

## Ministering During the Pandemic

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The ongoing covid pandemic has had drastic and far reaching effects on the way congregations and their ministers have been able to function. Some Unitarian ministers have clearly risen to the challenge, as shown by the reports and aspirations of Unitarian ministers applying for grants from the Ministers' Stipend Augmentation Fund (MSAF) in the summer of 2021. These so impressed trustees of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association (B&FUA) that they wished to share them with a wider audience. (Permission to share applications in an anonymised form was part of the application process.) Readers may not be familiar with the MSAF, sometimes known as the Liverpool Fund, as applications for grants were traditionally by invitation from the secretary, and not advertised. The fund was started in 1856, by Christopher and James Rawdon, wealthy Liverpool Unitarian businessmen and their associates who were keen to promote excellence in ministry and were also concerned that the loss of the Lady Hewley trust would adversely affect stipends. In 2018 the then trustees found that the expense of administering the trust as a separate entity rendered it inefficient, and so transferred its funds to the B&FUA, to continue its work as a restricted fund. Currently the administration has been streamlined, and on-line applications are invited from all Unitarian ministers (on the General Assembly roll) active in England.

The B&FUA trustees appointed a small group to oversee the process of dealing with applications, and in 2021 included four open questions. These were:

1. How has your congregation fared during the pandemic?
2. What do you wish to take forward from these insights?
3. What would help you to achieve this?

4. What has been growing in your congregation over the past year, and how have you been helping it to grow?

It should be borne in mind that the answers were given in the spring/summer of 2021, when there was no idea of how the pandemic would pan out, and that they were part of a grant application, so it is likely that the ministers portrayed their ministries in the best possible light. No attempt was made to check what was written and no approach was made to any of the congregations. There were twenty applicants, nine of which received a full stipend, nine were on a part stipend, and two changed from full to part during the year. Between them they served a total of thirty congregations. The answers to the four questions ranged in length from under one A4 page to more than five pages, often with response to the first question being the longest, and comments relevant to the different questions spread throughout the responses.

## **1. .How Congregations Fared**

### ***a) Communication***

The total lockdown at the end of March 2020 forced all congregations to cease meeting in person. This obviously presented a dramatic challenge to ministry in all its forms. With the buildings closed and in person meetings forbidden, people had to find other ways of communicating. Most ministers moved to online services and gatherings, while others, often with many congregants not able to access the internet, found different ways of continuing worship and maintaining contact. Some ministers went to extraordinary lengths to keep in touch with their congregants. One stated,

Many [members] do not have computers so I had a route of eleven members' homes along which I walked (or drove when it was raining) on a Saturday delivering paper copies of the service. This gave me the opportunity for lots of doorstep or garden chats with members.

While another wrote,

From the very beginning of the lockdown, I have ensured that everyone has received a copy of the weekly service, and a pastoral letter, every single week. Initially this was done by post, but when it became clear that that the Royal mail weren't coping, and that we'd have to be posting things out so early that the pastoral letter would become irrelevant, I started hand delivering the relevant things each week. This was initially a round of twenty five households weekly and an additional fifteen once a month, and took just under three hours for the shorter round. Several people needed large –print copies, and these were always provided.

In at least one case the minister also included an isolated member from another congregation on their round. Often the text of services was sent by email, along with a pastoral letter, though at least one minister preferred Mail Chimp. For worship, not all ministers gave detailed information about which platform they used but of those that did, most (sixteen) used zoom, sometimes from a neighbouring or linked congregation. At least two preferred YouTube, and at least two also used Facebook. For social and pastoral events, zoom was also by far the most popular. In one case the congregations thought that the zoom subscription was too expensive, so the minister paid for it themselves.

Telephone played an important role in pastoral care. In most of the smaller congregations this was arranged informally, while in larger ones there was more organisation, often with the help of committee members and other members. 'With the support of three members, we set up a system whereby everyone would – for as long as they welcomed it – get a phone call from someone other than the minister at least once a week.' In another congregation, 'we ...divided the congregation among the committee members to help with telephone contact, sending cards etc although this operation on a fairly ad-hoc basis'.

WhatsApp groups and video clips also featured, while Facebook posts and more regular updating of the website were mentioned in addition.

One minister commented, ‘have seen increased use of informal means of contact: the new WhatsApp group and my personal WhatsApp messenger accounts have been much busier over the past sixteen months, largely with people wanting low-impact contact, rather than in-depth conversations’.

For some the congregational newsletter proved increasingly important, sometimes being issued weekly, or acquiring new relevance;

We’ve also stayed in touch as a whole community by using our newly expanded and redesigned monthly newsletter... for this first time it’s been made available not only in large print but also in audio versions in two different formats.

Often it was a combination of both people at platforms that proved most effective:

Thanks to the dedicated work of Members, the Committee and Trustees by and large we were able to keep our community together. This was done by zoom for more than half of our members, and via the weekly Newsletter, phone calls and in-person meetings on the grounds of the...meeting house.

### ***b) Worship***

Many ministers produced the text of services each week, and in addition to leading them in person when allowed they delivered them by zoom or other online platforms, printed them for delivery to members, by hand when the Post Office could not cope. One wrote, ‘ - not missed a service, went straight from in-person to initially posted, then zoom within a couple of weeks, then YouTube recorded videos....These three versions continued apart from the zoom, which was only for when we were physically closed.’

The content and form of worship was of course affected by the pandemic, firstly by the difficulties around singing. Online services could include clips of recorded singing, to which people could sing along in their own homes, but this was not found to be an adequate

substitute for singing together as a congregation. One minister commented, 'The services themselves have suffered...because of the absence of hymn singing. I never realised before how many people came to church more or less *because* of the opportunity to sing.' Others found a new flexibility, 'My experiment in reading the words of hymns, alternating with the organist playing the tune... struck a chord, and although we will return to hymn singing, it will be a more flexible and adventurous approach.' The change in delivery format gave a new freedom to some,

The atmosphere and 'feel' of our worship has changed greatly since the pandemic, and there is a greater sense of closeness and community. I now ask for congregational contributions after my sermon and people have responded very positively to this initiative, and it will be a permanent feature of worship from now on.

And,

Spiritually I think that many of us have found a new deepness, helped by the provision of a variety of forms of worship, and an encouragement to experience worship by other Unitarians and other denominations whilst it's been possible to do so from the comfort of our own kitchen table.

At least one other minister intended to carry the variety of formats and flexibility tried on zoom into in- person worship.

At the time of submitting the applications, early summer 2021, many congregations had returned to some form of in- person worship often with a combination of on-line platforms. Some managed hybrid services, while others alternated in person with on-line provisions. But for many of the smaller congregations, in person worship did not yet feel safe. Though it had to be admitted that, 'Zoom and hybrid services have not been to everyone's taste'.

Some ministers commented on the number of people 'attending' worship in some form or other. A few reported that on opening the building after lock down, attendance figures for in person services were up to pre covid levels, but most found that numbers were considerably reduced, and some had not yet held physical meetings. The wishes of the congregation and

the layout of the building were often the decisive factors in making these decisions. One positive effect of on-line worship was the attendance of people either too frail or too distant to travel to the church building. Worshippers from other parts of Britain and also from other countries were welcomed. One bonus of on-line worship meant that ministers could gain a holiday Sunday by connecting their congregation to a zoom service being conducted elsewhere. This also had the benefit of widening the horizons of the visiting congregation.

*c) Pastoral Care*

Nearly all ministers expressed concern for the welfare of their congregations and worked in a variety of ways to keep in touch (many of which have been described in the communications section, above). Phone, email and outside visits were all used, and as one minister put it, 'There has also been a lot of pastoral work undertaken'. Often lay people were involved in setting up contact networks, sometimes informally, but generally more organised in larger congregations, one applicant wrote, 'Congregation and minister work thoughtfully at pastoral support', while another commented that pastoral care... 'has continued well, with the help of the congregation – they have always been very proactive in taking care of each other and staying in touch'. Two ministers noted that their weekly round of delivering newsletters of service texts were opportunities to make contact with members, sometimes with a socially distanced door step chat, or just a wave through a window or from the driveway .

Some ministers reported positive developments such as an increased feeling of camaraderie, and of concern for each other, getting to know each other better, and developing new friendships. However, many reported a decline in well being, both in their congregations and in their wider communities, 'What I have experienced is a decline in Mental Health, this chaotic period had escalated and exacerbated mental health, I have been dealing with members of the community with schizophrenia and personality disorders... this has been

very challenging'. Another reported, 'some serious pastoral needs, including family and work pressure, stress overwhelm, health breakdown'. The advanced age of some congregations was of concern to some, 'We still have a predominantly older membership... and frailty has inevitably increased during this time, exacerbate by the pandemic itself'.

Pastoral needs influenced other activities, such as online groups, and one congregation shared emails of joys and concerns. One minister commented, 'Keeping the services going (except in the periods of total lockdown) has served as a lifeline for some people, the one exception to the loneliness of pandemic life'.

#### ***d) Other congregational activities***

Clearly some activities were prevented by lockdowns and other restrictions; circle dancing and social events were mentioned as being abandoned for the time being, but a surprising number of events continued on-line, mainly by zoom. These included discussion groups, heart and soul, engagement groups, poetry, touching the spirit, stillness or meditation sessions, social chats and quizzes. In some instances these attracted new people, and even resulted in gaining new members.

Some congregations continued or expanded their social witness, including work with asylum seekers, hosting local support and recovery groups, (which were allowed to meet in person when other groups were not). There were also opportunities for some to build relationships with local arts groups and other activists. Several congregations were led to increase their anti-racist awareness, with participation in Black Lives Matter campaigns. At least one congregation managed to use the opportunity afforded by lock down to do some building and refurbishment work.

## **2. Taking these insights forward**

One minister noted that the pandemic had highlighted awareness that ,‘The church isn’t the building. The church is the people. The church is us.’ It has also led some congregations to review their priorities.

We agreed that there will rarely an opportunity for such a holistic overview and review of our sense of purpose and direction. Pandemic stripped away all the extraneous from our activity and offers us insight into the essential core of our congregational life. We want to follow that lead and although it isn’t absolutely clear where that may take us, there is a very positive appreciation of what is potentially available to us.

Most ministers wanted to keep their increased use of social media in order to reach those who could not attend congregational events in person, and were aware of the need to be more visible on social media, ‘We need to be finding people were they are, and not expecting them to come to us’. The Unitarian Digital Resources Network was praised by one participant.

There was a desire to build on the increased feeling of participation and community spirit that some congregations had experienced, using a more flexible approach. One congregation was using the opportunity to refurbish its building, and several are using their gardens and open spaces both for congregational needs and to reach out to the wider community. Several ministers commented on the opportunity to invite community groups such as recovery, welfare and social justice organisations to use their facilities. The opportunity to work with other organisations, from local groups to other Unitarian congregations, was mentioned by several ministers, with the prospect of greater collaboration in a number of areas.

### **3. What would help to achieve this**

The two most popular requests were for training and finance. Ministers wanted training in the use of social media and digital technology, and producing good quality online and hybrid



worship. Some felt they needed more help with dealing mental health issues among both their congregants and their wider communities. One hoped that their committee would get training in how to fulfil their roles, others wanted training in group dynamics and facilitation, on how to make grant applications and also more practical administrative back up such as copyright clearing for hymns. Hands on help with visioning work was also mentioned.

Finance was clearly an issue, with most congregations suffering considerable loss of income during the pandemic. One minister asked for 'endless reserves of energy and imagination'.

#### **4. What has been growing on congregations over the past year, and how ministers have helped this growth.**

Some of the previous answers, particularly to question one, already covered this area, and several responses referred back to responses made earlier in the application. Additional points given here included mention of renewed feeling of connection and freshness as a result of greater variety in worship and multiple uses of avenues for pastoral care. The emotional toll of the pandemic led to ministers trying to provide spaces where people could express their fears, grief, sadness and loneliness, as well as find strength in the group support; this often led to a renewed feeling of community.

There was a sense of greater adventurousness and flexibility. One applicant wrote,

Our experience of different ways of gathering has grown from 'nothing' to 'considerable' and when it has been possible between lockdowns I've encouraged people who've been interested in getting online access to do so....I'm also pleased with the growth of the realisation that trying something is okay even if it doesn't work. I've encouraged this by trying more things and genuinely not minding if they fail. I think it's led to a growth in our adventurousness as well as in our feeling that failure isn't a failure.

Some zoom activities such as new discussion groups, had resulted in new members. Other hoped that changes in organisation, such as a simplified committee structure, would lead to more effective governance. There was also some awareness of the difficulty of transitioning back to in person meetings while dealing with very real anxieties and increasing fragilities of ageing congregations.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that many ministers went well beyond the call of duty in order to provide ministry in such extraordinary times. At last one had taken no leave during the first year of the pandemic, while another told of the emotional toll in providing a 'non anxious presence'. I end with the worded of one exceptional minister, who wrote

The lockdowns have been, as they have for everyone, hard and in many ways brutal, and I almost wonder what ministry even was before last March. The work has increased enormously and has changed radically, and has been a challenge. I think my combination of determination to ensure that everyone receives the worship [in a form] which suits them best even if that involves miles of driving, two services [zoom and in-person] each Sunday and extras during the week, which wasn't the case before, and the creation of an atmosphere in which fear and sadness and loneliness are allowed to be expressed but which also knows that we are showing phenomenal strength; and the ability to guide people both logistically and spiritually through what have felt like constant changes has kept up as intact as it was ever going to be'.

