The State of Christian organisations in the UK

Covid-19

Introduction and outline

Definitions and representativeness

This research sought to answer the following questions:
How has Covid-19 impacted Christian organisations?
How have Christian organisations responded and adapted to Covid-19?
What are the primary needs of Christian organisations right now?

In defining Christian organisations, we have first relied on Clarke and Jennings' definition of a faith-based organisation as 'any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of... [a] faith' (2007, 6). However, we here concentrate exclusively on Christian organisations. In this report, "Christian organisation" should therefore be taken to mean charities and churches, while we use the terms "Christian charities" and "churches" to refer to these entities individually.
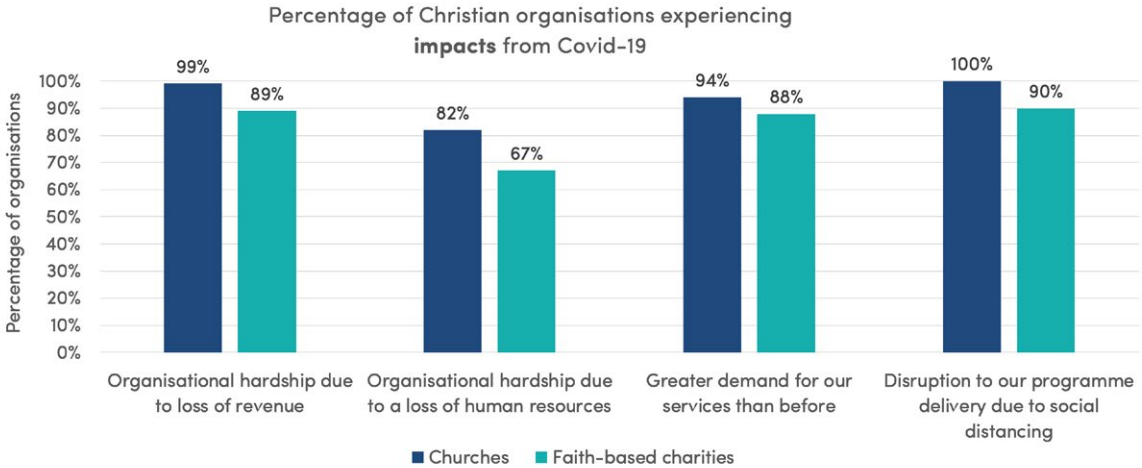
The data used in this report is calculated from the responses to an online survey, circulated widely between 20th April and 8th May 2020 through the social media networks of the sponsoring partners of the work. The survey received 92 valid responses, 72 from churches and 20 from Christian charities. Responses came from wide range of church denominations (including Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Salvation Army, Free Churches and Unity Groups), an encouraging spread of localities (a third from London), and a selection of charities (including food banks, children's services, educators, development organisations, homeless charities and more). As this data is not drawn from a representative sample, these results should not be assumed to perfectly represent the Christian sector. However, these results offer a valuable snapshot at this point in time to the organisations who have responded and the many like them. The conclusions in this report have been written carefully and reflect the quality of the data available. We are confident that the reader will find this information helpful and thought provoking.

This report begins by examining how Covid-19 has affected Christian organisations and changed their beneficiaries' needs, before considering how these organisations have responded to the pandemic and the support they need most.

Impact on Christian organisations and beneficiaries

To what extent has Covid-19 impacted Christian organisations?

Covid-19 has limited churches and Christian charities' ability to support their communities in three primary ways. It has (1) decreased their financial stability, (2) made it more difficult for them to deliver programmes and services, and (3) forced them to address greater needs with reduced staff capacity. Our analysis also showed that organisations outside London are more likely to have lost revenue and staff and to be facing increased demand for their services.

Percentage of Christian organisations experiencing impacts from Covid-19

	Organisational hardship due to loss of revenue	Organisational hardship due to a loss of human resources	Greater demand for our services than before	Disruption to our programme delivery due to social distancing
Churches	99%	82%	94%	100%
Faith-based charities	89%	67%	88%	90%

Reduced funding

Nearly all (99 per cent of) churches in our sample, and 89 per cent of Christian charities said they had experienced at least some organisational hardship due to loss of revenue. Slightly less than a quarter of churches (24 per cent) and 16 per cent of charities claimed to be experiencing extreme financial hardship. Many organisations expected their financial situation to worsen; as one church leader observed, 'financially, it could be huge. The loss of income streams from letting the building and donations will have a big impact the longer this time goes on'.
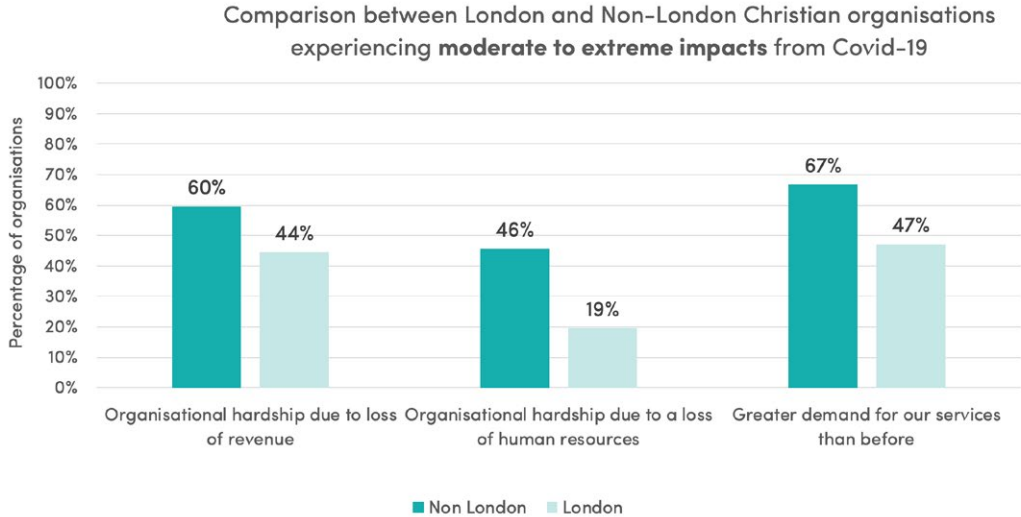
Difficulties delivering services

Similarly, all churches and 90 per cent of Christian charities said that their programme delivery had been at least somewhat disrupted by Covid-19. A further eight in ten churches (and half of charities) claimed that Covid-19 had caused extreme disruption to these programmes. One charity leader expressed concern that they could not 'conduct the programmes that our donors expect us to carry out', and a church leader wryly commented that Covid-19 had produced an 'inability to congregate, which is a fundamental part of congregational life'.

For the most part, however, this did not mean that churches and charities were no longer able to provide services, but rather that they had begun to provide services in new ways, or to offer new services altogether. We shall discuss this further in a later section.

Greater needs with fewer resources

In addition to the difficulties above, churches and charities detailed how they had been obliged to meet greater needs with fewer volunteers and staff members. Ninety-four per cent of churches and 88 per cent of charities said that they had encountered increased demand for their services; at the same time, 82 per cent of churches and 67 per cent of charities faced at least some hardship as a result of losing human resources. In the words of one participant, 'the challenge of delivering more services/provision with less human resources' had caused real difficulties for churches. While this need was not yet severe for all respondents (only 13 per cent of churches and 6 per cent of charities described having experienced extreme hardship as a result of losing human resources), it had produced significant disruption for some churches and charities.

Organisations outside London worse off

Comparison between London and Non-London Christian organisations experiencing **moderate to extreme impacts** from Covid-19

Our analysis also showed that churches and Christian charities outside of London were significantly worse off than churches within it. They were more likely to have lost revenue (60 per cent of churches and charities outside London claimed that they had been moderately or extremely affected by this, as compared to 44 per cent in London) and to be experiencing increased demand for their services. Perhaps most strikingly, organisations outside London were more than twice as likely to have lost significant human resources, with 46 per cent of these organisations stating that they had been moderately or extremely affected by a loss in human resources, as opposed to just 19 per cent in London.

Changes in beneficiary needs

To further understand how Covid-19 had affected churches and charities, we asked if new needs had emerged for these organisations' beneficiaries. In general, participants noted that their beneficiaries had an increased need for emotional and spiritual support, new material needs, were concerned for their health and safety, and had a desire to maintain community.

Emotional and spiritual support

As leaders emphasised, many of the people they served had experienced severe loneliness and isolation and had a need for emotional and spiritual support. Amongst other issues, participants discussed 'help with grief when loved ones die', 'prayer [and] spiritual consolation', an 'increased need for pastoral calls', and the necessity of finding 'ways to continue worship' while congregations were not able to meet in person. Several leaders also mentioned that non-Christians in their communities had expressed an increased interest in spiritual matters: one, for example, described online interactions where people 'who were not, to my knowledge, believers' had asked for help in finding their purpose. Churches and Christian charities are thus uniquely positioned to supply these spiritual needs which may go unmet by other organisations.

Material needs

Participants (especially Christian charity leaders) also discussed a variety of material needs that had emerged for their beneficiaries as a result of Covid-19. Many churches and charities had begun to supply food and other supplies to their community: as one church leader noted, 'due to [a] loss of work, there is a greater need for our food bank', and another recounted how their church had begun provide 'shopping and prescription deliveries' after the onset of the virus. On a global scale, some Christian charities which usually concentrated on spiritual needs had been obliged 'to take on relief and development functions', and in the UK both churches and charities had begun to provide more financial support, such as money management and debt advice.

Health and safety

Many respondents also expressed concern for their beneficiaries' health and safety, whether as a result of mental health issues, a desire to prevent their communities from contracting the virus, or a concern about increased reports of domestic abuse. As we shall see below, many of these same participants had adopted means of supporting people at risk, including social distancing measures, and referring survivors of domestic abuse to organisations which could provide help.
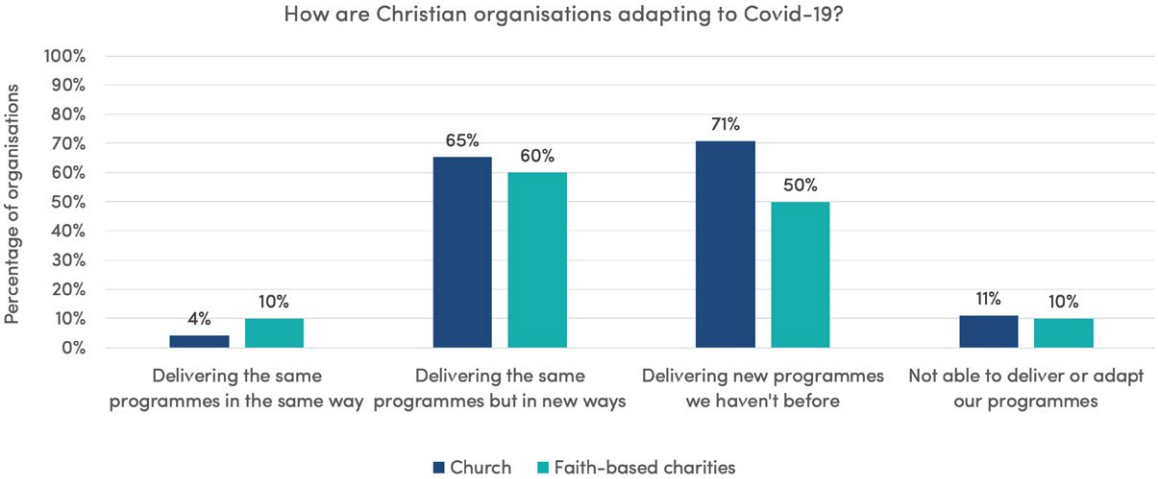
Maintaining community

While Christian charities sometimes also mentioned this theme, church leaders, especially, underlined a concern for 'maintaining a sense of community and connectedness among those who would usually meet up face-to-face'. As one leader noted, community members

often simply needed to be 'in touch and [have] a laugh'. In some cases, churches and charities had consciously decided to provide the technological support that would allow their communities to remain in contact: one charity leader, for example, described 'training older people on social media and online activities', and church leaders were also anxious that 'those without access to online technology' did not miss out 'in the rush to put most of our activity and projects online'.

Response of Christian organisations

To what extent have you changed your programmes in order to meet these new needs?

In response to the needs discussed above, churches and Christian charities had begun to adapt existing activities and provide new programmes. As participants explained, these activities and programmes concentrated on providing spiritual and emotional support, meeting material needs, ensuring beneficiaries' health and safety, and partnering with others.

How are Christian organisations adapting to Covid-19?

Adapting existing activities, providing new programmes

While very few churches and charities were able to continue delivering services exactly as they had before Covid-19, most were also able to continue functioning in some form. Only 11 per cent of churches and 10 per cent of charities said they were not able to deliver or adapt their programmes at all. On the other hand, 65 per cent of churches and 60 per cent of Christian charities said they were delivering the same programmes but in new ways, while 71 per cent of churches and 50 per cent of Christian charities said they were delivering new programmes.

Often, these churches and charities had adapted by replacing in-person activities with online services, telephone calls, and postal updates, and by adjusting essential programmes to comply with social distancing requirements. One charity, for example, noted that their 'homeless centre still provides breakfasts, but with a "queue and collect"

operation, rather than offering indoor hospitality'. Likewise, a church leader remarked that their church had adapted their 'food bank offer to enable physical distancing'.

To manage the increased workload of keeping in touch with their congregations without large gatherings, some church leaders had decided to delegate some responsibilities: one, for instance, had 'recruited, trained, and deployed a care team to telephone every adult member on [the] database weekly'. Moreover, both charities and churches had begun to consciously plan for the future. Charities described how they had created specialised funds to deal with the pandemic, developed organisational strategies, and met more regularly with their leadership teams; churches similarly had begun to seek additional sources of funding and to consider what services they would prioritise after restrictions eased.

When asked about what support they were currently providing to their beneficiaries, participants focused on the following services:

Spiritual and emotional support

Perhaps unsurprisingly, spiritual and emotional support was one of the primary services provided by churches. In the words of one church leader, '[our] telephone [and] internet usage is through the roof. [We are] working longer hours to try and communicate... [and phoning] those who seem cut off or adrift'. While charity leaders mentioned spiritual and emotional support slightly less frequently, they, too, were attempting to ensure the wellbeing of their staff and beneficiaries. Amongst other activities, these participants mentioned 'telephoning folk [to] see how they are coping and praying with them, [and] using Zoom to have Bible studies'.
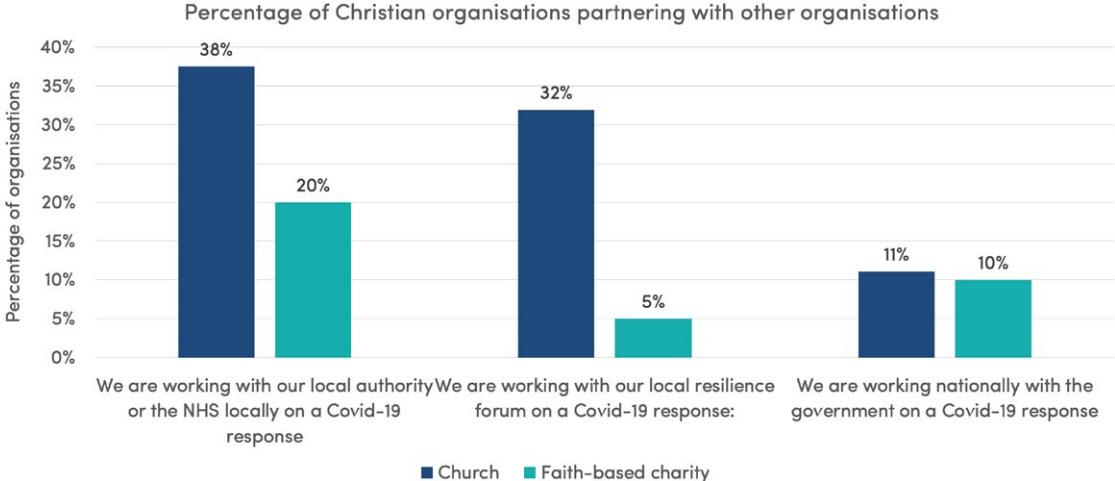
Material support

Both churches and charities were also actively involved in meeting material needs. In particular, these organisations tended to emphasise providing food and other supplies and services to their beneficiaries. UK-based charities mentioned that they had offered to 'collect medicine' and 'do shopping' for their beneficiaries, as well as 'delivering food and cleaning supplies to our tenants'. Similarly, churches had also delivered supplies, expanded their food bank operations, and provided volunteers to support people affected by the pandemic.

Health and safety

Furthermore, many respondents underlined their organisations' efforts to ensure their communities' health and safety. In addition to protecting their communities from Covid-19 by observing social distancing requirements, some churches were especially attentive to safeguarding and domestic abuse: one leader, for instance, mentioned 'keeping a connection with people who are in very difficult situations and keep[ing] an eye out for safeguarding'. At a time when people experiencing abuse might otherwise be isolated from their communities, this kind of accountability may be especially valuable. Similarly, both churches and charities had sought out opportunities to care for people with mental health issues. One charity had provided training on how Covid-19 might affect its employees'

mental health, and a church had 'given small individual jobs to those [in the congregation] who want something to do' so that it could help them keep busy and check in with them regularly.

Partnering with others

Percentage of Christian organisations partnering with other organisations

Several churches and charities had also begun to partner with other organisations to improve their response to Covid-19. Churches seemed particularly likely to engage in these partnerships. Nearly four in ten churches (38 per cent) were partnering with their local authorities, 32 per cent of churches were coordinating with a local resilience forum, and 11 per cent of churches were working nationally with the UK government on a Covid-19 response. While Christian charities were less likely to partner with these organisations, one in five charities were still partnering with a local authority, and one in ten were partnering with the UK government.
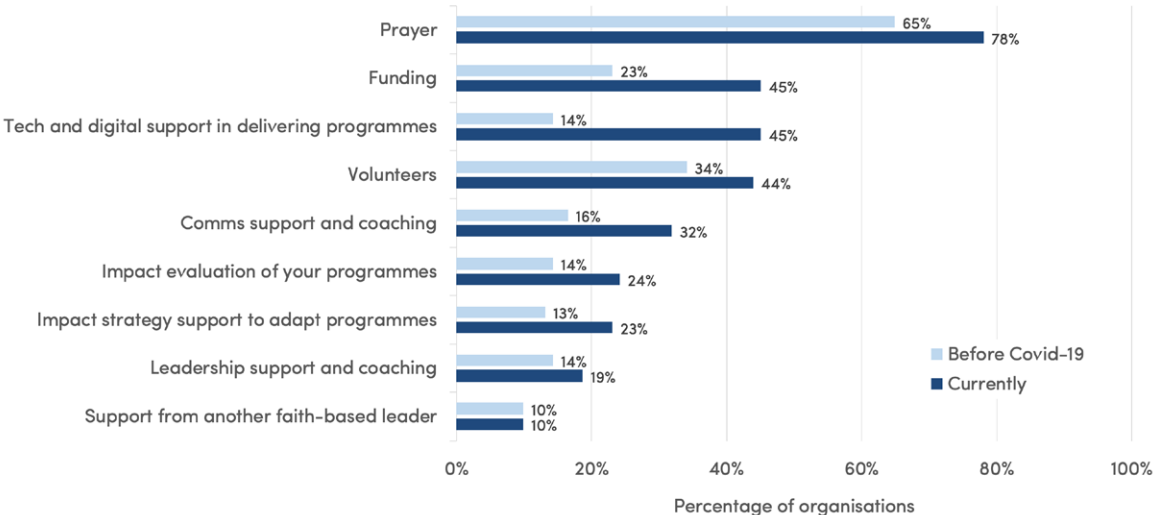
Perhaps equally importantly, churches were also able to facilitate partnerships within their congregations. One leader, for instance, explained how their church was 'matching available practical help with persons in need', and another noted that their church community had allowed for 'central coordination for pastoral and practical care'.

Information, expertise, and training: An additional role for Christian charities

Finally, many Christian charities in particular had also taken on a role that was mentioned less frequently by churches: providing information, expertise, and training for their staff and other charities. Charities discussed how they had had 'more online gatherings and trainings to upskill our volunteers', and had 'worked to promote' information on Covid-19. One charity leader also described how he had sought to share the technical expertise his organisation had acquired during the 2015 Nepal earthquake and the Syrian refugee crisis with other churches and organisations.

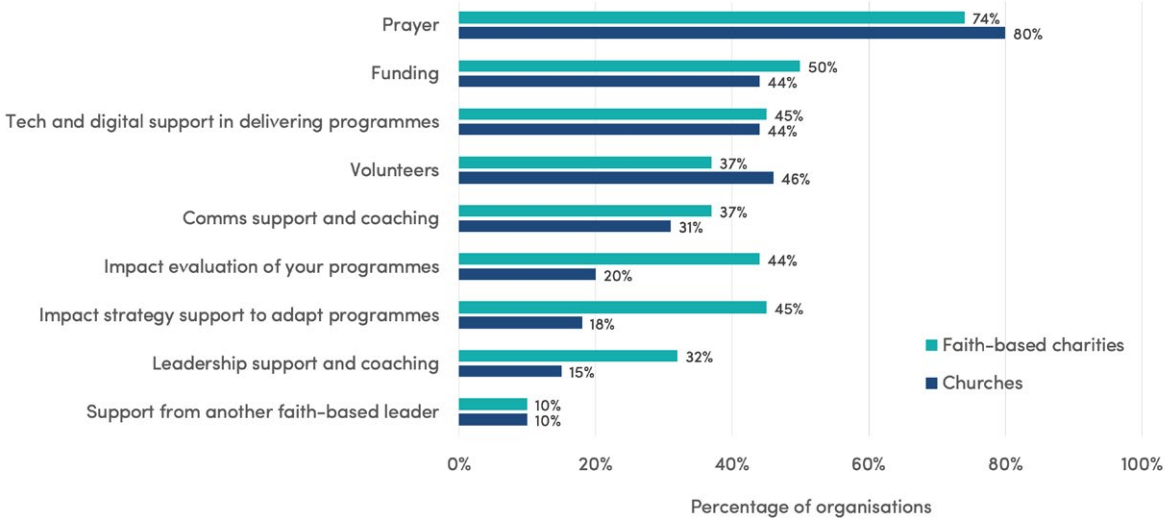# Support needed from other organisations and individuals

To what extent would the following types of support be a priority for your organisation?

Prayer — Before Covid-19: 65%, Currently: 78%
Funding — Before Covid-19: 23%, Currently: 45%
Tech and digital support in delivering programmes — Before Covid-19: 14%, Currently: 45%
Volunteers — Before Covid-19: 34%, Currently: 44%
Comms support and coaching — Before Covid-19: 16%, Currently: 32%
Impact evaluation of your programmes — Before Covid-19: 14%, Currently: 24%
Impact strategy support to adapt programmes — Before Covid-19: 13%, Currently: 23%
Leadership support and coaching — Before Covid-19: 14%, Currently: 19%
Support from another faith-based leader — Before Covid-19: 10%, Currently: 10%

Percentage of organisations

As the graph above suggests, the types of support that churches and Christian charities most appreciated from others changed markedly as a result of Covid-19. Before Covid-19, most churches and charities tended to value prayer, funding, and volunteers. While these types of support remained important after the onset of the pandemic, the relative importance of funding and volunteers reversed, with churches and charities beginning to prioritise funding over volunteers (perhaps as a result of greater financial need and limited scope for volunteers given social distancing requirements). Not surprisingly, the proportion of organisations which valued technical and digital support also increased 32 per cent, with churches and Christian charities appreciating this type of help almost as much as funding. The proportion of organisations prioritising communications support and coaching and impact support also increased markedly, with interest in these areas rising 22 per cent and 15 per cent.

Intriguingly, organisations outside London also seemed to have greater need for funding and volunteers than London churches and charities. While 82 per cent of organisations outside London considered funding a high or moderate priority, this was true of just 67 per cent in London. Likewise, while 85 per cent of churches and charities outside London considered volunteer support a high or moderate priority, only 67 per cent of organisations in London said the same.

To what extent is there evidence of difference in the types of support churches and Christian charities prioritise?

Chart: Percentage of organisations

Support type	Faith-based charities	Churches
Prayer	74%	80%
Funding	50%	44%
Tech and digital support in delivering programmes	45%	44%
Volunteers	37%	46%
Comms support and coaching	37%	31%
Impact evaluation of your programmes	44%	20%
Impact strategy support to adapt programmes	45%	18%
Leadership support and coaching	32%	15%
Support from another faith-based leader	10%	10%

Our analysis revealed one major difference in the type of support preferred by charities and churches: for the moment, at least, charities appear to be placing more emphasis than churches on strategic support (including impact evaluation, impact strategy, and leadership coaching). While 44 per cent of charities prioritised impact evaluation, for instance, this was true of only 20 per cent of churches. Similar trends held for impact strategy (prioritised by 45 per cent of charities and 18 per cent of churches) and leadership coaching (prioritised by 32 per cent of charities and 15 per cent of churches).

Support from specific groups

To better understand our results from the previous section, we also included open-answer questions on what support Christian organisations (including charities and churches) would most appreciate from two specific groups: other Christian organisations and individuals.

Other Christian organisations

Participants identified four types of support that they would value from other churches and charities: sharing knowledge and resources, working together, publicity and communications, and prayer.

Many of these priorities are not surprising given our findings above: several churches, for instance, were especially interested in 'technical and media resources', which fits well with participants' emphasis on technical and digital support in the previous section. However, it is more perplexing that so many churches and charities emphasised knowledge sharing between organisations, as only 51 per cent of respondents claimed that they would value direct support from another Christian leader. Nonetheless, this was the dominant theme in the qualitative data, with church leaders expressing a strong desire to 'know what works

well for [other Christian organisations] and to see what we may be able to use in our setting', and charities wanting to share 'effective ways of working'.

Furthermore, leaders were also interested in opportunities to work with other organisations – mentioning 'working together for the good of the community' and 'joined-up thinking [and] planning' – and also hoped that other organisations might provide 'visibility' and 'publicity' for their ministries. This concern for promoting their ministries accords well with the emphasis on communication support discussed above.

Finally – and as we might expect from the results above – churches and charities were highly interested in receiving prayer from other ministries, and charities in particular discussed receiving funding from other organisations. In some cases, this seemed to be because they had prior funding relationships with churches: one charity, for example, hoped that 'churches [would] continue giving and support'.

<u>Individuals</u>

In general, churches and charities mentioned three types of support that they would appreciate from individuals: giving, prayer, and volunteering. This is what we might expect from the graphs above.

However, churches discussed an additional theme: many church leaders were hungry for encouragement from their congregations. One participant, for example, mentioned that they would welcome 'a card or letter of encouragement, with prayer' and, once lockdown restrictions were lifted, 'a hug, and them not to be embarrassed by my tears'. Likewise, another leader stressed how much they valued 'appreciation. Just saying well done. In an uncertain world, it means a lot'.

Charities, by contrast, hoped that individuals might advocate 'for them with others' and 'spread the word about their work'. Once again, these emphases fit well with the proportion of organisations valuing communications support in the graphs above.

Summary

In summary, this report has highlighted the challenges facing Christian organisations during the Covid-19 crisis. For the vast majority of organisations, the crisis has directly led to both an increase in demand for services and a decrease in available funds and staffing. There appear to be some slight differences between churches and Christian charities' experience of these, and needs seem to be most severe in organisations outside of London.

Organisations have also made significant changes to their activities. 71% of churches and 50% of charities are delivering new services that they've not delivered before. This means that organisations are trying out and testing new approaches and methods to deliver positive outcomes. In some cases moving into areas of the community that they have never been active in before.

Christian organisations have many high priority needs right now, including prayer, funds, volunteering, support with technology, and support with communication. They also highlighted the value of encouragement and connection. Organisations want to be working in increased partnership with each other.

This report has been produced to add to the understanding of the needs of Christian organisations as a result of the crisis, and add momentum to providing effective support that meets the need. Please share it with others who may value reading it.

Please keep supporting your local Christian organisations and visit yourneighbour.org for practical ideas, or give.net to donate through Stewardship.

Eido Research is looking to conduct further research in this area to more fully map and celebrate the Christian response to Covid-19. If you want to get involved in this, or other projects like this please get in touch with us at eidoresearch.com.