and coercion are used to control them as they are treated as simple commodities to be bought, sold, used and abused.

In this article we will consider some of the facts and realities of this very serious and complex crime, and where exploitation has been identified in Wales. We will also look at how the national situation has changed through the COVID 19 pandemic, and how community outreach work has been affected.

As people of good will and faith, church congregations and civil society, we each have a role that we can play to do something about the terrible crime of modern slavery in our communities at a local level and globally, and we will consider this after focusing first on the national picture.

Human trafficking is part of modern slavery. In many countries the term is used instead of modern slavery, and as a crime, it takes its definition from the Palermo Protocol 2000<sup>41</sup> where there is always an 'action', a 'means' and a 'purpose' for taking a person into a situation through force, threats, deception or coercion with the intention to exploit him or her. Human trafficking is different from people smuggling. In the former, the commodity is the person, and it does not have to involve movement, for a person can be exploited in their own home, as we see in online sexual exploitation of children. People smuggling is the movement across a border illegally through consent where money usually changes hands to take someone to another country. Here, the commodity is the service provided.

It is estimated that there are more than 40.3 million people who are trapped in modern slavery and human trafficking in the world today<sup>42</sup>. One in four victims are children, while 25 million people are in forced labour<sup>43</sup>. Modern slavery is a very lucrative global industry which creates profits of over \$150 billion a year. There is a great deal of work to be done by leading actors in our world to gain control against this inhumane crime and begin to prosecute the criminals in a more effective way, for according to the USA Trafficking in Persons Report in 2019 there were just 9548

41 <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>

42 <https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/global-findings/>

43 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_575479.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf)

convictions in the whole world<sup>44</sup>, which equates to a 99.98% chance that an offence will not result in a conviction, so it is a very low risk, high profit business. Meanwhile men, women and children continue to be trapped and traded.

It is common to think that modern slavery only happens in far off, 'less developed' countries where people are experiencing poverty, conflict and unstable social status, but this is a crime that happens everywhere.

In 2019 there were over 10,600 individuals in the UK who were officially identified as potential victims of modern slavery and entered into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). These are people who have come to the attention of the responsible agencies and have given consent (if adult) to be entered into the system. It is understood that there are many more men and women who are living in our communities and experiencing exploitation and abuse who have not been found and taken to safety or are too frightened to ask for help. Children who are considered to be victims of exploitation are automatically entered into the NRM where their support begins. Data published by the Home Office for January to September 2020 gives a figure of 7576 individuals who have been entered into the NRM.<sup>45</sup> In Wales in 2019 there were 329 potential victims identified.

A common misconception is that victims found in the UK are foreign nationals who have been smuggled or trafficked into the UK illegally. However, in 2019 27% of referrals were British citizens. Individuals who are vulnerable for one reason or another have found themselves tricked and forced into situations of horrible abuse.

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic some of the most common forms of modern slavery where labour exploitation was identified were in car washes, construction, fast food, nail bars, factories, agriculture, cleaning companies and more. As our country went into lockdown, many vulnerable and exploited people became even more vulnerable. It is thought that people were simply moved from one industry to another, where they could keep working. For example, the cultivation of cannabis has continued in hidden sites, as well as drug dealing and the sex industry. "In Wales, two suspected victims were identified in rented accommodation after a neighbour called the police complaining that there were people coming in and out and not abiding by the lockdown rules. One of the women disclosed that she had been trafficked and forced to provide sexual services."<sup>46</sup> As the demand for food production and delivery services have grown, this has been an area where exploitation has had the opportunity to grow.

Men and women who had found themselves in debt to their exploiters through abuse within recruitment processes have become more tangled and trapped in the 'debt bondage' of control. Some people will have paid a great deal to be brought

44 <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-TIP-Report-Complete-062420-FINAL.pdf>

45 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/931982/national-referral-mechanism-statistics-uk-quarter-3-2020-july-to-september-hosb3320.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/931982/national-referral-mechanism-statistics-uk-quarter-3-2020-july-to-september-hosb3320.pdf)

46 P65 <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/It-Still-Happens-Here.pdf>



to the country in the belief that they had a job and accommodation provided, only to have found out on arrival that they had been dupped into a situation of abuse. When lockdown forced businesses to close and everyone to stay at home, these people may have had no way out and have since built up debts for housing and food that they will be forced to pay back.

Benefit fraud by criminals has been widespread through the pandemic where universal credit and the furlough scheme has been used to bring in more money.

A lot of the sexual exploitation moved online throughout the last year, and recruitment for jobs and illegal activities, such as drug dealing were evident on “end-to-end encrypted apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and more recently Wickr. The use of social media is already a core part of the county lines model, used to market the availability of drugs, recruit and groom young people and arrange deals.”<sup>47</sup>

The crime known as ‘county lines’ is a very serious concern in Wales. Young people are being groomed and recruited by gangs to act as drug mules – to carry and sell drugs in our rural and seaside towns. These young people are duped into getting involved in gang activity through gifts, free drink and drugs and a sense of ‘belonging’. Sadly there is a violent and vicious process as the criminals get more control and demand more action. “The gangs who operate county lines have always proven highly versatile and adaptable. During lockdown they displayed an ability to embrace new tactics in order to protect lucrative drugs lines... There is no clear evidence that demand for crack and heroin declined during lockdown and by retreating from the market, even temporarily, gangs risk ceding territory to rival groups. The operators of lucrative county lines were heavily incentivised to modify their patterns of recruitment and exploitation, embracing new methods of transport, distribution and retail rather than putting their drugs lines on furlough.”<sup>48</sup>

Awareness programmes that were taking place in schools have paused and outreach services to survivors living in the community have been affected. This is a serious concern because so many of those people who have lived through modern slavery offences have had very traumatic experiences with long-lasting effects and the forced isolation that came with the lockdown brought more emotional trauma.

Having briefly identified some of the realities of modern slavery in our communities and the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic, we should consider what we can do to make a significant difference on the ground. How can we work with others in collaboration and coproduction approaches to highlight the risks, identify the signs and reach out to care for and support individuals living among us?

47 P65 <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/It-Still-Happens-Here.pdf>  
48 [https://b9cf6cd4-6aad-4419-a368-724e7d1352b9.usrfiles.com/ugd/b9cf6c\\_83c53411e21d4d40a79a6e0966ad7ea5.pdf](https://b9cf6cd4-6aad-4419-a368-724e7d1352b9.usrfiles.com/ugd/b9cf6c_83c53411e21d4d40a79a6e0966ad7ea5.pdf)

Awareness raising is important, as we teach our young people about the dangers of being groomed and recruited by gangs or informing community and faith groups about the realities around us and what to do if suspicions arise. There is a really important role that each one of us can take in finding a way to care for those who need support. As victims of modern slavery are taken through the official channels within the NRM, they are legally entitled to receive advice and support based on the Council of Europe’s Convention on Action against the Trafficking of Human Beings<sup>49</sup>, and the UK’s Modern Slavery Act<sup>50</sup>, but we can also play our part in reaching out to these people and helping them to know that they are cared about.

There are agencies throughout Wales such as the Citizens Advice, who can offer advice on areas such as debt, employment, housing, education etc. As members of our communities, we can provide practical ‘on the ground’ ways to walk alongside survivors and those at risk.

For example, churches run a whole range of initiatives from ‘mums and baby’ groups, debt advice cafes, lunches and social clubs from the elderly.

Why not reach out to the organisations looking after survivors and invite them along! Some people in safehouses and community accommodation would love to have the opportunity to attend a church service but might be too afraid to find a church and attend alone. Another wonderful initiative would be to find out the gender, nationality and age of individuals who are being cared for in each town, mission area or diocese and prepare ‘care packages’ for each one according to their needs. How wonderful it would be if a person from another country and culture could be invited to a meal where food from their homeland is prepared for them.

Every human being has the right to freedom. We are all equal and should treat each other with respect and love. We can look to the Bible and see the value and importance of ‘loving our neighbours’ and reaching out to the oppressed and marginalised. It doesn’t have to be complicated to do a simple act of kindness for a vulnerable person who might be at risk of becoming a victim, or to befriend someone who has experienced such an abuse.

We are living in such unusual times where so much of our security in life has been stripped away. I can only imagine what it would feel like to have lost my home, income and all hope to the point where I was so vulnerable that I risked everything for the sake of my family, only to be trapped in slavery. I would hope that someone would notice and want to reach out their hand to help me.

Modern slavery and human trafficking is a global justice issue, which should be taken as seriously as other concerns affecting our world today. Just as we look at climate change, the environment, education and health, it is important to stand up

49 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/home?desktop=true>  
50 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents/enacted>

and campaign for justice for the oppressed and marginalised in our world today – our fellow human beings who like each one of us are ‘made in the image of God’. As the deadline for the UN Sustainable Development Goals<sup>51</sup> gets closer the need to speak out and influence change increases, and action has to be taken to prevent slavery and forced labour, to support survivors in the best and most loving ways possible and bring perpetrators to justice.

Haven of Light CIC<sup>52</sup> is a charitable organisation based in North Wales that focuses on the issues of modern slavery and human trafficking, working locally with community groups and churches, and in collaboration with statutory agencies. We are also involved in other national and international advocacy initiatives and we are a member of the European Freedom Network<sup>53</sup>.

Our mission is to work on the ground in local communities to raise awareness of this issue and among people who need our help, bringing our knowledge and skills to move towards the global eradication of modern slavery.

For information, to get involved, to give towards our work, or to let us know that you are willing to support us through prayer, please contact [info@havenoflight.uk](mailto:info@havenoflight.uk)

51 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

52 <https://www.havenoflight.co.uk/>

53 <https://www.europeanfreedomnetwork.org/>

## A Response from Rural Wales

The Reverend Ian Morris

### Lead Chaplain Royal Welsh Agricultural Society Chaplaincy Team

The pandemic has had an enormous effect on the Showground and consequently on the work of chaplains to the Showground. All events at the Showground were either postponed or cancelled from the beginning of the first Lockdown in March 2020, which was to all extents and purposes before the Royal Welsh Showground's Annual Season had begun. All staff at the Showground were furloughed under the Government's Job Retention Scheme and shortly after this it was announced that the 2020 Royal Welsh Show had been cancelled. No events have been held at the Showground since then, except for the COVID-19 Testing Centre and the COVID-19 Vaccination Centre. These are staffed by NHS Workers and Volunteers and so do not involve Showground Staff, other than as necessary to open the Site. The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society are not charging for use of the Showground for COVID-19 purposes, except to ask for payment of utility charges (principally electricity).

The RWAS Chaplaincy Service made a decision at an early stage in the Pandemic that chaplains would not attend the Showground until further notice unless requested to do so by the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society. Although this goes against the natural instinct of chaplains, which is to be with people and to offer them pastoral support, we stand by our decision on two bases. Firstly, this is to protect the health of chaplains. Most of our chaplains undertake caring and pastoral roles away from the Showground and therefore it would be ethically questionable for us to expose them to risk by attending COVID-19 Testing/Vaccination Centres which could lead to them being unable to carry out their other duties if they caught COVID-19. Secondly, we felt that our presence might hinder, rather than support, the work of the COVID-19 Centres. Should those Centres require chaplains, they could call upon NHS Chaplains, or us through the RWAS. That however is their decision to make.

The Lead Chaplain has maintained e-mail contact with the Chief Executive Officer of the RWAS and with each Showground Chaplain throughout the Pandemic. This has been both to offer pastoral support and to maintain a flow of information between the Showground and the Chaplaincy Service. The Sponsoring Body of the Chaplaincy Service has also been kept fully informed of developments and has contributed richly to the work of the Chaplaincy Service.

The Sponsoring Body of the Chaplaincy Service is now chaired by the Bishop of St. David's, following the retirement from that role of the Revd. Simon Walkling, Moderator of the United Reformed Church Synod of Wales. We thank Simon for his huge input as Chair and are grateful that he remains a member of the Sponsoring Body.

The Chaplaincy Team, the Sponsoring Body and the RWAS have taken this opportunity to work on a new format for the RWAS Chaplaincy Service, including revised Role Descriptions for RWAS Chaplains. The new format has now been adopted, although the role Description has still to be finalised. Under the new Format, the RWAS formally recognises that chaplains offer pastoral support to Showground Staff both during and between Events at the Showground. The Chaplaincy Team will continue to maintain a Duty Roster for chaplaincy at Events on the Showground but will also have a Duty Roster during the non-event periods. The Lead Chaplain's telephone number will be made widely available to all Showground Staff. Any member of Staff who wishes to contact a chaplain may call that number at any time. The Lead Chaplain will then refer that person on to whichever chaplain is on duty at that time. In due course, an automated telephone system for doing this may be acquired, if there is sufficient demand to justify this.

The ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic creates the complication that chaplaincy must be offered remotely, both because chaplains are unable to travel to the Showground until the Travel Restrictions are lifted and due to the personal and public health reasons outlined above. In view of this the RWAS has agreed to give the Lead Co-ordinating Chaplain's telephone number to all their furloughed staff so that they can contact the Chaplaincy Service if they wish to. The Lead Co-ordinating Chaplain will either offer direct pastoral support or ask a member of the Chaplaincy Team to contact the caller and offer pastoral support. In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (UK), no telephone numbers will be exchanged without the permission of both principal parties.



In the future, post-pandemic, it may be that some of those chaplains who live closest to the Showground might agree to attend site at advertised times and dates to offer non-remote pastoral support as has sometimes occurred in the past. This matter has yet to be developed.

## A Response from the Urdu/Hindi Christian Fellowships in Wales

The Reverend Irfan John

### Synod Enabler Culturally Diverse Congregations, Methodist Church Wales

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unfortunate and unexpected turn of events for the whole world and the universal church. As a congregation, both the Cardiff and Swansea Urdu/Hindi Fellowships also faced many challenges at personal and shared levels and in guidance with government support regulations, we managed to continue our church activities and grow closer together as a congregation in God's love during such a difficult time.

As physical church services were suspended all over the country during the initial lockdown period, I decided with other members of the congregations to use this time wisely in several ways. Rather than be out of touch with members of the congregation not being able to hold church services, we moved our church services to digital platforms. Beginning in late March, I started to lead 30-minute-long prayer meetings every evening with two separate families each day on video calls. These were dozens of families from all over the country with whom my family was regularly praying with and sharing time learning the Word of God. These daily services ran for a period of around two months and the response from our congregations was wonderful. The daily prayer meetings were being rotated between different families depending on what times best suited everyone for entire families could be present during the prayer time and there were many families from the Cardiff, and Swansea congregations who were joining me for multiple prayer meetings every week.

Leading on from the daily meeting with individual church families, our Good Friday and Easter Sunday services brought in a new change for the Cardiff and Swansea Urdu/Hindi Fellowships. These two services were held through a Facebook live stream which was open to the public and anyone and everyone was able to attend. There was a uniqueness to both these services as it was not only me leading the service from home but many members of the church congregations also took part in various roles through their digital presence. Where I myself was physically present in front of the camera and delivered the Word of God, I requested church members to send in pre-recorded prayers, bible readings, praise and worship and their testimonies which were played live within Facebook which was a means to encourage the congregation to take part in church services. Since then, our Facebook live services have been taking place every single Sunday and many viewers are tuning in to join the services each week from countries all over the world.

Beginning at midday on Friday 8th May 2020, I encouraged our Cardiff and Swansea Urdu/Hindi Fellowships to tune into a 24hr Zoom live stream for a continuous day of prayer, worship, sharing and bible study. Along with myself and my wife and kids, members from the congregation took turns to lead us in prayer for all those affected by the global pandemic. In our time of prayer, we remembered those families who have lost their loved ones, those struggling with the virus, those who had been affected financially, for the NHS, armed forces, our government and leaders who dedicated their time and efforts into this battle with COVID-19.

This was a wonderful initiative and a huge encouragement for our entire Indian/Pakistani Christian community because in the most uncertain times around the initial spike of the COVID-19 pandemic, this time of virtual togetherness as a community and fellowship in the body of Christ provided an uplifting feeling in both a physical and spiritual sense. At this time I also announced a daily Zoom meeting which was in place from May to August where along from the Sunday service on Facebook live, I held church services on Zoom every single week day which also gave opportunities to listen to guest speakers/worshippers and also there were services led by church families. From September onwards, the daily Zoom meetings have been reduced to once a week (every Friday).

Throughout the pandemic, we as a congregation have been in touch with each other in support of those affected by COVID-19. There have been a few unfortunate cases of people from our church who have tested positive and in regards with government guidelines and social distancing measures, I have supported these families in any way I can also keeping myself safe, by delivering groceries and cooked meals to the families who struggled health wise with the virus. To do this carefully, I delivered the food by leaving it on their doorstep and they would come to collect it after I left. Furthermore, during the Christmas season with support from the Morrisons supermarket Cardiff Bay, I was able to deliver Christmas presents such as toys and chocolates to children in the congregation to make their Christmas season a little better after a tough year.

In response to the rapid vaccine rollout, members of the Cardiff and Swansea Urdu/Hindi Fellowship are greatly confident in the vaccine and are all happy to take it when their turn comes as allocated by the government. We believe that it is crucial for everyone to be vaccinated and the sooner this is done, the quicker we can all transition back into our everyday lives as the government allows. Myself, as a leader for the South Asian Christian community believe that I need to lead by example and to increase encouragement for taking the vaccine once it is time for me to be vaccinated, with permission from the NHS I plan to record a video of myself having received the vaccine injection to share with my congregation members and that would be a perfect way to lead by example and clear any doubts other people may have regarding the success or effects of the vaccine.

To conclude, myself and my congregation believe that in the near and distant future we need to respond by directly upholding and abiding by government rules and legislation. As Romans 13:1 teaches us that “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” The Cardiff and Swansea Urdu/Hindi Fellowship is happy with current government rules and even with restrictions on attending churches in a physical way we have managed to work around these restrictions and move church services to virtual meetings and we will be happy to do so until further notice as the government believes is best in order to fully tackle this virus and once and for all move to a better future with the Grace of God.

.....

## Interfaith Chaplaincy

### Response to Placing Asylum Seekers at Penally Camp, Tenby.

The Reverend Rob James

#### Lead Chaplain

#### Introduction

The decision to place asylum seekers at the Penally Camp clearly came as a surprise to many. My initial involvement began when I received an email from the Chair of Hywel Dda Health Board. As a result of this I was privileged to help shape a letter that was sent to the Home Secretary on behalf of several key local stakeholders.

I was keen to ensure that the principle of ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ should determine the content and tone, and the local community as well the asylum seekers themselves would know that their concerns were not being ignored.

The following quotations illustrate this well:

*“We are writing to you to express our concern about the decision to relocate asylum seekers in Penally, Pembrokeshire. We are particularly disappointed by the lack of communication and discussion with local stakeholders such as Pembrokeshire County Council and Hywel Dda University Health Board and the local community.”*

*“Proper consultation would have immediately made it clear that Penally Camp is unsuitable accommodation, particularly for men who may have experienced trauma, great hardship and have been separated from their families. The buildings are in a poor condition, in a rural location with one village shop and no established support network. It is unprecedented in Wales that people seeking asylum are ‘cohorted’ together in such a large number in unsuitable accommodation. We have real concerns that they are being moved out of rented accommodation within the Wales refugee support network”.*

Subsequent to this, and following conversations with Rev Aled Edwards (Cytûn), Sian Rees (EA Wales) and others I was asked if I would develop a chaplaincy provision that could offer pastoral support to the service users at the Penally camp.

I agreed to accept this responsibility for several reasons namely,

- My role in helping to draft the letter that was sent to the Home Secretary.
- My understanding of Middle Eastern history and culture (my first undergraduate degree was in Middle Eastern history and Arabic)

- My experience or hospital and industrial chaplaincy
- My conviction that we should do all we can to share God’s love with people of all faiths and none, especially those who are ‘sojourners’ among us.

As Aled Edwards helpfully commented at the time “It’s not in the gift of Cytûn or colleagues in the Interfaith Council for Wales to determine where displaced people are housed but faith communities have always striven to provide pastoral care and support alongside statutory agencies”.

With this in mind we determined to do what we could ‘to make a challenging and sad situation better’.

Thanks to the support of Pembrokeshire County Council I was able to visit the camp together with Aled Edwards, the Police and Crime Commissioner Dafydd Llewellyn and local Imam Abdul Husain.

We were introduced to Jim Webb of Clearsprings who gave us a conducted tour of the camp and introduced us to a number of the men living there. We were able to inform them of our plans for an inter-faith chaplaincy.

Jim Webb was very welcoming and offered us his support, including the provision of appropriate worship space. This has proved to be no empty promise.

Following this visit I drafted a letter to be given to the service users informing them of these plans and assuring them of our concern for their welfare.

#### Strategy

It was obvious from the very outset that given the concerns about the opening of the camp, the lack of any clear guidelines, and changing Covid restrictions that this was going to prove a slow, complicated process. As a result, I adopted the following (flexible) strategy.

## Relationship with 'Clearsprings'

I was convinced that it was critically important to develop a productive relationship with those entrusted with the management of the camp. Trust, mutual respect and support were of the utmost importance.

To further this objective

- I discussed the proposal in a telephone conversation with Mr S Lakey Operations Director of Clearsprings Ready Homes. He affirmed he was very happy with what we were planning.
- I shared the vision with as many church leaders and local churches as possible. These included the Bishop of St David's, who has proved immensely supportive, the Superintendent of the Pembrokeshire Baptist Association as well as ministers and priests representing the URC/Methodist Church, the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Church in Tenby.

The Imam also gave me contact details for the Imam based in Haverfordwest who also expressed his support for the venture.

- I made it clear that those who were wanted to participate should obtain the backing of their church and ensure that their DBS clearance was in date.

As a result the of these discussions the following list of chaplains was agreed and shared with Rev Aled Edwards and the Clearsprings management.

### Muslim

Imam Abdul Hussain Milford Mosque

Mustafa Yunis Chairman Haverfordwest Mosque

### Christian

Rev Martin Cox, Rev Shirley Murphy and Rev Paul Boyle (Church in Wales)

Capt Linda Read (Salvation Army)

Rev Stella and Rev Jon Hayton URC

Rev Phil Vickery (Baptist)

Father Mansel Usher (RC) and his church have also been immensely supportive

and has established warm links with the camp management but he is still waiting confirmation of his DBS clearance. Clearsprings Management are very happy for him to be an online chaplain given his standing as a Roman Catholic priest.

Following their acceptance I emailed them as below:

*Dear .....*

*Thank you for being willing to fulfil this vital ministry.*

*It is important that we work together in a coordinated response to the challenges that face the men at the camp.*

*I would be grateful therefore if you would*

- *Provide me with a regular update so that I can liaise with Rev Aled Edwards at Cytûn and ensure that we are not in danger of duplicating our efforts.*
- *Contact me if you have any concerns or become aware of anything the men need so that we can access all possible sources of help. I have been offered New Testaments in Farsi for example and I know that Imam Hussian has been providing copies of the Quran.*
- *Develop good relationships with the camp authorities and the men now living in Penally whilst doing all you can to show care to those living in the wider community and are having to come to terms with the decision to use Penally in this way as well as the consequences that attend it.*
- *Avoid being used by those who have their own agenda and could compromise our role. Comments to the press can prove helpful but we need to be aware that they can be counterproductive too. Caution and wisdom are needed.*
- *Consider becoming a member a Whatsapp Group that I would set this up so that we are kept up to date with all we are doing.*

I am delighted to say that the relationship with the Clearsprings management has grown stronger over the months, and the chaplains have reported that they have been well received. The following three emails illustrate this very clearly.

Hi Rob,

I visited as arranged 1.30. Met Jim, very sociable and helpful. This was a visit to get the lay of the land. I was shown around the site. Met several asylum seekers superficially as Jim carried on work as we went round, responding to requests from people, for dentist, tablets, information of when they are moving. Met staff from the camp, Oaisi who visits with about 5 plus people on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Met Christians in this team. and an Eritrean Christian called Daniel. Met Paul from Refugee Help again from Cardiff.

It seems this is a holding area whilst more permanent housing is found around Wales they were thinking 4 weeks but it is becoming longer as councils are slow to give permission.

Was told I could do anything. Bible studies, pastoral visits, Alpha. Come any time.

Was wondering about a Bible study set up to see if any takers. Maybe run with another chaplain?

I have Farsi Alpha course Could show that.

Planning to go next Wednesday. all things being well.

Was on the phone outside and police questioned why I was there. Happy when I told them my purpose.

God bless

Phill

Hi, Rob

Thanks!

We made it yesterday, but it was pouring rain so not many people around in the common areas, but Jim showed us around (and we gave him the coats to pass on) and we met a few people, including the ladies in the office and Richard.

He said the Farsi New Testaments would definitely be appreciated, and they now have quite a few people from Ethiopia and Somalia too (sorry, no idea what the languages are), although the chaps we spoke to wanted to practise their English (which was very good).

Jim says he's happy to put up a poster saying when people are going to be available for prayer, worship, Bible Study etc if we send it to him. John and I would be happy to be available once a week; at the moment there are only a few time slots we couldn't really manage and we're local so we can be flexible around everyone else.

Jim's not around next week, and I forgot to ask for another contact number, but I'll wait to hear from you before I get in touch with him again.

God bless,

Stella

Dear Rob,

Hope you are well and keeping safe.

Revd Paul Boyle and I visited Penally camp earlier today and we were given a warm welcome and tour of the site and buildings i.e. the recreation areas and chapels. Paul and I will make arrangements again to visit with the hope of leading a Holy Eucharist service and chatting and meeting more of the camp members.

There has been a request for Bibles. With other Christian denominations and faiths it might be an idea to have a rota of services/visits etc.

I will speak shortly with other team members in the L.M.A. of our visit and try to encourage them in visiting.

With best wishes and prayers,

Martin.

I am happy to report that we have been able to supply Bibles in English and Farsi and worship CD's in Farsi and I am currently awaiting the delivery of two Bibles in Tigrinya.

### **Practical aid and Christmas Initiative**

From the very outset I sought to inform as many churches and individuals as possible that we were seeking to offer spiritual and practical care on an interfaith basis. As a result I have been contacted by individuals and groups from places as widespread as Cardigan, Fishguard, Haverfordwest, Pembroke and Swansea as well as the Tenby area offering material help. These were referred to Clearsprings and/or Migrant

Help, although I did encourage potential donors were encouraged to contact me again if they were having difficulties establishing contact.

On one occasion, for example I was offered a large screen TV and Blue Ray DVD player. These were gratefully received as were the sewing machine and materials that I was given in response to a request from the management to support an asylum seeker who was a tailor by trade.

Given the contentious and delicate context I took the deliberate decision not to provide copy for the press although I did agree to a recent interview with Evangelical Alliance Wales which sought to focus on 'the good things that are happening at the camp'. The resulting article can be found at the end of this report.

Given the many expressions of care I decided to make an appeal for small Christmas presents (suggested limit of £5 per present). There was an amazing response to this appeal and as a result I was able to hand over more than 300 gifts to the men in the week before Christmas. I was also given £2000 to use in ways that I felt would benefit the service users.

### **Provision of 'Tablets'**

Conscious that the latest Covid regulations were hindering personal contact with the service users Rev Aled Edwards and I discussed (with others) the possibility of providing the service users with 'tablets' that would allow them online communication. This was discussed with the Clearsprings management who agreed that this would be a very helpful initiative and said they would arrange for safekeeping and personal use, in private if requested. I was assured that the Wifi provision would be adequate in the selected locations.

As a result the following email was sent to each chaplain

*I trust you had a good weekend and all is well with you*

*We had a profitable time as chaplains last Thursday evening and agreed that given the current covid risks and rules it would be good to establish an online chaplaincy facility. As a result Aled (Edwards) is ordering the purchase of four tablets and I have spoken to Jim Webb of Clearsprings to progress this.*

*I have explained that there will be times when the men may want to speak confidentially and this needs to be taken into account when allocating room space for use of the tablets.*

*I would be grateful therefore if you would let me know*

*Your willingness to take part*

*How much time per week/fortnight? You could allocate to this ministry*

*The most suitable time(s) for you*

*I can then coordinate with Clearsprings.*

*Once again let me say thank you for all your support*

*God bless*

*Rob*

A letter was also sent to the service users which read

*Dear friends*

*I am sorry that the current Covid restrictions are making it so difficult for the chaplains to visit. We want you to know you are important to us and we hope things will improve soon. I am delighted to tell you that we have been given the money to purchase a number of 'tablets' which means we will soon be able to talk and pray with you online.*

*We will let you know the times the chaplains and the Imam are available as soon as the 'tablets' have arrived and have been handed over to the camp. We are also hoping it will not be long before we are able to visit you again on a regular basis. If you think we can be of any help please let us know through the appropriate authorities. I could always arrange telephone conversation.*

*God bless you*

To date some 20 tablets have been purchased and delivered. Ten were very generously donated by DPIA and ten were bought from the monies that had been given. The chaplains have been informed and have been asked to tell the camp management of the times when they will be available so that this can be publicised.

In addition to this we have been able to supply a selection of Bibles in English, Farsi and Tigrinya as well as some worship CDs in Farsi. Some have been purchased some have been kindly given.



## Observations

### Frustrations

Not surprisingly I have felt frustrated because of the restrictions resulting from the current pandemic. It would have been very helpful for us as chaplains to spend more time in personal contact with the service users. It is my prayerful hope that things will improve and I have asked if it might be possible to be told when and where the service users are transferred so that we can put them in touch with appropriate faith communities. This has not happened to date.

### Generosity

The Faith Communities in particular have been amazingly generous although I have also received gifts from others too including one avowed atheist.

### Interdenominational and interfaith cooperation

This has been both encouraging and very helpful. Local Muslim leaders have been immensely friendly and cooperative and there has been a very welcome display of Christian unity both locally and nationally. As the Evangelical Alliance interview says 'It's been encouraging to see the incredible level of collaboration across Christian denominations, organisations such as Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales), the Evangelical Alliance and the local Muslim community.

### Guidelines

I have been grateful for all the help I have been given but on reflection I believe it would be good to learn from this experience and to draw up a document detailing examples of good practice. Perhaps the Home Office in consultation with faith partners could produce some sort of handbook and appoint a (voluntary?) chaplain who would be able to offer advice in any future placements. Access to funding for specific needs would be helpful too eg for translation.

### Conclusion

I have no idea how long the camp will remain open but I do believe we have made an attempt 'to make things better'. The words of our Patron Saint David seem as relevant for this ministry as any other "do the little things, the small things you've seen me doing". As the former Archbishop Rowan Williams has said 'It reminds us that the primary things for us are the relationships around us, the need to work at

what's under our hands, what's within our reach. We can transform our domestic, our family relationships, our national life to some extent, if we do that with focus and concentration in the presence of God'.

.....

## Appendix

Nathan Sadler

### Evangelical Alliance Interview

Last year, the village community of Penally, Pembrokeshire, suddenly found out that over 100 men from the Middle East and north-east Africa had been moved into a local disused army barracks, repurposed as a camp for asylum seekers.

The locals continue to navigate this situation into this year. It has caused much controversy, with local media covering the story and protests from far-right groups being organised. But despite what must be an incredibly lonely and sometimes hostile environment for the men in the camp, there have been some in the community who have consistently shown them love and grace.

Evangelical Alliance Wales' executive chair, Rob James, felt that God was prompting him to help these men. With an academic background in Middle Eastern studies and a sense to act on the verses in Matthew 25:35–36 (For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat), Rob saw this as an opportunity to show the love of Jesus to a group of men who were cut-off and isolated.

Christian and Muslim men from Iran, Iraq and Eritrea live in the camp, so a chaplaincy network was set up to offer pastoral care. Chaplains from nearby churches and an imam from the local mosque have been visiting the camp, providing much-needed comfort and support for the men, and strengthening interfaith relations. It's been encouraging to see the incredible level of collaboration across Christian denominations, organisations such as Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales), the Evangelical Alliance and the local Muslim community.

Because of the willingness of Rob James, Rev Aled Edwards, chief executive of Cytûn, and others, the men in the camp have been welcoming towards the visiting chaplains. In fact, the men have received Bibles in either English or Farsi, as well as CDs of music in Farsi from the local churches and the chaplaincy network. The vision to pastorally support these men has also been shared by those in the local community and further afield, with support being offered from as far as Fishguard and Cardiff.

As friendships developed between the chaplains and the residents, it became known that one man had previously worked as a tailor. Within 24 hours of this coming to light, a sewing machine along with necessary materials was provided so that he could continue his passion inside the camp. During December, Rob and his wife Mo bought and wrapped three presents for each of the men, to ensure they knew they were remembered at Christmas. Rob was also given £2,000 to use in ways that would show them love and care.

With the level four lockdown still in place in Wales, some might assume that it would be impossible to maintain communication. However, there are plans to purchase and distribute tablet devices to the men in the camp so that they can stay in contact with both the chaplains and their loved ones at home.

These acts of kindness at the Penally camp are brilliant examples of people responding to the biblical mandate to love your neighbour, whoever that neighbour might be. Even today, God uses His people to be salt and light in the world. We can be both inspired and challenged by these incredible acts of love and thank God that He continues to care for the most isolated and vulnerable in our communities.

To develop your understanding of how to engage with people of other faiths, check out *The World on our Doorstep*, which was published by the Evangelical Alliance. We'd encourage those who want to support refugees and asylum seekers in their community to reach out to Evangelical Alliance member organisation Welcome Churches.

## A Response by Churches to COVID-19, and the Lessons as we Face a Post-COVID Period

The Reverend Carwyn Siddall  
**Gofalaeth Bro Llanuwchllyn a'r Cylch**  
**(Llanuwchllyn Area Pastorate)**

In the early months of 2020, it came to the attention of the press that a disease was spreading throughout the world – an invisible infection that everyone, whoever or whatever they were, would come to know its effects and consequences. This was a disease that led the United Kingdom to announce a strict lockdown that spring.

This was an infection that affected human health, but in the wake of the inevitable steps taken to prevent its spread, side effects were also seen. As people are the essence of every faith community, and what gives a church its life is people, it was inevitable that this pandemic would affect, influence and shape the churches and faith communities in our country, whether in terms of their need to respond the needs of the people or to adapt in the wake of the legislation that would come into force in relation to gathering together.

*Gofalaeth Bro Llanuwchllyn* consists of two Union of Welsh Independents Churches, one Baptist Church, and three Presbyterian Churches. Although each Church is independent of the others (that is, the Pastorate is not a United Church), those Churches, in the name of the *Gofalaeth Bro*, act and work very closely together. For example, many of our activities take place in the name of the *Gofalaeth Bro* for all members of the Pastorate. Also, since all Churches that are part of the *Gofalaeth Bro* belong to a denomination that subscribes the Interdenominational Safeguarding Panel, all safeguarding issues are handled by the Pastorate Safeguarding Panel. As it became clear that the pandemic would affect everyone everywhere, even in the rural area of Penllyn, it was decided to appoint a panel of six Officers from the *Gofalaeth Bro*, chaired by the Minister, to steer us through the crisis.

Underpinning the panel's initial activity was the advice that came from the denominations centrally. Admittedly, those briefings varied in nature, and we felt that some were too simplistic and superficial, while others were too complex. In due course, following further research on the Welsh Government and UK Government websites, the websites of other denominations such as the United Reformed Church and the Cytûn website, we proceeded to create our own policy that would clearly set out the actions and procedures that we as a Pastorate would implement and how those steps would affect all aspects of our activity. This policy was shared on the Pastorate website, and paper copies were printed and distributed in the services at the end of February.

On the last Sunday before lockdown, which was 15 March 2020, two comments were expressed which, in retrospect, were to be key as we faced lockdown, namely:

- i. that we had to ensure that spiritual provision continued;
- ii. that practical ways had to be considered of supporting those who would be self-isolating.

Each response from us as a Pastorate has been an expression of both of those things.

### Spiritual Provision

On Sundays, two integral activities of the Pastorate are holding a Service and Sunday School, with Sunday School including children's and adult's classes. When it was announced that we were entering lockdown with immediate effect, ensuring continuity in these activities was a priority. As we considered possible options, I was fortunate in that a member offered to assist, specifically by filming a weekly Service led by the Minister, and also a children's and adults' Sunday School lesson. A YouTube channel was created for broadcasting. The first Service was broadcast on the first Sunday of lockdown, 22 March. By the following Sunday, a children's Sunday School lesson was added to the provision, and on the following Sunday, 5 April, a Service, a children's Sunday School lesson and an adult's Sunday School class were broadcast. Most members were able to watch the provision on the internet, but for those who did not have access to the web, a copy was provided on DVD or in leaflet form, and these were distributed weekly. A PDF version of all provision was also placed on the website offering anyone the opportunity to download and read it.

Prayer is an integral part of our spiritual lives, and we felt the need to encourage people to discover anew the power of prayer, and to realise the blessing that can come from responding to Christ's own leading, by retreating to a quiet room to come near to God in prayer. It was decided to encourage people to do this by setting aside each Friday as a day of prayer, and different members were asked, in turn, to compose a prayer as a template and guide for others. These prayers were again uploaded to our website in PDF format, and also produced as a leaflet for those receiving Services by post, and it was very positive to see so many of our members agreeing to write a prayer.

A resident of the village of Llanuwchllyn asked if it would be possible to arrange for us to stand outside our homes on Easter Sunday evening to sing a few hymns to mark the prime festival of our Faith. That was arranged, with the accompaniment available 'live' on everyone's mobile phone at the same time. Although the signal varied in different parts of the village and valleys, and not everyone could be synchronised in singing, for very many this proved to be a great blessing

because, although they were encouraged to watch the Sunday Service at 2:00pm in order to feel that they were co-worshipping with others, that was in reality an isolated experience – but the singing was an opportunity to feel part of the church community, while keeping to the guidelines. The original format was later changed somewhat, by buying a loudspeaker to be installed in the centre of the village to play the accompaniment, together with a microphone for one of our precentors to lead the singing, and this became an extremely popular and much blessed weekly activity.

Two weddings had been arranged for August 2020 in the Old Chapel, and as it happens, that is the largest building in the pastorate, with seating for 450 people. As the Government had by then allowed services to resume, while adhering to strict guidelines, it was agreed to prepare the building to be able to host both weddings. We had not recommenced hosting Sunday Services at that time. Making the arrangements was painstaking work, with the Council's requirements being very detailed. Several things had to be considered, and a number of key points became clear. For example, for the bride to be able to walk down the path to the front of the chapel, no-one could sit on one side of the chapel because the aisle was not wide enough to maintain a social distance of two metres. We also had to consider our provision for the registrar at the signing, for example, providing gloves for everyone because everybody would be using the same pen, and keeping a safe distance between everyone as they approached the register. We had to submit three proposals before the Council could approve an acceptable risk assessment, and this provided a valuable basis for preparing risk assessments for the conduct of Sunday Services and funerals in the building. The Registry Office congratulated us on our arrangements and thanked us. Through this experience, we also realised how superficial some denominations' guidelines for the churches were regarding the preparation of risk assessments. We brought this matter up with some denominations, but they were somewhat reluctant to respond to our comments. Some churches contacted us for help and guidance, but as the risk assessments were prepared specifically for the layout and requirements of our building, it was decided not to share the risk assessments in case they might be adopted in their entirety. Instead, we prepared guidance based on our experience.

As the Old Chapel had been made ready, and since that was the largest building in the Pastorate, it was decided that all the Pastorate's Services would be held there when we decided to recommence holding Services on the second Sunday in September. The centralisation of all the Services there was also necessary as not every Church in the Pastorate has a building of their own (that is, they hire other buildings), and the other buildings used were too small for the congregation - keeping to the two metre rule meant that the number of people who could attend at the other buildings ranged from four to eleven. The congregations were divided into three bubbles, namely:

- i. Bala and Rhosygwaliau Independents
- ii. Cynllwyd, Carmel branch and Peniel branch
- iii. Aion, Glanaber and the Old Chapel

The first bubble was invited to attend a service at 10:00 every Sunday, the second bubble at 2:00 one Sunday and then at 5:30 the following Sunday, and the third bubble the same as the second bubble, but with the times reversed. As 30 seats were usable in the building, holding three services was necessary, with the bubble 1 and 2 congregation ranging from 10 to 15 every Sunday, and the bubble 2 numbers ranging from 15 to 25. On average, 45-50 attended every Sunday, and around 80 of the members had attended a service between September and December. It is very interesting to note that a large number of those attending were people who lived alone, so it was possible that attending a service was an opportunity to see people as well as to be involved in the worship itself. The result of holding three services was that there was a need for thorough cleaning between them, and those who had been appointed as stewards for each service took on the task of cleaning. PPE was provided for them to carry out their work as stewards and to clean, and dedicated cleaning equipment was also provided. Between the services a 'fogger' machine was used to purify the air, and the building was thoroughly ventilated.

One interesting aspect that I had to consider, and which deserves attention here, is Communion. As Nonconformists, our emphasis on Communion is not as pronounced as is seen in some other traditions, but having said that, this is one of the sacraments of the Church which is a key part of their spiritual life for many of our members. It seemed that some churches celebrated the sacrament virtually, while others, such as the Church in Wales, provided a liturgy for a Spiritual Communion where the bread and wine are not received. Easter Sunday was the only Sunday on which we held Communion in video form. A number of members prepared the elements and consumed them in their homes while watching the service, while others watched and spent a period in silence and prayer during the Communion. Theologically, this was difficult for me in leading the Service as the essence of the invitation is to come together around the table and receive from the same bread and wine. With that thought in mind, I did not lead a virtual Communion service thereafter. However, during lockdown, reception classes had been held on Zoom, and eleven of the young people wanted to be accepted as full members. A special service was arranged on the afternoon of Saturday 19 December, and we were able, while adhering to the guidelines, to administer Communion then.

As a minister, I believe that pastoral care is an integral part of the ministry and of the life and work of the Church. Through the services, I was trying to offer a message that would be reassuring and sustaining and that also offered pastoral care remotely. But having said that, there was also a need to ensure one-to-one care, and to

maintain personal contact with people, especially with those who lived alone and far from their families. A scheme was developed whereby each Officer telephoned up to nine households from time to time, and there have been very positive reports and expressions of appreciation of the scheme.

### Practical Provision

With older people forming a large part of the area's population and being advised to self-isolate, we embarked on creating a joint community plan between the Gofalaeth Bro and the Eagles Tavern to provide a nutritious meal on wheels every day of the week. Also, with the help of the Eagles Shop, a pack of weekly essentials was provided every Tuesday and Saturday and distributed at the same time as the meal. This scheme was not extended to Bala as similar provisions already existed there. Funding and support were received from the Community Council and almost fifty people offered their services as volunteers. This scheme has undoubtedly been the backbone of practical assistance, with many other aspects branching out of the scheme, such as prescription collection and delivery, provision of firewood etc. When the restrictions were relaxed somewhat, demand for this service reduced, but a core of people continue to receive the service, and the Eagles have by now taken over the scheme in its entirety. When I asked one lady about her views on the provision, the answer that I received was, 'More than a meal is offered when lunchtime comes. There is conversation at a distance and a smile, and contact with someone from the village'. Another letter said, 'this is Christianity in action', and that encapsulates the incalculable value and success of the scheme.

Over Christmas, there was once again an opportunity to work together, this time with the Community Council. There was a deep desire to ensure that the normal aspects of the Season were retained, while respecting the restrictions. The Bro Llanuwchllyn Christmas Concert was recorded and broadcast on the Pastorate's YouTube channel, with the Old Chapel being used to record each item in turn, thereby conveying a familiar atmosphere from a location that would have been central to the normal events of the Season.

As a Pastorate, we publish a quarterly newsletter, *Law yn Llaw* (Hand in Hand), which continued to be produced and distributed throughout lockdown, focusing on the impact of the pandemic on the world of work for many of our members, whether in agriculture, education, as professional actors or as front-line workers. We also took the opportunity to distribute greeting cards from the Sunday School children to all members with the newsletter.

I am absolutely certain that the pandemic did not stifle our activity as Churches or Pastorate, but rather challenged us to reassess, urgently, our work and mission. The essential aspects of our life and work were identified very quickly, and we tried to

ensure that those aspects would continue to be delivered, albeit in different ways.

To achieve that, we had to seek the assistance of numerous colleagues, some of whom discovered, possibly for the first time, an outlet for their talents in the life and work of the Pastorate, particularly in the world of technology. The value of the ministry 'of all believers' was also demonstrated, together with ministry among ourselves, offering pastoral and spiritual guidance and care. I am sincerely and abundantly grateful to all for their work and contribution.

The only key aspect of our life as Churches and Pastorate that, for obvious reasons, was not delivered was the element of being together in doing things. Although Zoom ensured that we could see each other 'live', it was as individuals that we sat and watched. Holding a conversation could be challenging, with the mute button a way of adding to the isolation. Since the Cultural Society went on Zoom, there has been little of a social element. In the light of those issues, I am sure that there is room to continue to exploit this technology and media in the future for some aspects of our work feel but that they should certainly not become a long-term method of holding local meetings and corporate worship.

Nevertheless, the role of digital services for the future must also be considered. Certainly, in this Pastorate it has been an opportunity for us to reach out to those who are housebound, to members who live far away and to those who are unable to attend regularly because of work commitments etc, as people can be watch anytime from anywhere. In that respect, this way of working has a clear place for the future. However, this could lead to complacency and possibly apathy towards the cause, with suggestions from some quarters already that joining in a service while having a cup of tea in their living room suits them, and is a great option when the weather is not conducive to attending physically. The danger of this is that the Minister or the Priest may end up preaching to an empty building every Sunday, with the repercussions of that ranging from the loss of that essential element of meeting together to issues such as the loss of collections to maintain the ministry and the material resources in pastorates.

One extremely positive thing learned during this period is that we as a Pastorate play a very large part in the life of our wider community, and that the Community is prepared to recognise our worth and our contribution as a faith community. The collaboration has been extremely close and constructive, and we trust that this will continue into the future.

Undoubtedly, facing a post-COVID life will bring its new challenges, and we will continue to feel our way and seek diverse and alternative ways of delivering the work, but I am absolutely confident that, as a community of faith in our local area, and under the blessing of the Lord, we will be able to face that future with confidence.