

Case-study: a place where love grows

by the Pastoral Reaching Out Team



A TIME OF CRISIS

The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus came from nowhere and interrupted our daily lives with an unbelievable force. For many there were days of disbelief that this intruder was impacting our lives with such aggression, disabling our sense of normality and routine. The daily news issued from the government through various media sources made it hard to ignore the imposing reality that our lives were being affected for an exceedingly long time to come. The news of deaths of strangers, friends and even close members of our families became unbearable to process. Panic buying and stockpiling of food and toilet rolls in the fear of running out of provisions sent a message that the world as we knew it, and understood it, will come to an end very soon.

COMMUNITY CHURCH: A LIGHTHOUSE ON THE HIGH ROAD

Willesden New Testament Church of God (WNTCC) could be described as a medium sized church with approximately 400 regular attendees present at the Sunday morning services each week. This does not include the people who tune in to the service which is streamed via YouTube every Sunday morning. The church has gained a reputation as a community church due to regular events that take place involving local people within the community who may or may not be regular Sunday attendees. The Sunday morning service, a week before the government announced the lockdown, had less than the normal attendance of our elderly members due to the advice for the more vulnerable to stay home.

The service on that Sunday was well received, however. Every one of those members were missed as their absence was felt by the rest of the church family. The next day at the Monday evening Prayer meeting a special prayer went forward for all our senior members of the Church asking for God's grace to protect them during this unprecedented time.

TARGET GROUPS

The Church Community is diverse, particularly in terms of the ages of attendees, with a good representation of the elderly, and vulnerable people. The church is located in a London borough with one of the largest African-Caribbean populations in the country and this fact is reflected in the congregation. There was a sense of urgency to contact every senior member and vulnerable person to find out how

they were doing and put a support mechanism in place to ensure they would be looked after during the COVID-19 crisis. The Pastoral Reaching Out (PRO) Team was set up through the coordination of ministers, trustees and nominated prayer leaders, led by the Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor. One of the trustees agreed to take on the role to coordinate and act as the lynchpin on behalf of the PRO Team. The coordinator contacted the main target groups, the senior members, i.e. 70 years plus, and vulnerable people, to establish if they had a support system in place in case of a crisis and to put a mechanism in place if necessary. Each of the PRO Team members willingly agreed to contact their allocated list of people at least once a week. They were expected to find out about their people's well-being, offer spiritual support through sharing a Scripture and praying with them before the end of their contact. The Bible Scripture which was chosen to represent the work of the PRO Team is Proverbs 27:17. 'As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend' (NKJV). In addition to looking out for our brethren it was important to be sensitive to their needs, maintain confidentiality in terms of what information was shared – protecting people's rights, security and privacy.

Over 120 of our senior members and vulnerable people are supported via the PRO Team weekly contacts. It became evident in a matter of days of the lockdown that many of the congregation members in addition to the PRO Team and Visiting Team members were contacting people within their own networks to check on people's well-being. An energy of checking in on each other swept throughout the church community. The coordinator was swamped with enquiries about individuals and was in a good position to give assurances to the brethren making enquiries, or to quickly follow up those enquiries. Assurances were given to the church community through the

church's communication channels that the PRO Team had been set up and was providing outreach support to as many of our members as possible. The Senior Pastor was not given a list in the same way as the rest of the PRO Team members as he undertook the specific role of contacting the recently bereaved brethren and dealing with emergencies as they arose.

Within the first two weeks, the Pastors and PRO Team members were being praised and encouraged by family members of seniors and vulnerable people about the difference the calls were making to their loved ones. Its success has led to calls for this work to be continued beyond the period of the lockdown.

This targeted work of reaching out to treasured brethren commenced on the 18th March, a few days before the official lockdown was ordered by the government, effective from the 23rd March. The PRO Team members have reported that they have been blessed, uplifted and inspired by this approach to pastoral care with their list of members. The PRO Team, as pastoral care leaders reaching out outside the walls of the church building, providing one to one pastoral care, have been warmly

reciprocated. Relationships have been strengthened; stronger bonds have been formed and individuals are getting to share with each other in a much more meaningful manner. PRO Team members have been receiving calls from their elderly member(s) in return. The act of iron sharpening iron has definitely resonated with a majority of the PRO Team members. Many say the calls by both parties are eagerly awaited, particularly during this period of lockdown. The length of calls/contact varies dependent on the personalities and relationships formed. The call/contact tends to vary from 10 to 30 minutes. A PRO Team member has an average of seven members on their list, with a maximum of 10. Checking in on brethren has extended beyond focusing on the elderly and vulnerable to all groups, including children and the youth within our church community. The use of WhatsApp, Facetime and Zoom through organised sessions has assisted individuals, groups and departments within the church community to stay in touch and offer mutual pastoral care.

Congregation members travel as far as 60 miles away from their homes to attend WNTCC and therefore during this lockdown



period it is wonderful to know that communications through a variety of social media have overcome the challenge of distance when reaching out to people to ensure that their physical, psychological and spiritual well-being are looked after, and staying connected to each other as Church family is assured. This is an example of how good can come out of a bad and distressing situation.

SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

During this process valuable lessons have been learnt. For instance, having a membership list fit for purpose can make a difference to the effectiveness and speed for better communication. We learnt that the membership list and associated records must be better maintained to ensure that accurate updated records are available for action at times of an emergency. Also, we are far more appreciative of the importance of networking and working collaboratively with departments within the church community. For example, being able to liaise with the Agape ministry with access to and distribution of provisions in a timely fashion assists our most vulnerable members and local community at their time of need, especially during this pandemic and lockdown.

STRATEGICALLY MOVING FORWARD

Out of a disastrous situation WNTCG has established a ministry that has been well received and is considered a resounding success for maintaining and strengthening the church family's relationships and spiritual growth. The birth of this ministry has demonstrated the importance of staying in touch, showing love, care and kindness just as Jesus would have wished His disciples to have done when taking care of His flock. Paul encourages the Churches through his letters to look after the more vulnerable of our church community.

There have been resounding requests for this ministry by the PRO Team and other pastoral care

activities to continue and grow throughout the wider church. This has led to a commitment from the leadership for this ministry to be further developed and made available to all our members and visitors. By reaching out we are being obedient as disciples of Christ to show God's love, by attending to the needs of God's children, and given to hospitality (Romans 12:13). As one of the Visiting Team members stated, 'This season has brought out the best in a lot of us; a lot of loving and sharing between the brethren.' I believe that thought summarised one of the positive outcomes that have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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About the author

Currently, Charlotte Johnson is a Doctor of Ministry (Dmin) student at Pentecostal Theological Seminary (PTS), and a Trustee/Deaconess at Willesden New Testament Church of God. Charlotte holds a MSc in Human Resources Leadership from Manchester University, and a MSc in Church Ministries from PTS.

A former senior manager in the NHS and a Local Authority in London with over 30 years' experience, specialising in administration, learning, development and equalities. A former magistrate, school governor of a secondary school and chair of a primary school for over fourteen years. With a passion for supporting individuals to achieve their God given potential Charlotte is a qualified executive coach and leadership mentor.



Pastoral Reaching Out (PRO) Team's Guidelines

The overall vision for WNTCG is to be the Church where love grows. Its mission is concerned with Connecting the church; Adding to the Church; Shaping the Church; and to Equip the Church. (C.A.S.E.) For more details about the Church's vision and mission statement, go to www.wntcg.org/vision-and-mission

The Church & Pastors Council (C&PC) under the direction of the Pastors have set up a Pastoral Reaching Out Team. The establishment and purpose of the PRO Team is to provide pastoral care and spiritual support during the period of lock down by the Government, on behalf of the WNTCG. The focus is on the more mature and vulnerable members of our Church family, but not exclusively, to ensure they are safe, secure and cared for.

Members of the PRO Team have been asked to ensure that a consistent approach is maintained by adhering to the following guidelines:

- Contact the brethren on your list at least once a week
- Share the Scripture as part of your interaction, e.g. Word for Today, Golden Text in Evangelical Sunday School Lesson Commentary
- Pray with the brethren before the call/communication has ended
- Liaise with the coordinator at least once a week for support and sense-checking
- Treat all contact details and the membership list as confidential information, therefore, do not share any of the information with unauthorised persons
- Concerns about safeguarding must be alerted to a member of the safeguarding team – see the website for the Safeguarding Team details and the Safeguarding Policy.