The impact of COVID-19: Conversations with Faith Communities

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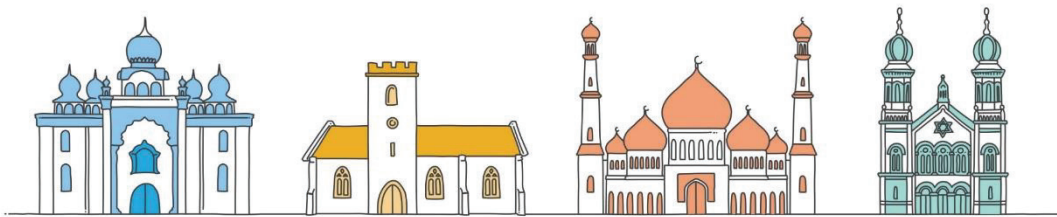
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Introduction

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were large, and felt across the whole of society and the economy in Scotland, but some of the features and functions of faith communities made them particularly vulnerable to its harmful effects.

Faith communities are typically based in locations, in shared buildings and houses, with frequent interpersonal interactions, relationships across generations, and with people who may be at higher risk of more serious disease - through their older age, their health status or because they are disabled.

The research presented in this report sought to understand some of the ways that the pandemic affected faith communities in Scotland, and what this means for their future.

The research findings highlight **a prominent experience of loss** in faith communities. This loss consists in direct bereavement, lost membership, lost spaces, lost connections and opportunities, and lost certainty about the future.

The findings also include positive effects, including accounts of **survival, adaptability, and new growth**. This included development of new skills and capacity – particularly for digital and remote activities and interactions.

The pandemic situation led faith communities to **reflection, and thinking about their deeper functions and roles**. There are examples in this report, of proactive action to take control and strengthen themselves, and provide a legacy for future members of their communities.

Section One - The impact of the pandemic on society

The pandemic has had far reaching effects on health, society and the economy in Scotland and across the world. The protection measures including physical distancing rules and guidance also led to disruption to health services, education, work, leisure, community and neighbourhood life.

Available evidence has shown that this has been a period with high levels of anxiety, loneliness, and these impacts have been worse for some groups, particularly disabled people, younger people, and people on low incomes.[1] [2] [3]

These, and other effects are diverse, diffuse and ongoing. Understanding the impact of the pandemic requires in-depth and triangulated research and analysis. It needs to consider the experiences in different places and for smaller groups within the population. It also needs to have research that is based on accounts of direct experience, as well as secondary analysis from administrative and survey datasets.

Faith communities during the pandemic

Faith communities are based around social relationships, networks and shared religious practice. They have vital engagement with their members and their wider communities, through their services, buildings and voluntary activities. These are provided for their own members and for other people outside of their organisations.[4] A large proportion of people in Scotland are members of, or engage with, and benefit from the work and activities of faith communities.[5]

The pandemic has disrupted many of the areas of life that are important to faith communities.

This research sought to get stories and accounts from people in Scotland, who have direct experience of these disruptions.

The research asked about three main things:

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[1] Impact of COVID-19 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
[2] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on equality (research) - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
[3] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on wellbeing - survey findings - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
[4] Faith as social capital | JRF
[5] Religion | Scotland's Census (scotlandscensus.gov.uk)

1. What aspects of community life have been lost (and gained) during the pandemic?
2. What are faith communities' priorities for the future?
3. What might help or get in the way of these priorities?

The research was done by a social researcher in the Scottish Government Central Analysis Division and involved conversations with a small number of members and leaders of faith groups, who have first-hand experience of the effects of the pandemic. It involved people who were involved as leaders from Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Jewish communities.

This is qualitative research, that aims to provide deeper insight into a relatively small number of experiences. This sought to draw out and illustrate some of the things that may be felt in other communities, but this report doesn't present a representative or complete view of faith communities. For instance, all of the interviews took place in the context of urban settings in the central belt of Scotland, and there is no presentation here of experiences in other parts of Scotland or rural communities.

Acknowledgements

What are faith communities?

There isn't a standard definition of faith communities that captures their full diversity, but there are characteristics that many communities share:

- Faith communities are (typically) groups of people who have a connection to a religious tradition, who gather for religious worship, prayers, celebrations, and social and charitable activities.

- Faith communities may have strong connections with national and international religious institutions, but may also have long embedded histories within their neighbourhoods and geographical areas.

- People in faith communities may have formal and informal roles and varying levels of association. There may be a core group of people who participate regularly in formal worship, and a network of other people with affiliations to the community at a looser level. Not everyone within a faith community might attend a venue, or gathering, but these looser types of membership remain vital.

- Faith communities may have a prominent physical presence (buildings, activities, meeting places) within an area, and also non-physical functions that contributes to the health of the community (through their services (including e.g. funerals and work with bereaved people and families) networks of people, their volunteering, their knowledge and experience, and long-term practical and emotional investments).[6] [7]

- Faith communities may be the only organised group that remains in some settings, particularly in deprived, or rural settings.

Faith communities provide social, economic, cultural, and societal resilience value, in the places where they exist.

> "People use different phrases, but there is the narrative beyond yourself, and your interests. In a bowling club or a choir, the interest is to sing or play bowls. The faith community is people embracing a narrative beyond yourself,

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[6] The Role of Faiths in Civil Society | Faith-based Regeneration Network (fbrn.org.uk)
[7] Working with faith groups to promote health and wellbeing (local.gov.uk)

or a wider, deeper narrative about being human, depending on your theology." (Christian participant)

Section Two - What aspects of community life have been lost, and gained?

Conversations with faith communities revealed a range of perceived profound losses. This included:

- The loss of members, through bereavement and illness
- Lost buildings, worship services, and social support
- Lost social interaction and lost social capital
- Lost certainty about society and the future

There were also positive experiences. These included:

- Survival and adaptability
- The establishment of technology for digital-based, and remote relationships and interactions
- For some communities it was also a time of reflection about the future, and what matters to them

Bereavement and mourning

Faith groups, like other groups in society, were directly affected by the virus, through the death, hospitalisation and illness of community members, and a long period of time with heightened concerns about transmission and safety.

> "When the pandemic began, there was panic. People were panicking because all the messages were how bad it was, this is not flu, this is killing people. It is one thing when you are reading about a pandemic and it is another thing when you are burying people because of the pandemic, so that had an effect on the psyche of the community." (Christian participant)

Risk factors could be higher in faith communities than other population groups for a few reasons. Faith communities often have an older than average age profile, or may be based in areas where households are more likely to be larger than average and with a multigenerational composition.[8]

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[8] S0923_housing_household_transmission_and_ethnicity.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

> "People were really afraid. My experience, of the Pakistani community… a lot of people died in the second wave…People were really afraid, and people were seeing people going to hospital, getting really ill, and dying. [And these were people] who were conforming to the rules." (Sikh participant)

As well as the risk to members, there were added demands on faith communities for the services they provide. Faith groups often provide support to people who are sick or bereaved, and these needs increased because of COVID-19. Faith groups performed funerals, burials, funeral prayers, and support to their members and local areas when people died from COVID-19.

> "There were a higher number of deaths in the black and ethnic minority community, when you look across the sector of society. I think there are a couple of factors, first Muslims, or particularly South Asians, live in more densely populated areas…South Asians also live in bigger nuclear families with mixed generations. So that was another challenge, that brought about a lot of deaths. And we did a lot of funeral prayers, for the locals." (Muslim participant)

As well as the increased demands, there were other challenges in performing these functions because bereavement and mourning activities could not take place in the same way, for much of the pandemic between 2020-22.

Health protection measures meant that funerals could not take place in the same way, or within the usual time period. Some of the practices were not possible at all, including customary prayers at gravesides, and traditional religious practices for supporting bereaved families for a number of days. This was an important loss.

These impacts, particularly where community members died from COVID, and where there were limitations on funerals and mourning, were direct, significant and shocking for communities.

Closed spaces

Another major impact for faith communities was the loss of their meetings and meeting places. For long periods of time during the pandemic, buildings were closed and physical interaction was not allowed. The loss of these spaces was felt, at the same time as broad support for the measures that were taken.

> "There was generally an understanding that what we were going through and that there was a need for these restrictions. Our Mosque closed for prayer, before the announcement from the Scottish Government, because we felt it was not safe. Like I said, especially for the elderly, and the black and minority ethnic community, with people with a lot of issues with their health – diabetes, multiple health issues. So we felt it wasn't safe. Even when we opened, we encouraged the elderly to stay at home until they were fully vaccinated, to come back." (Muslim participant)

This meant there was a much reduced ability to celebrate festivals, eat together, have services and meetings, and participate in social activities, clubs, and other facilities. This was likely to have been felt even more for older members, who may have had deeper and longer ties to the community.

> "Temples were on lockdown, and that is a huge centre, for the community to get together, to meet up, to hear how everyone is doing. Just to be together. That is a huge struggle, for the senior community in particular. One person had been going to Temple every Sunday for 60 years, and that was a big loss for her. It was quite emotional, and significant how much the pandemic affected the community." (Sikh participant)

> "We had a massive impact in the Mosque. Because the Mosque gives a communal sense, and people were cut off from that. So the elderly in particular being isolated. Because Mosques usually do a lot of activities for the elderly, so there was a big impact because of that." (Muslim participant)

> "General annual events were impacted. Eid was affected, and other minor festivals throughout the year. Ramadan was greatly impacted. That is a month where a lot of people come

> to Mosque. They break their fast together and they pray in the evenings. I think the religious life has taken a big hit."
> (Muslim participant)

Although there were alternative, and digital/remote, methods of participating and running events, some of these were not easily accessible to people, and were not felt to be fully adequate replacements for the direct contact they were used to. Some members of the communities were not able to, or did not want to use digital alternatives, and were cut off from community life as a result.

Volunteers were not allowed to enter other people's houses to help them get connected, or to demonstrate the technology. e.g. some members of the Jewish community are not allowed to do Zoom meetings on the Sabbath.

> "In many cases [social contact] was totally cut off, either because services and activities weren't being held, or when they were held, because there was no opportunity for people to take public transport and people were being told they couldn't Car Pool anymore there were no opportunities for people to get to services even where they were being held."
> (Jewish participant)

This also represented a loss to education activities, with the closure of children's education services.

> "[The physical distancing restrictions]… They have had an impact on the spiritual and religious education of children. In particular with funeral prayers. There has been a big impact."
> (Muslim participant)

Their face to face interactions were stopped. Leaders were used to visiting community members, and could no longer do that. Food and provisions supplies were disrupted for people.

This effect of closed spaces was also noted in relation to the way that some people at risk of abuse - who usually accessed support through their membership and attendance at religious events and places – were exposed to new risks.

> "There are issues with women in general, people who weren't in good relationships, not necessarily domestic

violence, but there is a lot of emotional abuse. People stuck at home with partners they don't have anything to say to. There is a lot of attention on younger women in these situations but older women were in situations where they were stuck at home with emotionally abusive partners." (Sikh participant)

Social interaction

Faith communities are places of meeting and gathering, and the loss of physical contact was a major impact for the people involved in this research.

Faith buildings were some of the first community spaces to be opened, before council spaces reopened. Losses were still felt after this point because of restrictions that limited levels of attendance, and activities.

> "In churches we were no longer able to do hospitality at the end of services. That is a glorified way of saying sharing a cup of coffee. But when you have someone who lives on their own, who is quite isolated, and quite vulnerable. When you take away a set point, when they sit with people in the week, and all of a sudden, that positive experience gets taken away 'in case you catch Covid from that other person you are sitting beside' or in case you give Covid to the person beside you. That re-frames the whole social interaction." (Christian participant)

> "The times when the restrictions were lifted a bit, there was an enormous relief that they could be back in the physical space, albeit they had to be two metres apart. But they couldn't have a cup of tea together. They couldn't hug, or smile at each other. All of the things that keep people's hope for the future alive. These were dampened." (Christian participant)

Some participants expressed concern about the longer-term impact of this period, and the legacy on relationships and closeness.

Restrictions on physical interaction can suggest that personal contact is a health risk, and there were worries that this could create a distressing distance between people who want to be close to each other, and leave a permanent legacy on friendship.

> "…if Bob is sitting here, and John is sitting here, and we tell them they can't meet and have hospitality, then the reality is we are keeping Bob safe from John, and John safe from Bob. So people begin to see each other not just as friends, but as potential infection points." (Christian participant)

These social interactions are important places to provide and receive support - that is outside of the home environment, and this loss therefore may be particularly important for women's groups, older people's groups, and young people's groups.

> "… we have a health and wellbeing group that runs weekly, and it is a lunch club, with activities, and senior women come together and do activities, Yoga, gardening, and have time together away from their house and responsibilities, grandchildren, and everyone in their family. When they can do that, we tried to get them online. And we found it very difficult…. We lost a lot of women because of that. Because they just couldn't grasp it. We resorted back to daily phone calls, 'how are you?', 'how are things in the house?' and not only did they lose that space, they lost the space they had at the Temple as well." (Sikh participant)

> "For people working with young people, they felt the years of work they had done with young people had been lost, their confidence, their sense of self-worth – had really dipped, and the youth leaders almost felt they had to start again from scratch with some young people." (Christian participant)

The restrictions led to isolation, in situations where alternative methods of contact were not possible.

> "We have volunteers that were willing to go into people's homes to get them connected, we weren't allowed to do that, because of COVID. So they couldn't go to church, or synagogue, they weren't able to get connected, and if they have family and friends outside of the country, they couldn't talk to them either, because they had no method. They didn't know how to use the computer, or phone, and the only way they could communicate was a land line, and that led to so much isolation." (Jewish participant)

Vulnerable members

Faith communities often have members who are older, or disabled, or who may not have been born in the UK, or have English as a first language. In these circumstances faith leaders and volunteers became sources of communication – for 'getting the message out' and for providing emotional support. They also provided practical help, and explanation of the measures, what was allowed, and advice on vaccination and testing, for their members who didn't know, for example, how to use a test-kit, or to perform home COVID tests.

They also have members who are not able to be informed or have access to services, and faith groups provided information about the vaccination programme, government schemes, and access to food and medical supplies, and financial relief.

> "…ethnic minority organisations played a really important role in making sure the messages were getting out. The work was done by these organisations. People were following the rules. But people were falling ill and losing loved ones. I don't get the sense that people were complaining. There was a sense of being stuck at home, and not being able to see anybody." (Sikh participant)

> "With the vaccination programme, we have worked hard to raise the profile in the ethnic communities, especially when there were conspiracy theories." (Muslim participant)

The costs of restrictions for older people were high, particularly at times when the threat of the virus was perceived to be reduced, and people felt a painful tension between the need to be protected, but the need to maintain essential family and friendship relationships.

> "Where we had the frustration was between the younger parents and older people, who said 'this is the only life I have, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life not seeing my children and grandchildren'. It was more difficult to explain to them why." (Sikh participant)

> "There were two main concerns. One was the economics of it. It was very difficult for people. Second, the dangerous nature of the virus. People felt 'we are living with our parents'. Children are going to school, and obviously living in

> bigger families, parents and grandparents. And trying to protect grandparents at the same time." (Muslim participant)

Faith communities, and their leaders played a role in the pandemic in terms of helping people know what to do, and explaining the risks, and the protection behaviours.

> "So we are busy saying to people 'please take a lateral flow test before coming to church', and this poor guy was sitting there going 'I don't know what to do' and he was in tears. So the assumption that everyone would know what to do with a lateral flow test was not there. We had to show people." (Christian participant)

> "Faith communities have people who can't find a home in other places. We operate on grace, so we have a lot of vulnerable people in the area. One of them turned up at someone else's door, who is a nurse, with a lateral flow test saying 'I don't know what to do'." (Christian participant)

Work

Some faith communities are primarily people from South Asian backgrounds and who work disproportionately in some of the professions that were affected by the pandemic, and these people were unable to work from home.

> "We also felt that a lot of people from the South Asian community were in the gig economy, so Uber drivers, taxis, and stuff, so they really felt a pinch when it came to their own work. A lot of them gave up taxis, they couldn't do much. A lot of shops being affected, takeaways and all of those types of businesses. It has had a greater impact, because if you look at general society, the South Asian society, they were more low income based families, and the jobs weren't professional. Others could work from home. We didn't have that opportunity." (Muslim participant)

The enduring duration of COVID

The COVID-19 virus presented direct threat to health and life in Scotland from the early months of 2020, and the health protection measures ran for an extended period during 2020-22. This extended duration brought

further negative impacts above and beyond its temporary effects. It created uncertainty, fatigue, and concern.

After the first wave of infections in spring 2020, there were further waves of the virus during autumn and winter 2020/21, summer 2021 and autumn/winter 2021/22. These were followed by further national and local restrictions and guidance, and there were loosening and tightening of protection measures.

Some of the faith communities lost members over this period, and people who gradually fell away and stopped participating in community life.

> "There are a number of people who are not coming out again, because they are just worried. Everyone makes a decision to go out. You are balancing the anxiety of getting COVID, and also Long COVID – which no one wants, versus being with people. And for some people, with health conditions, they have been told for so long 'don't do this' that they just won't come back" (Christian participant)

> "Those people who were isolated before…this has magnified their isolation, and now they are self-selecting to not come back out." (Christian participant)

Faith communities, like wider society, went through phases of optimism and openness towards tiredness and fatigue, and the ongoing nature of the pandemic means these communities are likely to face further hardship and a potential loss of energy and optimism as circumstances develop, and particularly in a situation where the threat of infection returns to higher levels.

> "In the first lockdown we saw organising and solidarity, and an optimistic view of the world we were going to live in. I am not so certain I feel optimistic anymore. It is to do with the fatigue. The pandemic has taken a lot out of people. Some people can't wait to get back to interaction, but other people, not. And there is a gender difference, and this might be reflected in the white community" (Sikh participant)

> "The first lockdown I think people got through quite easily, and then things loosened. The second lockdown was a totally different kettle of fish. There was far more anxiety, we

found fewer people wanting to say 'right this is a learning opportunity'. The second lockdown became something just to 'get through' and back in the last lockdown we had over Christmas [2021]. People found that really hard." (Christian participant)

Section Three - Positive experiences, new skills and services

One of the positive developments mentioned by faith communities was an increased capacity and confidence for running digital events. There was an uptake in the use and skills for technology and video meetings.

Although remote access to services wasn't possible or easy for all faith community members, some of the leaders spoke about how digital technology enabled access to other people, and contact across communities – and sometimes in far-off places, and other countries. The benefits of digital forms of worship and other activities have been felt strongly – albeit as an additional form of interaction and not as a replacement for physical interaction. Participants reported a desire to keep these going.

> "All of the stuff we have brought in digitally, we have kept going, so for a while, when we weren't allowed to meet, we were entirely digital, and since we have been a hybrid of digital and physical, and moving forward, and some of our growth has been in London and people joining us digitally via Zoom, we will not be doing away with the digital. We will be continuing with the physical and the digital." (Christian participant)

There were many stories and reflections on the adaptability of these communities, and how quickly and effectively they were able to reorient themselves towards a new reality, and provide vital help and services.

> "We as a congregation are spending more time calling people, and making sure people are not isolated. There are 2 kosher delis in the community, and they are making more of an effort to ensure, when they deliver things, they provide a newspaper. They have their clientele, and ask do you need toilet paper, or dish washing liquid. In some cases, I think neighbours are getting better, and being more helpful. But if we have a dinner at _____, I think that dinner would have previously been 40-45 people and now it is 20-25." (Jewish participant)

A reflection period

There were lots of examples of how the pandemic had given an opportunity to pause and think about the present and the future, and

what matters to people, and how the community can prepare for future shocks.

> "It is a reflection for people. The temporary nature of life, and how something like this comes. I know we can never be prepared for something like this, but the idea would be a bit more sensible. I know that pandemics will happen, because of how globalised we are." (Muslim participant)

This has been expressed in faith communities providing a new emphasis within their activities, on the environment, technology and work and the economy – and establishing a legacy for the future and future generations of members.

> "Thinking from a Church of Scotland perspective, lots of local churches have used the time in a creative way. In _____ we have now created a wildlife garden, a piece of heaven in a haven or _____. When people couldn't meet inside we had this community courtyard. And people can meet outside. People's appreciation of nature, and growing food outside." (Christian participant)

> "In our community, there is a lot of people who have started growing their own food. The idea, that if tomorrow we run out, we should be somewhat self-sustainable. Onions and carrots, in allotments." (Muslim participant)

> "I remember people in _____ talking about how that some people had never experienced so much connection in their lives. One person said to the minister of the _____, that people had never asked how he was, and he had people visiting him with food, and visiting, during the lockdown. He had never felt so connected as he did during lockdown. Envisaging a new future." (Christian participant)

There are thoughts about ways of using technology, and communicating and interacting as a community internally and externally.

> "it has shown how we can adapt, so not only health and wellbeing, but youth group – much easier getting online. It showcased some gaps we have in services, we have befriending services that were blossoming in the pandemic, we have volunteers calling and checking up on people, and it

is something we have been able to give life back to. It has shown us what has worked better, and what hasn't worked. We have taught ourselves other methods of communicating people, via Whatsapp – video call. They all can do that, but not Zoom or Teams. We have a plan for our future of services and the community that uses them, to have a quicker response." (Sikh participant)

And reflections about family life, and work, and the economy.

"It was something we learned through the pandemic. It took us off guard. A lot of people were so comfortable with the status quo or how they were living. It hasn't just changed behaviour, it has changed the mind-set. And a lot of people have spent more time with their family, and they have enjoyed that. And there is a lot of talk that we don't want to go to a life that was pre-pandemic, we want to come out of the pandemic with some sort of wisdom, that we don't go back to the habits pre-pandemic. In that regard, for some families, it would be economically more robust. To have less holidays, eat out less, try to save up and pay the mortgage off, something like that." (Muslim participant)

"And prioritising things that are actually much more important, that perhaps you didn't think they were important. And perhaps also the pay gap, clearly a lot of people made a lot of money through the pandemic. And the general type of employment that people do – I think people are more aware of that. And if we can work towards a qualification where if anything did happen, we can work from home, rather than just losing our jobs. So there has been a lot of introspection like that." (Muslim participant)

Section Four - The future

At the time of the research, in early 2022, Scotland was preparing to loosen the restrictions that were introduced to respond to the Omicron variant of COVID 19, and a growing national concern about the cost of living. At a general population level in Scotland, there was a higher than pre-pandemic level of anxiety and loneliness, and far lower levels of social interaction than there were before the pandemic began. This suggested a level of uncertainty about the future across the Scottish population.

Faith communities involved in the research had a clear sense about the needs of their communities and plans for the future. A strong priority within that aspiration was to restore the physical and social interaction element of their community life, in safe and sustainable ways.

> "I think people were previously thinking about enjoyment and satisfaction, and now are thinking about survival. I think it is a different mind-set." (Jewish participant)

These points touched on wider social themes and needs for managing the pandemic, understanding the detail and complex needs of people and groups in society, and planning for the future.

> "You can view the faith community as an engine of social capital, and a physical presence, it is a presence in many communities - a building - which often may be the only accessible/affordable community facility. It is very fragile in places, but it is people who assemble, and whose religious outlook makes them support or serve others in their community. Even if government policy celebrates, recognises and doesn't forget about that, in the face of their increasing fragility." (Christian participant)

This also involved reference to investment in paying attention to people's circumstances and needs, and generating knowledge that is not narrow and inherently exclusive of groups and people in society.

> "Surveys give you a wide picture, but they don't highlight diversity or complexity. The only way forward, in my opinion, there is so much diversity, you have to be inclusive but think about wider policies – you can't have thousands of specific policies. You can benefit from talking from a range of groups

and getting <u>some </u>sense of the experiences. You can think about who are the relevant people who can inform the diverse experiences you are interested in." (Sikh participant)

"I think the long term effects are going to be really interesting. There is the other side, about what this has done to younger people, and what we have taught them about social norms, so until you are 10 or more, you learn about social norms. But for the last two years we have told people, 'don't shake hands', 'make sure you sanitise everywhere' – so there is research to be done on the net effect of that." (Christian participant)

Section Five – Summary and recommendations

The findings in this report can be summarised, as follows:

- **Life changed in complex and unexpected ways for faith communities during the pandemic, and this is still happening as the threat from COVID-19 remains:** The effects of the pandemic were large and enduring across society – and these were felt in faith community settings. It will take time to adjust to a different situation, with an ongoing threat from infection. The future for some communities is likely to be different to the trajectory they were on before COVID-19. It will be important for government and wider society to understand how things change for these communities over winter 2022-23 and the longer-term.

- **These findings provide insight into what might happen in any resurgence of infections:** We can expect that some of these same effects – of loss, reduced capacity, and adaptation – would be likely to happen in future scenarios, if similar measures are used to protect society from the threat of a similar infection. Some of the communities may have to adapt from a situation where there are reduced capacities because of the impact from COVID-19.

- **Faith communities generate social capital, and they are good at reaching people who are isolated:** There are people in society who are isolated, and who need support, but who do not belong to a religious organisation. Faith communities, and other voluntary organisations, provide these functions and generate large amounts of social capital and resilience, through their voluntary activities, and place-centred networks.

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