

COVID-19 and Inequalities (1)

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This follows the ‘Faith-Based Facilitation’ model. You may wish to consider the ‘Four Theological Voices’ when reading Scripture (NB all references are from the NIV, 2011). Please see OurHub for details.

Introduction - The issue

“ We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.

”

(Barr, 2020)

One of the most prevalent and recurring themes of The Salvation Army’s COVID-19 research findings was the exacerbation of many of society’s existing inequalities, including (but not limited to) geographic, socioeconomic, gender, age, ethnic, health, digital, and environmental inequalities.

To practise mission we must recognise that not everyone has been affected equally by COVID-19, bringing to mind the ‘same storm, different boats’ analogy that was often cited in different forms in social media and the press during 2020, as well as bearing in mind that some people were not in ‘boats’ at all.

Questions for reflection

- What do you think the existing inequalities are in your local community, that may have been exacerbated by COVID-19?
- How can you, as both an individual and a corps/centre, address these inequalities: practically, pastorally, and spiritually?



The First Step - Being good news at the margins and listening authentically

As Christians, the first step to being good news at the margins is to listen authentically to those suffering from inequalities in society, and truly hear what is being said by the voices of those usually ignored and silenced. Scripture tells us how the church in Philippi ‘was built from an encounter with Lydia, with a slave girl and a jailor,’ in which a marginal and usually silenced voice was listened to authentically, resulting in positive and radical change (Roxburgh and Robinson, 2020).

As a church with activist roots, it is important that The Salvation Army is listening authentically to those marginalised voices within our communities, in order to properly respond to need, serve well, and be good news. We should not assume to know what is needed but instead practise authentic listening to respond to the needs articulated by the marginalised, because ‘if we ignore the world we betray the word of God, which sends us out to serve the world’ (Micah Network, 2001, p2). In this way we can also demonstrate respect and enable people ‘to be the architects of change in their communities rather than imposing solutions upon them’ (ibid).

Authentic listening is evidenced by responding to what is being said, and by being good news in meeting the physical, social or spiritual needs of those on the margins. As well as meeting needs on the frontline, being good news at the margins might include more long-term efforts and political campaigning to transform unjust societal structures that make some people more vulnerable to COVID-19 and the inequalities it exacerbates.

Questions for reflection

- What might cause people to feel marginalised or excluded, particularly with regards to age, having a disability, or their relationship status?
- How can you create opportunities to authentically listen to marginal voices? Can you also ensure that these voices are not only heard but also help to shape and guide the agendas set?

Going Deeper - What does Scripture tell us about showing solidarity with those who are vulnerable?

Romans 14 instructs Christians to ‘accept the one whose faith is weak’ (v1) and not to judge or regard others with contempt (v4) if they have different views or ways of life from our own. But solidarity is much more than words and opinions; it also manifests in our actions. Jesus gives us many examples of how he showed solidarity with those who were vulnerable or who were considered secondary.



One of the best-known examples is Jesus regularly eating with ‘tax collectors and sinners’ (eg Mark 2:15-17), people who were considered outcasts from polite Jewish society in first-century Palestine. He also showed solidarity with vulnerable people ostracised due to ‘sin’, such as the woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:36-50) and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). This was quite a startling approach for the patriarchal society in which he lived.

In Jesus’ day, illness was often believed to be caused by sin, and to compound this, some conditions such as leprosy or haemorrhaging were deemed by Jewish law to make people ‘unclean’, as well as anyone who came into physical contact with them. This made many people with disabilities into outcasts of Jewish society, and therefore highly vulnerable.

Although Jesus could heal without touching people (eg Mark 7:29-30 / Matthew 15:28; Matthew 8:13 / Luke 7:9-10), he deliberately chose to make physical contact in some of his healings, in order to demonstrate solidarity with those who were vulnerable and considered ‘unclean’ by way of their physical conditions.

In order to be a truly integrated and inclusive Salvationist family, it is also vital that ministry is done ‘with’ people, and not ‘to’ them, so that they feel equal and included. This approach helps to eradicate power imbalances and promotes healthy, equal relationships within the corps or centre and the community that allow people to journey further and more deeply in their walks with Christ and provide them with an important sense of belonging.

Questions for reflection

- Thinking creatively, how have you shown solidarity with vulnerable people in the past, and how could you become even better at doing so? What does this look like in your context?
- What does doing ministry ‘with’ and not ‘to’ look like within your corps and community?

Reflection - Who may be more vulnerable because of COVID-19?

We have considered some of the ways in which we can respond to the inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19. However, in order to be able to effectively be good news at the margins, listen authentically, show solidarity with those who are vulnerable, and do ministry ‘with’ and not ‘to’, it is also helpful to further consider who those at the margins actually are, and question where existing inequalities may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Who might be more vulnerable as a result of COVID-19?



Older People: Research from Age UK (2020) found that one in three over-60s have found their anxiety to be worse than before the start of the pandemic, which has had a far-reaching impact on other aspects of their lives. For example, 45% of people aged 70+ say that they are either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable leaving their house because of COVID-19, which has led to increased isolation, depression, lower fitness levels, and exacerbation of existing health problems.

People from ethnic minorities, refugees, asylum seekers: People from ethnic minorities are at increased risk of both infection and death from COVID-19 (Iacobucci, 2020), whilst refugees and asylum seekers suffered reduced access to healthcare and vaccines, increased risk of exploitation, precarious housing situations, and a greater likelihood of exposure to the virus in deportation centres (Mukambang, 2020).

Children and young people: Probable mental ill-health amongst 5 to 16-year-olds increased from one in nine children in 2017 to one in six children in 2020 (NHS Digital, 2020). Young people were disproportionately represented in job sectors that were locked down, and their job and long-term economic prospects have suffered as a result more than other age groups (Costa et al, 2020).

Women: Women were another group particularly affected by the pandemic, especially mothers. Women who were mothers took on the majority of homeschooling (ONS, 2021) and are also more likely to be suffering from Long Covid (Torjesen, 2021).

Other considerations: Certain geographic regions have been more greatly impacted in terms of numbers of COVID-19 cases and detrimental effect on economic output. In addition, people working in certain sectors such as retail and hospitality have been particularly hard hit by the financial repercussions of COVID-19 (Wilson et al, 2020).

Moving Forward - Additional Resources

Contact your local authority for help to identify the main groups, issues and activities that are already under way or planned in relation to inequalities.

We hope you have found this helpful. A bibliography for this chapter and the full COVID-19 booklet that addresses key themes in greater detail is available on OurHub. If you have feedback or any ideas you'd like to share, email rdu@salvationarmy.org.uk.