

Churches have vital role to play in post pandemic recovery, new report says

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Churches and other places of worship have a vital role to play in the post pandemic recovery, expanding their contribution as important community hubs, new research shows.

The report—led by the University of York—says existing church networks will be vital in helping to restore individual and community wellbeing and building future resilience.

Dr. Dee Dyas, Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture said: "Being allowed to reopen to visitors as part of the road map is only half the story. Churches have an even bigger job to do now because of increased need—that means they will need to find further support and resources to maximise what they can offer communities at this critical time in the nation's recovery.

"Normally churches act as a 'National Wellbeing Service'. They are vital community hubs, providing cradle-to-grave activities for everyone to access and are usually key places of comfort and refuge in times of crisis.

"They offer a lifeline to many and provide an almost invisible infrastructure of care, support and socialisation for people of all faiths and none across the whole country. It wasn't until much of this disappeared overnight, because of enforced church closures, that its full importance to individuals and communities was realised."

Human cost

More than 5,500 people, made up of non-church members, congregations and church leaders, took part in surveys and interviews between August and December 2020 and in February and March 2021, providing testimony and data on the human cost of the pandemic when places of worship were closed and unable to play their usual role as crisis centres and places of comfort in times of national need and anxiety.

The report gives examples of the impact closing churches had on [social contact](#) and support for both children and adults, and the widespread

negative impact on mental wellbeing caused by restrictions on funerals and other support usually offered to the grieving.

It found:

- 79 percent of all respondents identified [social isolation](#) as a key issue in their community
- 75 percent of non-church members wanted access to churches as places of quiet reflection and comfort.
- 87 percent of churches regularly contacted the isolated
- 91 percent of churches offered online engagement

Despite the COVID-19 regulations, the survey showed that churches still managed to have a presence through online engagement, foodbanks and other practical help, including more recently working with the NHS as vaccination and testing centres.

Essential

"One very striking aspect of our findings is how strongly non-church members have been affected by the closure of buildings and activities and the resulting increase in isolation and need at a time of major suffering across all social groups, " Dr. Dyas added. "If there was one clear message from non-church people it is summed up in this quote from the respondent who said: 'These places must remain open. They are essential to the community ... especially for times such as this.'"

Diana Evans, Head of Places of Worship Strategy for Historic England, one of the funders of the project, said: "This report gives voice to the pain people experienced when places of worship were locked during the pandemic, leaving individuals and communities without access to spaces where they felt safe to mourn, find respite in beauty, and seek peace. It also shows the potential of local places of worship for people of all faiths

and none as the country moves towards recovery; acting as symbols of their community's long-term survival while serving as local hubs for social care, practical support and companionship."

The report draws on evidence from experts in key fields such as bereavement, and Public Health, as well as collating reports by many secular and church organisations.

Dr. Dyas said: "Given what churches normally offer and their responses to the pandemic, they clearly have an indispensable role to play in recovery. There is increased recognition from local and national government of the great value of places of worship as community partners, and their contribution to wellbeing, and levelling up across communities."

Wellbeing

The report makes clear the damaging effects of closing church buildings and activities and states that every effort must be made to keep buildings open to support emergency social care, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, and other community benefits.

It also stresses that experts and individuals on the ground agree that the country is facing an "epidemic" of unresolved and unsupported grief and loss which will take years to heal. Both specialist support and a return to normal social activity are vital if people are to be helped to move forward.

The report's authors say capacity to care for the sick, dying, and bereaved needs to be increased, including supporting [church](#) ministers as key workers in the community, and greater investment in hospital chaplaincy to care for both patients and staff.

The report strongly recommends that this summer is used as a time for consultation with grassroots practitioners and communication of the latest scientific guidance, so churches can stay open safely and maximise their contribution to recovery and wellbeing, even in the event of further waves of virus transmission.

More information: The report is available online:
churchesandcovid.org/

Provided by University of York

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