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To national and regional leaders of all church denominations

Workplace Chaplaincy and the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 has made an immense impact on every aspect of our lives, no more so than our economy. As Moderator of Workplace Chaplaincy Mission UK I write to:

- brief you about how the community of workplace chaplains is responding to these changes
- offer our support and encouragement to you as you play your part in the debate about the future shape of our local, national and global economy
- seek your support for this ministry at a time of great need and opportunity.

Mission in the Economy through Chaplaincy ministry

Workplace Chaplaincy Mission UK (WCM UK) is a key networking association for Workplace Chaplains. Our roots go back to the second half of the 20th century, when we went under the name of the Industrial Mission Association. In recent years interest in grass roots mission in the economy has grown and we now are a network of more than 500 practitioners across the UK, lay and ordained, the majority part of ecumenical local or regional teams, in a few cases multifaith.

Most are lay volunteers, who visit those at work in their local economy and serve as their chaplains. Leadership, training and support may be provided by paid chaplains, particularly in the larger teams. It is a relational ministry that engages with people about their experience of life and work, whether or not they have an expressed faith. It is pastoral and prophetic; a practical expression of God's love, mercy and compassion and desire for justice and peace in the way we organize economic life. As such, workplace chaplaincy begins with chaplains going to where people are. In the current context this is not possible and so, on March 23rd, virtually all chaplaincy visiting stopped. Workplaces were no longer open and, even where they were, chaplains could not visit.

Nevertheless, there have been numerous examples of imaginative ways that chaplains have kept in touch – by email, phone and video conferencing. One chaplain was asked by a regional manager of Boots to host virtual coffee mornings for staff; another continues mindfulness and meditation meetings online with staff of a local authority. Those with whom chaplains have had contact, in this and other ways, have expressed gratitude for the support offered and see what chaplains can offer as essential to their own well-being in these difficult times. Prayer has been rediscovered by many, and chaplains have been well placed, not only to pray for their people, but with them and encourage them to pray themselves.

Impact on workers and businesses

Through this we have been made acutely aware of the impact on workers and the economy of the COVID-19 lockdown. People are anxious for all sorts of reasons, and uncertain what the future will bring. Lots more people will be working from home, and there will be many whose jobs will not survive, despite the steps that have been taken to support the economy. Some sectors will be hit harder than others - retail, hospitality, entertainment, construction, tourism, transport for example; those where lower paid and self-employed workers are more common. It is clear the lasting impact of this crisis will be greatest on those most vulnerable and least able to withstand such an economic shock.

Responding to the changing economy

As moderator I have been keeping in touch with team leaders through this period, to share experiences and consider how we can and should respond. We are determined to sustain our ministry and are developing protocols for restarting visiting, when we can, and using communication tools to do chaplaincy in a new way. There will be a great need also to bring the compassion and care of the Church's ministry, through local projects, to those whose jobs will disappear entirely. We will need to be flexible in our response as circumstances continue to change and need becomes apparent. With this in mind we have three specific proposals to put to regional and national church leaders.

Firstly, we are urging this ministry not be forgotten. Wherever you have a chance please include this in your planning and encourage your congregations to support workplace chaplaincy. There will be a great need and opportunity for chaplaincy to those at work and our member teams are eager to work in partnership with churches, finding new volunteers, and being supported in prayer.

Secondly, this is just the moment when a national strategy and plan for working together in mission to our economy is needed and we urge this be taken seriously, by denominations, working in partnership ecumenically and, where possible, with other faiths. This ministry needs resources and leadership.

Thirdly, as the Archbishop of Canterbury said only recently, there is a great opportunity for a national debate on the shaping of our economy in the future. Faith communities must be involved in this and Church leaders have the opportunity to encourage this and contribute to it. Those busy as workplace chaplains, whether part of your local team, or through WCM UK, are keen to support you in this.

I, and my colleagues around the country, would welcome the chance to talk with you, at your convenience, about these and other matters as we search together for a new vision for mission in our economy. Do please keep in touch with your local team, if there is one, or contact me.

Be assured of our prayers for you in these challenging times.

With warmest regards

Rev'd Dick Johnson
WCM UK Moderator

Cc National and regional leaders of all denominations.