

Review

COVID-19 and Christian Faith-Based Organizations in Great Britain: A Research and Resource Review of Organizational, Financial and Human Contributions and Impacts in the Context of a Wider “Christian Ecology”

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic presented what, on both global and national levels, has arguably so far been the most extensive health, economic and social challenge of the 21st century. Responding to this challenge, it soon became clear that, while having a vital role in the contextual provision of necessary services, public authorities also needed to engage with organizations in the voluntary, community sector, including Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs). This article presents and discusses and analyzes a digest of research and resource evidence from the beginning of 2020–to the end of 2023 concerning the organizational, financial and human contributions of and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on, in particular, Christian FBOs in Great Britain. It goes on to analyze these contributions and impacts within the analytical framework of what it calls a wider “Christian ecology” as the context within which such FBOs live, to which they contribute, and, as argued by this review, apart from which they cannot be properly understood. Finally, in exploring some of the lessons to be learned from the evidence and analysis presented, the article identifies and considers some key opportunities and issues that arise at the interface between the work of (especially, but not only, Christian) FBOs and the structures and processes of the governmental powers-that-be.

Keywords: Christian; faith-based organizations; services; COVID-19; pandemic; human consequences; financial consequences; organizational consequences; Great Britain; review of research



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1. Introduction

1.1. The Origins of This Article and Its Underlying Research

The Evangelical Alliance’s introduction to its Autumn 2020 Changing Church Survey begins with the words, “The coronavirus pandemic has proven to be a marathon not a sprint” (Evangelical Alliance 2020b). In that context, this article offers a digest of a review and critical analysis of relevant research and resource literature published in English between the beginning of 2020 and the end of 2023, having special regard to the human, financial and organizational contributions of, and consequences for, Christian Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Great Britain (GB) in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Especially in the early phase of the pandemic, because of the pressing need for evidence in order to inform policy initiatives to respond to the challenges to both governments and societies arising from COVID-19, a vast amount of research was conducted and reported. In the circumstances of the time, this often took place at a much faster speed than is common in more “normal” circumstances, as societal, scientific and academic resources were mobilized and deployed to try and inform policy and practice responses to the pandemic in as near “real time” as possible. Indeed, the virus and responses to it even gave birth to a new open-access journal simply bearing the name COVID (2024)¹. In relation to the journal

in which this article is now being published, a special edition of *Religions* (2023) was published focusing on the intersections between COVID-19 and religion.

In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) alone, the body that co-ordinates the UK's Research Councils (*UK Research and Innovation 2024b*) funded a special program of research (in *UK Research and Innovation 2024a*) which, between 1 February 2020 and 1 April 2023 had, in total, funded 645 new research projects. Given that there was little scientific knowledge about the origins and likely trajectory of the spread of COVID-19, combined with the fact that, initially, there seemed to be few effective medical treatments for mitigating its effects and, crucially, no available vaccine, not surprisingly, many of the early research projects were concerned with the bio-medical aspects of COVID-19, although a large number of those that had such a focus were also multi- or inter-disciplinary in character. In relation specifically to the UK's humanities and social sciences, alongside projects in these disciplines that were funded by UK Research and Innovation, the UK's *British Academy* (2024a) for the humanities and social sciences additionally initiated a "Special Research Grants: COVID-19" program (*British Academy 2024b*). This included an award (COV19\200323) made to the author of this article for a project on "The Organisational, Financial and Human Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Christian Faith-Based Organisation Service Sector in Great Britain" (*Coventry University 2024a*).

1.2. The Article's Key Parameters and Working Definitions

The roots of the originally approved and funded research project that informs this article were laid in a time of crisis. Its results, as originally planned, were intended to contribute to real-time interventions into the wider political and policy world within which Christian FBOs at that time were operating in GB. However, as explained in the following section, for a variety of reasons, it has proved necessary, with the approval of the British Academy, to make adaptations to the original program design and plans, including to its overall timescale, meaning that this article now covers a much longer period of research and resources than was originally envisaged.

Within this overall longer-term period, there has been a veritable "blizzard" of research, resources, and publications relating to COVID-19 both globally and in relation to GB, including in connection with COVID-19's relationship to Christian and other FBOs, religious traditions and communities, and broader matters of religion or belief. It is, therefore, a key aim of this article, albeit in a much longer than usual format, to produce an overall digest of relevant research and resources that is intended to assist the reader in charting a way through what might otherwise threaten to be an overwhelming amount of data, reflection and analysis.

In relation to the above parameters, "COVID-19", or more popularly simply "COVID", is the name that is now often used for the disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was first identified in the People's Republic of China in late 2019 and was designated as a "pandemic" by the Director General of the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 (*World Health Organization 2020a*). "GB" should be understood as referring to England, Wales and Scotland within the state of the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" (often referred to simply as "the UK"). In other words, the province of Northern Ireland is not included in its scope. In terms of the designation "Christian", for the purposes of both this article and its underlying research, this is taken to include any tradition, movement or group that self-identifies as "Christian" even if (for example) it does not share a Trinitarian understanding of the divine of the kind that is found among the largest Christian traditions.

In relation to "FBOs", there is a wide range of definitions and understandings (*Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013a, 2013b*). For example, the World Bank refers to these as "entities dedicated to specific religious identities, often including a social or moral component" (*World Bank 2023*). But for the purpose of this article and the research that underlies it, the following "working definition" of "Christian FBOs" was adopted:

... these FBOs are to be understood as organizations with core values rooted explicitly in the Christian faith, where the organization's primary purpose is not evangelism (bringing people into Christianity) or discipleship (education and formation as Christians) but to meeting other service provision needs, within and/or beyond the Christian community (including, but not limited to, social, societal, and individual needs). (Coventry University 2024b)

The "contributions" made by FBOs and the "consequences" of the COVID-19 pandemic for the "human", "financial" and "organizational" dimensions of Christian FBOs in GB should be understood as bearing the normal meaning of these words.

1.3. Adaptation of the Original Project

As noted in Section 1.2, this article sets out to present a digest of some relevant results from the project that underlay it, albeit that during the course of the project, there emerged a need for the project to be adapted in ways explained in more detail in the following footnote², and which were approved by the British Academy. Had the project been able to proceed and complete in the way that it was originally planned, it would have added substantially and, likely, quite distinctively, to what was otherwise a relatively limited arc of research and resources that focuses specifically on British Christian FBOs during the pandemic. Even though the results of the originally intended survey of Christian FBOs would, in fact, not have been able to be used in a straightforward comparative way in relation to data on other FBOs and voluntary and community sector organizations, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that both that the project was unable, as originally intended, to make a "real time" impact, and also that there now remains a gap in what could otherwise have been distinctive and important empirical survey data.

While acknowledging the above, the eventually different kind of findings and the longer timescale of the project as compared with what was originally envisaged has arguably, in the end, enabled a longer-term perspective to be taken in relation to the relevant research, publication and resources, resulting in a much more comprehensive digest of relevant research and resources than would have been the case if this article had been published in 2021 as originally planned. This is because, as highlighted at the beginning of this article, in the end, the COVID-19 pandemic itself turned out to be more of a "marathon" than a "sprint". In this context, the longer than originally intended timescale of the project has meant that it was, ultimately, possible to take into account and to differentiate between relevant research and resources across the initial emergence of the pandemic, the peak of its spread and impact, and also its post-vaccine change into a more "endemic", and then post-pandemic phase.

At the same time, there is, in fact, a relatively limited amount of published research that focuses specifically on Christian FBOs and COVID-19 in GB, meaning that much of the data on Christian FBOs discussed in this article has had to be extracted, derived or deduced from pertinent data found within studies that, in principle, had a wider focus than on Christian FBOs alone. Some of these studies dealt with FBOs in general and/or FBOs of other than Christian religious and faith traditions, as well as the wider voluntary and community sector, in their engagements with the challenges and impacts of COVID-19, both globally and in GB.³

It was, in fact, always intended to locate Christian FBOs in GB with some reference to and discussion of the broader context of FBOs other than Christian religious and faith traditions and organizations in the wider voluntary and community sector. However—for reasons that arose more exclusively from examination of and reflection on the research and literature itself—while the core of the underlying research and of this article retains a clear focus on Christian FBOs, another of the consequences arising from the changes to the originally planned project, is that this central focus is presented and discussed within the analytical framework of what the title of this article refers to as a wider "Christian ecology". For now, what this refers to can (negatively speaking) be briefly summarized in terms of the impossibility of fully separating out Christian FBOs in GB (and especially so in terms of

their human, financial and organizational dimensions) from the wider “Christian ecology” in which they operate, and more positively speaking, as something that is inclusive of Christian places of worship and broader Christian organizations and networks which may or may not either see themselves or be seen by others, as meeting the working definition of “Christian FBOs” that both the original research project and this article adopted and was set out in the previous sub-section.

Overall, therefore, although the necessary adaptation of the project gave rise to some significant losses of potentially important data and findings in relation to the project’s original aims and objectives, it also mitigated what might otherwise have been the danger of not sufficiently appreciating the extent to which Christian FBOs are very much embedded within this overall “Christian ecology”. Therefore, in concluding this introduction, both the approach and the argument of this article can be summarized as being that it is generally helpful for describing, analyzing and understanding Christian FBOs to set them in the context of other FBOs and of the broader Voluntary and Community sector. However, specifically in relation to the description and evaluation of Christian FBOs during the pandemic, including the contributions made by them, the stresses and strains faced by them, their current situation, and their future prospects and ways forward, it is critically important that this should be done with reference to an analytical framework that takes into account the wider “Christian ecology” from which such FBOs live, and to which they also contribute. And it is in this context that the deployment of the concept of a “Christian ecology”—a more detailed justification for the adoption and use of which will be explained and discussed in Section 6—appears in the title and in the substance of this article as both a central methodological approach and a key finding of the project.

2. Religions and COVID-19 Research: The Global Context

2.1. Origins and Global Spread of COVID-19, National and International Responses

The [World Health Organization’s \(2024\)](#) WHO COVID-19 Research Database is an important and comprehensive resource for understanding the origins and development of a global pandemic of what is formally known as the SARS-CoV2 virus. The origins of the pandemic remain subject to dispute, with some claiming there was an accidental escape from a laboratory of a manufactured or modified virus, while others argue for its origin being in a species cross-over to humans as in a number of other recent viruses. Overall, in relation to the likelihood of the various potential pathways of its introduction to human beings, the China Part of the Joint WHO—China Study’s World Health Organization convened *Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2* considers that “introduction through a laboratory incident was considered to be an extremely unlikely pathway” while “introduction through an intermediate host is considered to be a likely to very likely pathway” ([World Health Organization 2021](#), p. 8). What is certainly the case is that Huanan Market in Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China, was the pandemic’s main early epicenter.

Nearly three-quarters of a century ago, the British historian Arnold Toynbee coined the phrase the “annihilation of distance” ([Toynbee 1958](#), p. 87) as an insightful descriptor for the closeness, speed and interconnectedness of the world that had been brought about by technology and modern means of transport, and in the light of which Toynbee argued that “all local problems” have been converted into “world-wide problems”. If that was the case already when Toynbee first wrote this towards the end of the 1950s, then it is even more so the case in our now highly globalized world. And this was clearly illustrated by the speed at which the newly emergent COVID-19 virus crossed borders not only regionally but also internationally, so that what began as a local problem in China in the Autumn of 2019 had already, by January 2020, become a major public health issue in Italy.

By Spring 2020, it had more generally become clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had very much become a global problem, not least because of the limited effectiveness of available treatments and, crucially, the lack of a preventative vaccine. These factors in combination meant that, within the borders of nation-states, one of the main means for fighting the virus was the imposition, to a greater or lesser extent, of public health

measures that became more widely known as “lock downs”, and which sought to limit human contact in relation to large scale events, at work and in public transport, right down through to familial and household interactions; while internationally, there was either a partial or complete closure of borders.

At the same time, in comparison with what had been possible during the last major global pandemic of the so-called “Spanish Flu” in the early 20th century, the “annihilation of distance” that had in many ways facilitated the spread of the virus also (and especially via its extension into cyberspace) became the means for the development of greater international awareness; for the collaborative sharing of information; and for a comparison of the effectiveness of public health measures. Indeed, the internationalization of existing and emergent scientific expertise, research and knowledge transfer was given expression par excellence in the search for, discovery, development and rollout of effective vaccines, which, in the end, was what was mainly responsible for the pandemic ultimately moving into a less destructive endemic phase and beyond.

2.2. Religion or Belief and COVID-19 Interactions: Global Exemplar Resources

Before identifying some of the positive contributions that religion or belief traditions, communities and organizations, including FBOs, made during the pandemic and going on to discuss the impact of COVID-19 upon religions and FBOs, it is important to acknowledge that religions and beliefs also contributed to transmitting the spread of the virus (Wildman et al. 2020). This was particularly so in the early days of the pandemic when not enough was known about its patterns of transmission or the potentially serious implications for some kinds of gatherings and forms of religious practice. And even beyond the initial ignorance about and under-evaluation of the implications of COVID-19, the research identified ways in which the “force” of religion contributed to negative public health-related behaviors. For example, as argued by Singh:

We are ordinarily disposed to look for evidence of the positive role religions play in society. Religion, as Durkheim posited, is a “force” that activates a sense of obligation in the faithful to reach beyond self. This impulse usually results in positive action and behavior. This essay, however, brings together exceptional cases that cut across religions where the ordinary functionalist positivity gives way to negative behavior. Here, irrationality, inwardness, and selfishness trump wisdom and altruism. (Singh 2020, pp. 289–310)

Other research has examined the effects of COVID-19 on religious belief structures, such as its interaction with, and sometimes reinforcement of, apocalyptic understandings of religion (Crossley 2021) and the ways in which religious fundamentalism and aspects of religiosity can predict conspiracy thinking (Łowicki et al. 2022). At the same time, early on in the pandemic, the WHO recognized the potential importance of religion in the wider context of public health, issuing early interim “practical considerations and recommendations” (World Health Organization 2020b) on this to leaders of religious communities, groups and organizations. In this context, a Blog from the Rand Corporation noted that:

Congregations provide physical infrastructure and complex social networks that can be leveraged for a wide range of issues. They also provide access to informal support, food, health care, and educational and job opportunities through extended social networks and linkages with other community institutions. (Derose and Mata 2020)

And it is for reasons such as these that writers such as Gunderson and Cutts (2021) have, in reflecting on the role of faith communities in the context of responses to and moving beyond the COVID-19 epidemic, even gone as far as to refer to faith communities as being a “Social Immune System”. And indeed, research has shown many and varied ways, and at multiple levels, in which religious traditions, their communities and organizations have made positive contributions to the tackling of the pandemic. This includes evidence for

how the practice of religion itself could have been beneficial to those impacted directly in health terms by the virus (Fardin 2020; Corcoran et al. 2022). It includes an enhanced understanding of the relationship between religion and positive mental health (Dein et al. 2020; Bahal et al. 2023), especially, but not only in relation to spirituality (Kowalczyk et al. 2020). And, in particular, it shows how FBOs have played a significant role in health promotion related to COVID-19 (Barmania and Reiss 2021).

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic was such that all areas of international, national, local, family and personal life became implicated in both its spread and in efforts to tackle it, including religion or belief traditions, communities and organizations. Indeed, and especially when considered globally, the interface between the COVID-19 pandemic and religion or belief is one that has a vast range of points of contact and implications across the entire spectrum of religion or belief (Hart and Koenig 2020; Marshall 2022; Sisti et al. 2023). This enormous range of local, national, regional and global, thematic, individual religion, and cross-religion research and resources relating to COVID-19, including with regard to the role of FBOs, has resulted in the development of extensive research and resource repositories which have, on a global basis, set about collating key data, findings and analyses.

As reported by Baker et al. (2020), one global project partnership that was established near the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 is the *Faith and COVID-19: Resource Repository* (Georgetown University 2024) which was set up between Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs; the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development; the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD); and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI). This has amassed an enormous amount of relevant information, research findings and resources and has led to the creation of a *Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Initiative Reference Document for Religious Leaders and Faith Communities Guidance* (Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities 2020), which was originally set up as a "living document". Other global repositories include the World Health Organization's (2024) WHO COVID-19 Research Database, mentioned at the start of Section 2.1 of this article.

For a comprehensive global overview of such relevant research and resources, the reader is referred to the repositories themselves. However, the following selection of examples is provided here as an indication of the scope and range of the kind of materials contained within such repositories. With reference to the interface between COVID-19 and beliefs and practices across a range of individual religious traditions and communities, a Pew Center study by Sahgal and Connaughton (2021) highlights the differential impacts of COVID-19 on religion or belief across a range of "advanced economies". As one example of what became an extensive literature on debates concerning the role of law in relation to public health requirements and freedom of religion or belief, Movsesian's (2022) work is of note, while DeFranza et al. (2021) have discussed the way in which, in times of social crisis, religion or belief can tend to undergird and reinforce support for legal and policy measures articulated in terms of the perceived common good.

Chryssides and Cohn-Sherbok's (2023) edited collection examines "challenges and responses" with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and the world's religions; Borkataky-Varma et al.'s (2024) edited collection also examines "religious responses" to the COVID-19 crisis across a range of different religions. In relation to patterns of religious practice, the widely recommended public health practice of "social distancing" meant that physical meetings and other traditional forms of religious activity in person, such as pilgrimages, were often restricted (Majumdar 2022). There is also evidence (Witt-Swanson et al. 2023; Leonhardt et al. 2023), particularly from the USA, to suggest that these have changed significantly and not only for the short term. As part of these changes, the impact of the use of electronic media and the implications of this were further accelerated (Lorea et al. 2022; Altawil 2022).

There are also studies that, while cross-religious, zoom in on the interaction between religion and COVID-19 in particular countries and/or wider geographical areas. These

include [Begović's \(2020\)](#) article on Bosnia-Herzegovina, [McLaughlin's \(2020\)](#) report on Japan, [Tan et al.'s \(2022\)](#) article on religion and mitigation in Malaysia, and [Chilanga et al.'s \(2022\)](#) article on religion and risk perception in Malawi; [Smith et al.'s \(2022\)](#) collection dealing with "racialized health" in "Black Atlantic" contexts, and [Floyd-Thomas's \(2022\)](#) work on religion, race and white supremacy in the USA during the pandemic.

Other work focuses on specific religious traditions, albeit across different parts of the world, such as [Kaunda et al.'s \(2022\)](#) edited book on Christianity and COVID-19, while others that also focus on a specific religious tradition, such as [Sibanda et al.'s \(2022\)](#) edited book on Christianity and Southern Africa, do so by reference to specific geographical parameters of a more regional kind, while still others focus on COVID-19 and a particular religious group with reference to only a specific country context, as in [Grisafi's \(2021\)](#) article on Shincheonji in South Korea.

In terms of repositories for relevant research and resources, the global ones mentioned above are complemented by other more nationally focused online resource collections, of which (before turning to the specific GB context in Section 3) one might especially note examples from the USA, such as that of the [Faith Communities Today \(2024\) Research and Resources: U.S. Religion During COVID-19](#) website and [Pandemic Religion: A Digital Archive](#) which is a project of the [Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, in partnership with the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at IUPUI \(2024\)](#).

2.3. FBOs, COVID-19 and Relevant Research

Turning more specifically to FBOs, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on how FBOs have, in general terms, made important service contributions in contexts where state resources have either been undeveloped or have become fragmented. This includes their role in the context of social collapse and/or war ([Boro et al. 2022](#)), in humanitarian work more generally ([Ferris 2005](#)), and in relation to community development ([Vidal 2001](#)). As their role has evolved, FBOs have become a new area of interest to scholars in religious studies, sociology, social policy, voluntary sector, and urban studies. Recently, studies have particularly focused on the capability and effectiveness of FBOs in areas such as social work, social capital, and social cohesion ([Göçmen 2013](#)). Through their provision of a broad range of social welfare services, platforms, and advocacies for the vulnerable, marginalized, disenfranchised or debilitated, FBOs offer a wide spectrum of services locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally ([NCVO 2019, 2022](#); [Göçmen 2013](#); [Hogg and Baines 2011](#); [Bode 2006](#)). In relation specifically to GB, while organizations such as the [Faiths and Civil Society Unit \(2024\)](#) of Goldsmiths, University of London, have conducted significant research into aspects of the interface between FBOs and the wider society, comparatively little work has been carried out to fully audit their impact in Britain as compared with the breadth and depth of research conducted in the USA and some Two-Thirds World contexts.

With regard to COVID-19 and FBOs in particular, secular authorities in the USA dealing with COVID-19 recognized early the significant role that FBOs could play. Thus, for example, the [National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases \(U.S.\) and Division of Viral Diseases \(2020\)](#) issued early initial guidance to the leaders and administrators of FBOs (and community organizations). Later on, research was produced surveying the development of partnership work with FBOs at various levels in the USA, including in vaccine rollout ([Santibañez et al. 2022](#)). [Faiths4Vaccines \(2024\)](#), which originated in the USA and then extended its work globally, describes itself as

... an inclusive, multifaith movement comprised of local and national religious leaders, as well as medical professionals, who are working together to identify and resolve current gaps in vaccine mobilization, outreach, and uptake. Therefore, the initiative seeks to increase opportunities for faith-based institutions, particularly houses of worship, to engage and support the United States government

in its efforts to increase vaccination rates through the advancement of equitable vaccine distribution and combat vaccine hesitancy.

Examples of collaborative working with FBOs beyond the Christian community in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic include that of [Rachmawati et al. \(2022\)](#) on Islamic FBOs in Indonesia.

3. Religions, FBOs and COVID-19 Research: The British Context

3.1. COVID-19 in Great Britain: Emergence and Response

With regard to the appearance and spread of COVID-19 in GB, at the time of writing this article, the [UK COVID-19 Inquiry \(2024a\)](#) is being undertaken “to examine the UK’s response to and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and learn lessons for the future”. The work of the Inquiry is framed by its Terms of Reference ([UK COVID-19 Inquiry 2024b](#)), which give it the remit, by 2026 (with the likelihood of some interim reporting) to produce “a factual narrative account” of the “COVID-19 response and the impact of the pandemic”. Pending the future publication of the above comprehensive account, one can note that COVID-19 first appeared in public discussion in GB on 31 January 2020, when the Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Chris Whitty, announced the first confirmed and recorded cases of what, at the time, was more often known and referred to as the “2019 novel coronavirus”. On 10 February 2020, the [Secretary of State for Health and Social Care \(2020\)](#) issued the *Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations, 2020*, which were intended to give public health professionals “strengthened powers” to keep infected people and those reasonably believed to be at risk of having it in isolation ([Mahase 2020](#)). On 3 March 2020, the UK Government launched its *Coronavirus Action Plan* ([Department of Health and Social Care 2020](#)).

As the virus spread throughout the British and wider European populations and beyond, according to the UK Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, on 16 March 2020, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advised the government to enter “lockdown” ([Institute for Government 2022](#)), albeit that was initially implemented in an advisory, rather than a strict legal sense, until 23 March 2023, at which point it was initially envisaged as being something that would apply for a period of three weeks. Those working in health and social care were very much on the “frontline” of both the pressures and risks arising from the virus and the treatment and support of individuals directly affected by it. However, entire sectors of the economy and of social life, spanning such areas as education, hospitality, transport and social services, could no longer operate “normally” in the pre-COVID-19 sense as “social distancing” rules were introduced with the force of law in order to try and contain the spread of the virus, especially at a time when it was not known how serious the virus would be for children or if, and if so how quickly, an effective vaccination could be developed, tested and rolled out.

During the height of the first year of the pandemic, GB had one of the highest rates globally of COVID-19 infection and excess mortality. At that time, unsurprisingly, a great many public funding resources were being invested into epidemiological, drug and vaccine research, and these eventually bore fruit in the relatively speaking rapid development, testing, production and mass roll out of vaccination programs. Such vaccination programs—and of which the one led in GB by the National Health Service (NHS) was a particularly efficient and successful example—together with the gradual spread among the population of a natural level of relative immunity derived from previous infections with the virus, in due course led to a decline in virus-related morbidity.

By the latter half of 2022, epidemiologists, public health officials and politicians in much of Europe, including in GB, started to speak of the virus as having entered an “endemic” phase and, as such, having at least some similarities to previously known and experienced annual waves of influenza viruses. At the same time, however, there was increasing recognition of the negative and, at the time, relatively unforeseen (especially mental) health impacts of “lockdown” and the recognition of the existence of an emerging pattern of debilitating symptoms of what came to be known as “long COVID”. In

between the initial recognition and definition of the pandemic and its transition into a more “endemic” phase, alongside the direct health impacts, a massive personal, social, and economic disruption took place across society as a whole. This was so to such an extent that, in contrast to life pre-COVID-19, there was a sense of having entered what could be seen as, and was often called, a “new normal”.

3.2. Religion or Belief and COVID-19 Interactions: GB Exemplar Research and Resources

In GB, as globally, materials were collected on the interaction between religion or belief and COVID-19. On a cross-religious basis, this included the *Coronavirus Chronicles* that were produced by the ongoing [British Religion in Numbers \(2024\)](#)—Counting Religion in Britain project. Among the most relevant articles included in this are the December 2020 *Multinational Study of the Pandemic’s Impact on Religious Faith*, the January 2021 *Multinational Pew Poll on COVID-19’s Impact on Religious Faith*, and the February 2021 *Are things really looking up that much for the Churches?*

Thematic religious studies were carried out on the relationship between COVID-19 and various topics, such as that of religion and anxiety ([Rigoli 2021](#)). With regard to how, in terms of worship, British religious communities adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it imposed, Manchester Metropolitan University and Chester University conducted a research project on *Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19 (BRIC-19)*, which produced a summative report ([Edelman et al. 2021](#)) of the project’s findings. Especially at the height of the pandemic “lockdowns”, as researched by [Cardiff University et al. \(2023\)](#) on *Bereavement During COVID-19: A National Study of Bereaved People’s Experiences and the Impact on Bereavement Services*, pre-COVID-19 patterns and norms around dying, death and bereavement were particularly impacted in terms of what could or could not take place in places of worship, at crematoria or graveyards.

The virus also had disproportionate impacts on various groups within the population. Alongside and cutting across older people and those with pre-existing health conditions, it very soon became clear that the virus both highlighted and, in many ways, amplified pre-existing social and economic disadvantages, including in relation to minority ethnic and minority religion or belief groups. Thus, [Finney et al.’s \(2023\)](#) edited report on *Racism and Ethnic Inequality in Time of Crisis: Findings from the Evidence for Equality National Survey* highlighted how various “lock down” measures added to the pre-existing social, economic and housing pressures under which individuals and families were living. In addition, Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures showed that infection and death rates were higher for ethnic and religious minorities than among the population as a whole and/or other groups within it ([Gaughan et al. 2022](#)).

With particular reference to other than Christian religious traditions in GB, the [Institute for Jewish Policy Research \(2024\)](#) produced a set of reports on *Jews and COVID-19*, which drew on a UK-wide survey of Jewish lives, including health, jobs, finances and relationships to help navigate the pandemic and revitalize Jewish life. [Hargreaves and Rushworth \(2022\)](#) examined the impact of COVID-19 on both Jewish and Muslim communities in Britain, while [Kaur and Basra \(2022\)](#) conducted a qualitative study in relation to Sikhs. More specifically with regard to Hindus, [Mukherjee \(2022\)](#) examined “live streaming” of the goddess at a time during which worshippers could not easily attend temples.

4. The Voluntary and Community Sector, FBOs and Christian FBOs in GB

4.1. COVID-19 and the Voluntary and Community Sector in GB

In GB, the Voluntary and Community sector has a very extensive presence which, at the very least, complements state organized service and welfare provision. There are a number of relevant projects and reports in relation to the sector’s important role in contributing to tackling the pandemic and its social impacts in GB. On a national level, these include the report of research conducted by [Nottingham Trent University Business School et al. \(2022\)](#) *Respond, Recover, Reset: Two Years On*.

On a regional and local level, examples include [Together Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland's \(2021\) COVID-19 Impact Report: The Voluntary, Community, Faith & Social Enterprise Sector](#) and [Surrey Community Action's \(2020\) Part One: Surrey's Voluntary Sector COVID-19 Impact and Resilience: Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Surrey's Voluntary Community and Faith Sector and the Resilience of the Sector Post-COVID-19](#) which also looked forward to the implications of this for the post-pandemic period.

With regard to particular themes related to COVID-19, in terms of ethnic minority groups, there is the regional report for Together Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland that was produced by [Civil Society Consulting \(2021a\)](#) on *COVID-19 Impact Reports Spotlight on Civil Society Organisations Supporting Ethnic Minority and Newly Arrived Communities*.

4.2. (Especially Christian) FBOs and GB COVID-19 Social Impacts: Some Examples

With regard to the place of FBOs within the overall Voluntary and Community sector, the 2019 *UK Civil Society Almanac (NCVO 2019)* highlighted that “faith-based organizations which have a charitable purpose but are not places of worship” totaled around 15,000 or about 11% of the entire voluntary sector. From this, it can be seen that even in “normal times”, FBOs were playing an important role in generating and deploying what the American social scientist Robert Putnam calls “social capital” ([Putnam 1995](#)) of both the “bonding” and “bridging” kinds. At the same time, it has been precisely at a time when the services of FBOs and the continuity of experience that they have developed became both especially needed and increasingly recognized that anecdotal evidence emerged of the FBOs themselves showing indicators of financial and other distress that could potentially significantly impact on their future capacity, or in some cases, their very existence.

In light of this, it is not surprising that under the heading of “The public health response” within the *Terms of Reference* of the [UK COVID-19 Inquiry \(2024a\)](#) is included a reference to “the roles of, and collaboration between, central government, devolved administrations, regional and local authorities, and the voluntary and community sector” and “the closure and reopening of . . . places of worship”, as well as “The economic response to the pandemic and its impact, including governmental interventions by way of . . . additional funding for the voluntary and community sector . . .”. In addition, noting that “religion or belief” is one of the UK’s so-called “protected characteristics” within equality and human rights law, it is significant that the Inquiry’s *Terms of Reference* state that, in meeting its aims overall, it will

. . . consider any disparities evident in the impact of the pandemic on different categories of people, including, but not limited to, those relating to protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and equality categories under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

COVID-19 triggered a mobilization across the full religious spectrum of FBOs in the UK. In relation to the second largest faith group in Britain, Islam and Muslims, the [Muslim Charities Forum \(2020\)](#) produced a report highlighting the large range of activities developed in response to COVID-19. At the same time, Christian FBOs constitute the largest and most geographically widespread number of FBOs, providing extensive services and support not only in relation to their own base constituencies (which form a significant part of the wider community) but also in relation to the wider society. Some of these direct their efforts toward meeting the spiritual, physical, social, and cultural needs of their own communities, while a significant proportion are also substantially invested in the civic landscape through engagement in social justice, charity, and service sectors of wider British society.

In GB, Christian FBOs of various kinds and scopes (from local to national) and having varying foci in terms of groups and services (from the young to the elderly and from debt advice and support to the provision of food), found themselves confronted with the need to rapidly adapt, both in terms of their previous ways of working and in relation to volume of work. Taking the specific examples of poverty, and especially of food poverty, it is instructive to look briefly at the examples of the Christian FBOs, the Trussell Trust, Church Action on Poverty and Christians Against Poverty.

The Trussell Trust understands itself as a “an anti-poverty charity that supports a network of more than 1200 food bank centers across the UK”. It describes its work as being “based on, shaped, and guided by Christian principles. These values have strong roots in the Christian teaching and practice, whilst also being accessible and meaningful for people, whatever their background”. In a 1 May 2020 press release, the Trust reported that according to data provided by 333 (or 71%) of the 425 food bank charities in its network, within the weeks commencing 16 March and 23 March 2020, there had been an 81% increase for emergency food from food banks, including a 122% rise in parcels given to children, in comparison with data provided by its network for w/c 18 March and w/c 25 March in 2019. As noted by the Trust: “The figures are significantly above the normal year on year increases we generally see across the network. Our latest yearly increase data from April 2018–March 2019 showed a 19% increase” (Trussell Trust 2020a). Indeed, Table 1 shows the increase in food parcel distribution since 2017–18 and across all four nations of the UK.

Table 1. Percentage change in number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network by nation and region 2017/18–2021/22. (Trussell Trust 2023, p. 5).

Nations and Regions	Increase from Last Year (2021/22)	Increase from the First Year of the Pandemic (2020/21)	Increase from the Pre-Pandemic Year (2019/20)	Increase from Five Years Ago (2017/18)
United Kingdom	37%	16%	56%	120%
England	37%	16%	65%	135%
Scotland	30%	16%	9%	50%
Wales	41%	26%	36%	85%
Northern Ireland	29%	2%	80%	141%

As alluded to previously, such levels of need, while exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, are also part of a longer-term trend that pre-dated both the pandemic and the more recent intensification of the cost-of-living crisis. While these two events have had a major impact on the need for food bank services, they have also exposed and exacerbated a longer-term crisis, namely that of a weakened social security system that is unable to protect people from the most severe forms of hardship, thereby (Trussell Trust 2024) forcing increasing numbers people to the doors of food banks, as highlighted by the AHRC/ESRC funded research and report (Denning et al. 2021) from the “Life on the Breadline” project. In this overall context, Christian FBOs such as the Trussell Trust (2020b), in the first instance, faced the challenge of needing to change their ways of operation due to a combination of their need for themselves to become “COVID secure” while, at the same time, scaling up their operations in order to be in a position to meet the considerably expanded needs. In one guise or another, involvement in the provision of food has been one of the main activities identified among Christian initiatives responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

The Christian FBO, Church Action on Poverty, was involved in the production of published the report edited by Aichison and Perry (2021) on *Navigating Storms: Learning from COVID-19 Food Experiences*. This, in turn, was part of a wider Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research project mapping and monitoring of responses to risks of food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK that was led by the University of Sheffield and King’s College London in collaboration with the organization Sustain, and also Church Action on Poverty, and which fed into Lambie-Mumford et al.’s (2022) *End of Project Summary of Key Findings: Food Vulnerability During COVID-19*.

Building on its grassroots practical work in relation to debt advice and the relief of poverty, also conducted before the pandemic, the Christian FBO, Christians Against Poverty, made a number of wider political interventions ranging from the submission of evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty on the Universal Credit and Tax Credits uplift made during COVID-19 (Christians Against Poverty 2021a), a submission to a Scottish Government call for evidence on its COVID-19 recovery plan in relation especially to provisions relating to bankruptcy (Christians Against Poverty 2021c), and a

submission to call for evidence from the Money and Pensions Service ([Christians Against Poverty 2021b](#)). Post-pandemic, Christians Against Poverty also undertook a survey of those seeking support with debt, the press release on the findings of which highlighted that, among such, there had also been an increase in post-pandemic loneliness ([Christians Against Poverty 2022](#)).

4.3. Partnerships between FBOs (Especially Christian) and Local Authorities

The political interventions of Christians Against Poverty illustrate and highlight the importance of the interface between Christian (and other) FBOs and the structures of the state, both at national, regional and local levels. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, government at the local level in the form of local authorities (and, where appropriate, more regional forms of governance) played an important role in support and facilitation of the work of Christian and other FBOs. In recognition of what such FBOs could bring to the overall voluntary and community sector contribution in tackling the pandemic and its social, familial and personal impacts, this was developed through collaborative approaches to financing and organizational support. For example, in the context of the West Midlands Combined Authority, research conducted by a consortium of Coventry and Wolverhampton Universities and the Birmingham Voluntary Services Council which informed the report *Innovation and Enterprise Across the Social Economy in Recovery from COVID-19 Final Report: Report for the West Midlands Combined Authority* ([Rees et al. 2021](#)) showed the importance of a strong interface between Christian and other FBOs and local strategic structures.

On a national level, an important record of this collaboration between faith groups, FBOs and local authorities is provided in a report that was commissioned by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society. The [APPG on Faith and Society \(2024\)](#) was originally established in 2012, and its work is serviced by [Faith Action \(2024\)](#). Its report, *Keeping the Faith: Partnerships Between Faith Groups and Local Authorities During and Beyond the Pandemic* ([APPG on Faith and Society 2020](#)), drew on research undertaken in partnership with the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London. While this report was not focused on Christian FBOs or even FBOs alone, its research was informed by the results of a bespoke survey that asked about “Faith Groups or FBOs”, from which it is possible to abstract specific and comparative data on local authority partner activities with Christian FBOs.

The research took place during July–August 2020, thus reflecting the first six very intensive months of the pandemic. The survey was sent to all 408 local authorities in the UK. It was complemented by material from 55 in-depth interviews with local authority leaders and coordinators of faith-based projects conducted across 10 sample local authorities. Within an overall response rate to the survey of 47.5%, 194 local authorities made valid returns ([APPG on Faith and Society 2020](#), p. 3), out of which 60% stated they were working with a faith group or FBO. Bearing in mind the above-discussed examples of food-related work undertaken by the Trussell Trust and by Church Action on Poverty, from this survey, it is also worth noting the very important role played by food banks in the context of the accentuated and exacerbated food emergency that was a significant part of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, 59% of responding local authorities stated that they were working with Christian-related foodbanks, while in relation to the wider religious landscape, 24% said that they were doing this with Muslim ones, 11% with Sikh ones, 10% with Hindu ones, 4% with Buddhist ones, and 1% with Humanist ones ([APPG on Faith and Society 2020](#), p. 25).

With regard to wider forms of food support, in response to the following question: “How were various faith groups or faith-based organizations involved in your local authority-coordinated food distribution programmes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?” ([APPG on Faith and Society 2020](#), pp. 25–26), it is perhaps worthy of note that, although there was some degree of variation in different kinds of activity across the various faiths, this variation was, generally speaking, not so large and that, overall, that was rough parallelism between the kinds of activities undertaken by Christian FBOs and that by other FBOs. For example, around the transport and delivery of food parcels, 62% of local

authorities were working with Christian FBOs, and when taken across all faiths, that was 65%. Alongside that, 64% of responding local authorities stated that they were working with Christian faith groups and FBOs in relation to “sharing information to their members” (66% across all faiths); 62% with Christian ones in “transport and delivery, e.g., of food parcels” (65% across all faiths); 62% with Christian ones in “collecting and donating food or money” (64% across all faiths); 59% with Christian ones in “operating a food bank” (60% across all faiths); 57% with Christian ones in “pastoral support/befriending” (59% across all faiths); 52% with Christian ones in “providing volunteers to our programmes” (53% across all faiths); 48% with Christian ones in “cooking and delivering meals” (57% across all faiths); 46% with Christian ones in “making buildings available” (47% across all faiths).

At the same time, based on data from previous policy reports relating to these activities of faith groups and FBOs, in comparison with their levels of engagement prior to the pandemic, their “. . . capacity for engagement has, perhaps not surprisingly, declined across most areas of policy engagement” (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 27). Part of this drop in capacity might have occurred due to the almost frantic nature of the necessary activity in the first phase of the pandemic. At the same time, the report noted that some of this change could be explained by the shutting down of premises and the furlough or self-isolation of staff. Nevertheless, despite this, the report also identified that, overall, there was a rise of 12% in the number of authorities identifying partnership working with faith groups and FBOs, specifically in relation to food poverty, and a 7% rise in relation to mental health and wellbeing which the report notes could be interpreted either as “a response to increased demand” and/or reflecting the possibility that they “could have diverted their resources to these areas of engagement to compensate for the restrictions imposed on their other community welfare and outreach functions during lockdown” (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 27).

What was, however, clear in relation to the first wave of the pandemic was that “Faith groups and faith-based organizations are integral providers of new food distribution programmes as a response to COVID-19” (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 27). Relative to local authorities themselves and wider voluntary sector groups, “In three out of seven categories” of new initiatives to combat “food poverty and destitution” (such as the setting up new food banks, the cooking and delivering of meals, and the provision of emergency breakfast or lunch clubs), FBOs featured in between the other two providers (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 27).

5. Financial, Organizational and Human Impacts on Christian FBOs in GB

5.1. Financial Impacts of COVID-19 on Christian FBOs in GB’s “Christian Ecology”

Globally speaking, a report in *The Economist* (2022) highlighted the financial impact of COVID-19 on many religious bodies and organizations. In relation to GB in particular, a report by Andrew Brown (2021) was published by the Religion Media Centre under the headline *The Covid Cash Crisis for Religion: Social Action May be cut and Victorian Churches Shut Due to a “COVID Cash Crisis*. The highlights of this were confirmed by another Religion Media Centre report by Catherine Pepinster (2021) under the headline *Cathedrals Make Millions for Their Cities—But Financial Losses in Covid Have Been Devastating*.

At the same time, in terms of positive contributions, Pepinster noted the Ecorys (2021a) consultancy organization’s report for the Association of English Cathedrals on *The Economic and Social Impact of Cathedrals in England* that had drawn attention to the fact that “the impact of the pandemic has . . . Brought benefits, causing cathedrals to rethink their role in their areas. Many people turned to them to provide vital help, such as food banks and other services during lockdown, as well as spiritual solace”, examples of which were published in Ecorys’ (2021b) *Cases Studies* report that focused on six Cathedrals. On the other hand, Pepinster (2021) summarized the findings of the report as being that

Anglican cathedrals have been hit by a perfect storm caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a report has revealed. They have endured a 75 per cent drop in visitors, a fall in worshippers, and an 80 per cent decrease in income from use of their

facilities. And the vital role that cathedrals play in their communities' economies means that the slump in visitors has had a huge impact on cathedral cities.

5.2. Organizational Impacts of COVID-19 on Christian FBOs in GB's "Christian Ecology"

In its review of work with 127 organizations (including a number of Christian FBOs) during the pandemic, the Organization [Civil Society Consulting \(2021b, p. 2\)](#) noted that "At the beginning of the pandemic, 87% of small ethnic minority-led community organizations were at risk of permanent closure within three months. This compares to 10% of the charity sector as a whole". However, through its offer of the program "Steps to Sustainability", which was later built upon by "Steps to Recovery", Civil Society Consulting was funded by DLUHLG (previously the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) to support fifty-four organizations. This program commenced mid-March 2021 as part of the UK Government's "Community Champions" program, which was managed by Strengthening Faith Institutions and Ostro Fayre Share Foundation, which supports and empowers grassroots organizations, community and faith leaders, as well as by the National Lottery Community Fund and which had a focus especially on minority ethnic groups.

As a stark example of the impact of COVID-19 on the organizational, human and financial capacities of Christian FBOs in GB, the organization Christians Against Poverty, whose extensive contributions during the pandemic were outlined in Section 4.2 of this article, in January 2023, found itself in the position of needing to issue a press release to the effect about the financial pressures it was facing, as follows:

Covid and the cost of living crisis made 2022 an exceptionally challenging year for CAP, along with many other charities. During a year when fundraising and donation levels struggled, CAP faced significant demand on our services and finances, with calls to our free debt helpline and requests for emergency food and energy support rising substantially. ([Christians Against Poverty 2023a, 2023b](#))

Towards the end of February 2023, this was followed by a further *Latest Update* statement, in which Christians Against Poverty explained that "Following a review of our staffing and funding situation, we can confirm that CAP will be making fifty head office redundancies over the course of this spring" but "Our key priority has been to protect our front-facing debt advice roles, where there will be no compulsory redundancies" ([Christians Against Poverty 2023a, 2023b](#)).

The broader interrelationship between the contributions made by Christian FBOs during the COVID-19 pandemic—but also the pandemic's negative indirect as well as direct impact on, especially, their financial resources—was identified in a number of relevant surveys and wider research projects. An example of this was the [Evangelical Alliance's \(2020a\)](#) second regular *Changing Church* survey, conducted 1–12 October 2020 in collaboration with Stewardship and in partnership with Eido Research. The Executive Summary of the results of this survey (which was based on 451 valid responses from church leaders and 1061 responses from other individuals) highlighted, in ways that echoed other evidence relating to the period, that involvement in the "delivery of food or medicine" almost doubled to 50% of the congregations of respondents while mental health support increased, along with involvement in foodbank and nutrition.

On the other hand, over the same period, the survey identified a reported reduction in relation to work in a number of other areas, including befriending the elderly and isolated, school support, debt counseling and support, homelessness, asylum seekers, addiction recovery groups, and affordable housing. And, crucially, in relation to finances, 46% of churches reported that donations were down over the past three months compared to what had been typical pre-COVID-19, with churches in Scotland (and in Northern Ireland) reporting the largest (25%) falls in donations.

5.3. Human Impacts of COVID-19 on Christian FBOs in GB's "Christian Ecology"

In terms of volunteering capacity in the voluntary and community sector more broadly, the *UK Civil Society Almanac* [NCVO \(2022\)](#) noted that in 2020/21, there were 16.3 million

people engaged in “formal volunteering” (via groups/clubs/organizations) and that this was down from pre-COVID-19 figure of 20 million, noting that “The pandemic saw formal volunteering at least once a year plunge from 37% to 30% in 2020/21. Those who formally volunteered at least once a month fell from 23% to 17%”. Formal volunteering is defined by the National Council for Voluntary Organizations (NCVO) as volunteering organized within an organizational context, such as by charities and voluntary and public sector organizations.

At the same time, it was also noted that “informal volunteering” (which is seen as being carried out outside of an organizational context and can include activities such as tidying a local park or driving a neighbor to a hospital appointment) “rose substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic such that by 2020/21 more than half of people volunteered informally at least once a year and a third (33%) did so at least once a month”. However, summarizing the situation from a longer-term perspective, [Lapshynov’s \(2023\)](#) report on *A Bleeding Atlas: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Volunteering in the UK* noted that “national levels of volunteering fell markedly between 2013 and 2020, though formal volunteering in particular took a hard hit” and that, “To make matters worse, by early 2020 growth in activity had already significantly outstripped growth in income on average, meaning that the sector would have entered a period of financial instability regardless of the impact of the pandemic . . .”. But then, during the pandemic,

Charities had to simultaneously digitize their services, furlough their staff, and move en masse to remote working—if at all possible, depending on the nature of the services provided—which has had a major impact on their ability to respond more effectively to the pandemic”. ([Lapshynov 2023](#), p. x)

As a result, what has happened overall has been an increasing demand for services in the context of both a reduction in income and a dwindling number of volunteers ([Rich and Lapshynov 2020](#)). More specifically, between March 2020 and April 2021, more than a third of charities saw their volunteer numbers fall ([Lapshynov 2023](#), p. xi). Indeed, in the Executive Summary of the results of its survey of 2000 charities, the Charity Commission for England and Wales found that “almost all (91%) participants in England and Wales experienced some negative impact from COVID-19. The most commonly affected areas were service delivery, finance and staffing, with the majority experiencing frustration and uncertainty” ([Charity Commission for England and Wales 2021](#)).

At first sight, in some apparent contrast with the above wider picture, it was noted in [Rees et al.’s \(2021\)](#) report on the social economy in recovery from COVID-19 in the context of English West Midlands that “Alongside the contributions of specific Faith Based Organizations, wider faith communities and places of worship have a wealth of often locally-rooted human resources that usually (though not always) have a readiness to provide volunteer help in meeting crisis needs”. However, what this especially highlights is the important connection between what is the relatively stable existence of faith community groups/places of worship and FBOs. Indeed, it was often the case that local congregations became a site of mobilization for the more general volunteering that was going on in society, and not just in supporting what Christian FBOs or the churches were themselves doing. In this context, it can be noted that members of a congregation perhaps hear a sermon and get inspired that “we have to do something”, and/or somebody speaks to them about their experience of helping neighbors in their street, and they ask, “what can I do?” It is not that all congregation members are always involved in such activities, but that in times of crisis, they can and often did rise to the occasion, with this volunteering being flexed beyond the congregation itself and even beyond Christian FBOs as such.

In August 2020, the University of York’s Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, working in collaboration with Historic England, the Church of England, the Association of English Cathedrals, the National Churches Trust, and the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance set up the *COVID-19, Churches & Communities* research project ([University of York Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture 2024](#)) that provides important insights into, especially, the Anglican parts of the wider “Christian ecology”. This project’s

aim was to gather, analyze and report on grassroots responses to closures and restrictions across the country between Autumn 2020 and February–March 2021. Its findings presented views gathered from over five and a half thousand survey responses and interviews with church leaders, members, non-members, and experts in relevant fields. It provided insights into individual and community experience, assessed developing responses by churches, including new partnerships with other bodies, and looked forward to the contribution that churches, their buildings, and their networks could make to recovery. Among the report's key findings was that

Alongside other faith groups, churches have proven capacity to aid national recovery through long-term networks and hubs of social care in every community. They have built longstanding relationships and public trust and are experienced in meeting complex needs through both 'light touch' and specialist support. Church Leaders and Members are now articulating a clear commitment to addressing the increased needs triggered across society by COVID-19, through expanded provision and partnership working. ([University of York Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture 2021](#), p. 11)

At the same time, it is important to be aware that (apart from Christian groups with African-Caribbean origins in which membership numbers are often rising, as well as among some of the so-called "new churches" which are, generally, not so associated with the ownership of their own buildings), many other local churches of the traditional Christian denominations of Great Britain are quite weak, a significant number are closing, and the results of the 2021 Census for England and Wales show significant decline in people self-identifying as Christian ([Office for National Statistics 2021](#)). The question, therefore, arises of how long into the future can this "Christian ecology" sustain itself?

In relation to this, a report from York St. John University's project on *Coronavirus, Church and You* led by Revd. Professor Andrew Village and Revd. Canon Professor Leslie Francis, which more generally aimed to "research the impact of lockdown on churchgoers", also underlined the human capacity limits of churches in terms of volunteering for tasks beyond their own immediate and often quite challenging needs. The research consisted of two phases built around an initial online survey run between May and July 2020, followed by a further survey that was conducted between January and July 2021. Both phases were focused on the Church of England but were also open to others to complete, with the first survey having seven thousand responses, of which 5347 were Anglican. Both resulted in online reports and a large number of associated publications by Village and Francis, all of which are accessible via the project's website ([York St. John University 2022](#)), including some coverage of Baptists and Catholics in the UK.

Picking up especially on the situation in rural churches, the headline of a *Church Times* article written by the researchers announced that "The writing is on the wall for fragile rural churches" ([Village and Francis 2020](#)). Using a pre-pandemic research report hypothesis of "fragile churches" ([Lawson 2019](#)), which identified as key perceptions of such fragility that "Our church building will not be financially viable" and that "Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace", the article reported that among Church of England clergy respondents, 34% of those in rural parishes said that the impact of COVID-19 would be such that their churches would not be financially viable compared with 24% in inner city parishes, 20% in town parishes, and 18% in suburban parishes, while in relation to the loss of key engaged people, 29% of clergy in rural parishes answered "yes", compared with 24% from town parishes, 23% in suburban parishes, and 20% in inner-city parishes. In more extended journal articles, [Francis et al. \(2021, 2022\)](#) also further reported on and discussed these issues.

Despite the above, however, when considering the role of places of worship with often small congregations, it is insufficiently appreciated that the apparently "internal" support that is provided by such local faith groups, congregations and places of worship is not only of purely internal interest and value to those groups in an isolated sense, but that it is in itself a contribution to the wider community to which such groups also belong. Indeed,

this is especially so when one bears in mind the relatively high proportions of people with minority ethnic backgrounds that can be found within both Christian (and particularly other) faith groups in Great Britain.

6. Christian FBOs in Great Britain and Their “Wider Christian Ecology”

6.1. An Example of a Christian FBO’s “Wider Christian Ecology”

In announcing to both its supporters and to the wider public the negative financial impact of COVID-19 upon the capacities and the services that it would, in future, be able to provide the Christian FBO, Christians Against Poverty, underlined the continuing role of the local congregations with which this Christian FBO has both historically worked and would also be able, even on the other side of a financial and organizational crisis, to continue to work in the provision of at least some specific services, stating that “We continue to work hand in hand with our local church partners, who provide face to face support for clients in their homes, so that they will experience as little impact as possible” (Christians Against Poverty 2023a).

This statement, therefore, underlines the complex ways in which Christian FBOs in GB, such as Christians Against Poverty, cannot be understood apart from the context of the wider “Christian ecology” within which it operates. In this concrete example, then, the FBO itself comes under financial stress; it is forced to reduce some of its work—certainly its staffing and its back office functions—but it also manages to continue to provide services because it is part of a wider “Christian ecology” within which it sits and where its relationship to local congregations is key to what it actually can do. And therefore, because of this wider “Christian ecology”, the anti-poverty aims and objectives focused on by the FBO concerned do not need to be completely abandoned even when the specific FBO comes under significant stress and limitations arising.

6.2. “Ecology” in Its Wider Uses and Meanings

If its use in this article and beyond is to be more than an artistically creative expression, the phrase “Christian ecology” is one that needs some further unpacking, including with reference to the usages of “ecology” in other contexts. Generally speaking, the word “ecology” is today usually connected with matters of environmental understanding and concern, while the word was first coined in the nineteenth century by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel (1866), who, broadly speaking, defined it as the study of the relationship between organisms and their environment. The Carey Institute for Ecosystem Studies (2024) notes that, in between the first appearance of the term “ecology” and today, with regard to academic contexts, a range of definitions have been proposed and developed, with the most common ones reflecting the approach of Andrewartha and Birch (1954), who considered ecology to be “the study of the distribution and abundance of organisms” and that of Odum (1953) which focuses on “the study of ecosystems”.

Across these differences of emphasis is a view of nature that is “encompassing and synthetic” rather than fragmented. In relation to this, the Carey Institute for Ecosystem Studies’ (2024) own summary definition argues that “ecology” is best understood as being “The scientific study of the processes influencing the distribution and abundance of organisms, the interactions among organisms, and the interactions between organisms and the transformation and flux of energy and matter”.

6.3. Translation of the Meanings of “Wider Ecology” into “Christian Ecology”

On first reading the Institute’s definition, one might question what it might have to do with Christian FBOs. But there are, arguably, two aspects of the Institute’s further explanation of what it means by “ecology”, which, if “translated” between contexts, could be seen as having a particular resonance with what this article argues is the potential that the notion of a “Christian ecology” offers for an illuminating analytical understanding of the role of Christian FBOs. These aspects include a focus “on ‘processes’, ‘interactions’ and ‘relations’ rather than on the physical entities per se”. In addition, if Christian FBOs are

understood in terms of the “organisms” of the Carey Institute’s definition, and the wider Christian community and its congregations, organizations and networks are understood in terms of the “physical world” within which the specific “organisms” of Christian FBOs operate then, as the Institute explains it,

The relationships between organisms and the physical world can be bidirectional, although different specialties may emphasize the effect of the organisms (and systems containing them) on the physical world, or the effect of the physical world on the organisms. (Carey Institute for Ecosystem Studies 2024)

As applied to “Christian ecology”, this means that formally independent Christian FBOs or local churches themselves may run food banks, parenting groups, or provide debt support, but in reality, none of these initiatives ever operate in isolation from their wider “Christian ecology”. Indeed, in relation to this, the Kruger report’s insight that “The networks of a faith community, the relationships within a congregation or faith group, are a source and opportunities of huge resilience for the people they seek to help” (Kruger 2020, p. 35), and the earlier quoted (in Section 5.3) conclusions of the University of York Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture’s (2021) report on *COVID-19, Churches and Communities: Experiences, Needs, and Supporting Recovery. March 2021*, both underline the importance of “long-term networks”. Therefore, within the identification of an overall “Christian ecology” for Christian FBOs, it is not so much local “churches”, congregations, or even “church projects” that are important and key, but rather what both reports identify as “networks” which, while they encompass the formal links that often exist between churches, congregations and church projects, also go beyond these to reference the Christian environment more broadly.

7. Christian FBOs in Great Britain: Strategic Issues and Opportunities

7.1. The Post-Pandemic Starting Point

In a post-COVID-19 pandemic edition of the *UK Civil Society Almanac* (NCVO 2022), out of 18 identified sub-sectors within the overall Voluntary and Community sector, organizations identified with “religion” came in at third place, or now at just over 10% of the sector as a whole, and thus down 1% from the comparable data quoted above for 2019, although with an increased number of organizations. However, the 2022 *Almanac* also noted that “the vast majority of voluntary organizations are micro and small” and also cautioned that “the impact of the pandemic on the number and size of organizations are yet to be seen”. Perhaps even more significantly, while still holding third place at 10% in terms of the proportion of all Voluntary and Community sector organizations, in terms of income, these organizations come in only 18th place, having a total income of £2,984,000,000 which represents only just over 5% of the income of the whole voluntary and community sector.

7.2. From Meeting Individual Needs to Cooperative and Structural Partnerships

As has been noted above, one of the key challenges for FBOs (including Christian FBOs) in their provision of faith-based services, and which was also underlined in the context of their response to COVID-19, has been that of how they interact with the secular powers-that-be on a national level, and with statutory services provided by local authorities and other government-related bodies (Kemp 2023). In his Foreword to its first report on the interface between religion and belief groups and COVID-19, the Chair of the APPG on Faith and Society, Stephen Timms, in a way reflective of the vast majority of Local Authority responses, quoted a local council leader who told the researcher, “My personal admiration for faith groups has gone through the roof, just in terms of their commitment there. We as a local authority didn’t know what we were getting into. And they have got involved with smiles on their faces and they’ve done it professionally”. Furthermore, according to Timms, “Most of those responding expected collaboration to be maintained or further developed in the future” (Timms, in *APPG on Faith and Society 2020*, p. 2).

Indeed, the APPG’s follow-up report called *Keeping the Faith 2.0: Embedding a New Normal for Partnership Working in Post-Pandemic Britain* (APPG on Faith and Society 2022),

and based on research undertaken a year after that undertaken for the original report, proceeded via the conduct of more reflective in-depth interviews with faith group and local authority leaders and focused on exploring and reflecting on any wider lessons to be learned from the pandemic. Among other things, this research found that the extensive food distribution partnerships with Christian and other FBOs that had been noted in the first report had, in the course of the further spread of the pandemic, broadened to include involvement in becoming venues for the first vaccinations against COVID-19. And this was quite distinctive in comparison with the situation in a number of other European countries, with nurses giving vaccinations in church building centers and so on rather than their having to be given by a doctor in a medicalized setting.

But while this kind of provision expanded, a change in focus also started to come about, with congregations and FBOs moving more into mental health and well-being support as some of the implications of lockdown became ever clearer, especially among isolated older people, but also people in midlife who had lost jobs, and on young people and children who had not been able to be in school environments. As summarized by the Chair of the APPG, “Faith groups were being more systematically involved in service provision”, and both their greater experience gained from their earlier involvement and also the recognition that they had received for such “had galvanized their sense of mission and purpose, and strengthened their confidence” (Timms, in [APPG on Faith and Society 2022](#), p. 2). However, the question then arises of whether the government was, so to speak, just conveniently “using” FBOs in times of crisis and whether Christian FBOs were also, through the experience of crisis co-working, starting systematically to think through what the implications of that might be post-COVID-19 and what the implications of that might be for them in relation both to their wider “Christian ecology”, and also their working with governance structures beyond that “Christian ecology”?

Among the examples of this increasingly systematic involvement being undertaken by Christian FBOs, the *Keeping the Faith 2.0* report noted that “A Christian worship centre” in the West of England had pioneered “a year-long programme mentoring struggling families and young people in their own homes”, and that its success had then “allowed statutory services to bolt-on other professional care services” from “local schools, housing and social services and health care providers”, enabling the reach of the program to extend from 60 families to over 200 ([APPG on Faith and Society 2022](#), p. 10). Also, a Christian project leader of a church-based health project from the southwest of England reported that its local health commissioning body was “exploring whether they build a health centre attached to the church so that we can collaborate moving forward. Can they fund some of our family support workers and locate them in GP surgeries?” (in [APPG on Faith and Society 2022](#), p. 12). A Christian faith-based welfare hub leader from a London Borough testified to what the report summarized as the “post-pandemic confidence” ([APPG on Faith and Society 2022](#), p. 27) of faith groups in which “Our approach is in the first place to create places and spaces of welcome that lead to the sharing of stories which in turn lead to solutions. All are equally welcome. Our philosophy is [to] be formed by people and not driven by projects!” And this leader gave an innovative example of such, which involved two years of pilot local authority funding (with the possibility of future extension) for: “the future delivery of key healthcare and welfare interventions being steered by multidisciplinary networks, including faith groups, based on where people are already congregating in the course of their daily lives” (in [APPG on Faith and Society 2022](#), p. 27).

8. Issues for the Future in (Especially Christian) FBO and State Relations in GB

8.1. Historical and Christian Roots of the Welfare State

Arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in GB, and as explored by [Cranmer and Pocklington \(2021\)](#), a whole series of issues were raised about the nature of the relationship between the Christian Churches and other faith community organizations, FBOs (including Christian ones), the wider “Christian ecology” and the state. In considering some of the wider implications, without indulging in what this author has elsewhere argued would

be an unwarranted nostalgia for Christendom (Weller 2005), it is important not to forget that the idea of a universal and comprehensive welfare state, as it emerged in Britain in the wake of the Second World War, was a strongly Christian-flavored one, as the first APPG report also noted

... this religious foundation has by and large been forgotten, and the dominant narrative surrounding the origins and purpose of the Welfare State is instead a secular, scientific and technocratic one—a perspective that still appears in many policy frameworks today. (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 50)

In fact, among other things, the term “welfare state”, which was adopted via the 1945 Labour Government in the context of implementing the Beveridge Plan for post-war social welfare, was itself a term that had been coined by the Church of England’s Archbishop William Temple (1942) in his book *Christianity and Social Order*, which book also briefly outlined some of the broad policy contours that would inform the creation of the post-Second World War British welfare state.

8.2. Post-Pandemic “New Normal” Policy Space for FBOs: Opportunities and Issues

In the context of the work of Christian and other FBOs in engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic, the APPG noted the opening up of what it called a “new policy space” that

... offers unparalleled opportunities for faith groups to be seen unapologetically for who they are—i.e., communities of faith. That faith-based identity, for so long occluded, denied, or described only in proxy terms such as culture or ethnicity, can now be allowed to express itself in fully authentic and creative ways. (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 50)

The report also noted that a number of the participants in the research that informed it had referred to this development in terms of this having become a “new normal” (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 50). In doing so, it also noted the potential policy link between this “new normal” and the “New Deal with Faith Communities” that the UK Member of Parliament Danny Kruger had identified as a key area in his broader report on the UK’s Government’s policy goals concerned with *Levelling Up our Communities* (Kruger 2020). In addition to the above, in 2020, a call for evidence on government engagement with faith communities was issued by Colin Bloom, who was commissioned as an “Independent Faith Adviser” and whose eventual report (Bloom 2023) *The Bloom Review: Does Government ‘do God’. An Independent Review into How the Government Engages with Faith* also contained some resonant themes. Among those who sought to explore some of the potential future implications of this were *The Good Faith Partnership’s* (n.d.) report *Stepping Up and Stepping Out*, the content and subtitle of which highlighted the potential of what had been learned during the pandemic for the development “in COVID-19 recovery and beyond” of what it called a future “a future social covenant” between faith communities and government.

At the same time, the *Keeping the Faith* reports note some important issues, concerns and potential dangers around what, if care is not taken, might be the implications of the strengthened position of Christian and other FBOs in the provision of publicly funded services to the general public. These include the possible privileging of religious communities, organizations and groups through their exercise of a potential “gatekeeping” function in relation to the accessibility of services and within which, for example, the gendered structure of many religious leaderships might have undesirable effects in relation to inclusivity. Therefore, in considering the broader way forward for Christian and other FBOs, it is important that such issues and potential dangers, as well as the opportunities that have been noted, are kept under continuous review.

In order to provide a focal point for continuous engagement in government going forward, the first APPG *Keeping the Faith* report advocated the creation of both a Faiths Commissioner and also of a Faiths Advisory Council (APPG on Faith and Society 2020, p. 52), while *The Bloom Review* (Bloom 2023, pp. 63–64) argued for what it called an Independent Faith Champion. The APPPG acknowledged the historic example of the

existence, until 2012, of a previous Faith Communities Consultative Council (FCCC), which the APPG report noted had evolved out of the historic Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC) that had been created to help support, facilitate and review the government's engagement with inner city policies on a more religiously inclusive basis that went beyond the Church of England's mechanisms to support urban regeneration that followed the publication of its *Faith in the City* report ([Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas 1985](#); [Faith in Society 2024](#)).

However, what neither the APPG nor the later Kruger or Bloom reports mentioned above acknowledged was the previous complementary existence and work of the Expert Panel on Faith advising the Secretary of State for Communities, Other Ministers and Civil Servants in the Department of Communities and Local Government⁴, which had been set up in the last period of the New Labour Government. In the end, it existed only in the year 2010 before it was abolished by the incoming Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government. However, given the potential "gatekeeping" and related issues noted by the *Keeping the Faith* report in relation to collaborative work at a local level, unlike the Faith Communities Consultative Council, the Expert Panel was not composed of members who were appointed or acting as representatives of formal religious organizations and bodies. Rather, its membership was appointed on the basis of applications made against the criteria that members should have a substantial practical and working knowledge and experience of faith communities across all their diversities, including confessional movements, ethnicity, gender and other factors.

As a result, the Expert Panel was able to offer a source of informed, but also more independent, input to government that was complementary to that which it was possible for the Faith Communities Consultative Council to offer. And from this, there are arguably still lessons to be learned if, in the future, any new Faiths Advisory Council were to be brought into existence. And in light of what this article has identified concerning the very significant levels of collaboration in service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic that developed between local authorities, FBOs and wider faith groups, it might be of continued significance that perhaps the most important product of the short-lived Panel was its creation of a document addressed "primarily to purchasers of funders and services in local government" ([Department for Communities and Local Government 2010](#)), and which sought to address what were then current (and can still sometimes be found) false assumptions current among local authorities in relation to working with faith groups including FBOs, including that

Myth 1: We are not allowed to give public money to religious organizations;

Myth 2: Faith-based bodies do not have the necessary expertise or "clout" to deliver services;

Myth 3: They will use public money for proselytizing or worship;

Myth 4: They would not want to help people they do not approve of;

Myth 5: Single-group funding has negative implications for community cohesion;

Myth 6: Faith-based groups only work with their own communities;

Myth 7: Funding will imply support for the religious views/doctrine of the organization;

Myth 8: This is too much of a cozy relationship between faith and government;

Myth 9: It means that non-faith-based service providers in the third sector will be disadvantaged;

Myth 10: If you engage with one faith community, you will always have to engage with all the others in the same way and all together.

Against this background, this review of research on Christian FBOs during the COVID-19 pandemic in GB shows how Christian (and other) FBOs have generally been welcoming of at least the opportunity for them to be funded by and to work in close cooperation with

local government organizations in extending the reach and impact of services that can help to meet the needs of the wider public. While their collaborative experience during COVID-19 has also increased the confidence of many in local government to reach out to FBOs and faith communities as an important and valued part of the wider voluntary and community sector, its politicians and officers will nevertheless want to continue to be aware of the potential issues involved in this, and to avoid some of the previously noted potential dangers. Equally, this review of research has also shown that Christian FBOs will want to be assured of their continued freedom precisely to be Faith-Based Organizations, in the sense of having a perspective that goes beyond the scope of a service provision that is bound by the existing structures of society. In particular, when taking forward further collaborative opportunities, they will want to avoid any potential instrumentalization by the “powers-that-be” and especially any weakening of their ability, when necessary, to be prophetically critical of government policies.

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Notes

- ¹ The journal *COVID* describes itself as “. . . an open access journal that provides an advanced and multidisciplinary forum for the study of coronaviruses, coronavirus-related diseases and global impact. Our aim is to publish papers on all aspects of coronaviruses, from basic molecular and clinical research to COVID-19 related public health studies, physical and psychological health, economic and environmental impact and all other aspects affected by coronaviruses” ([COVID 2024](#)).
- ² The originally proposed plan approved by the British Academy, and for a brief summary of which see [British Academy \(2024c\)](#), was for a primary research project to be conducted via an online survey entailing the geo-mapping of a stratified opportunity sample of around 1000 Christian leaders, Chief executives, Company Directors, Governors and Trustees, and service managers, as well as endpoint service delivery personnel in Christian Faith-Based Organizations across Great Britain. Within that, respondents were to be asked to respond not as individual research subjects but with reference to the experience of their organizations and their organizational roles. The original aim of the research was, by means of identifying the causal, consequential, contextual and strategic issues being experienced by these organizations and role holders within them at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, to enable an assessment of initial and projected short to medium-term human, financial, and organizational impacts on these FBOs and their services, with the purpose of equipping them in making the case to government and other bodies for public and

charitable funding for their work. The project, as originally conceived, obtained ethical approval through the Ethics Committee of Coventry University’s Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations. An initial attempt was made to secure a sufficiently large sample of responses. Given the immense pressures that such organizations were under at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, from its planning onwards, it had always been recognized that there was the kind of risk that was explicitly expressed by one of the organizations that responded to the original survey with the words: “I am not sure how many others would bother given how busy we all are in the charity sector”. In combination with a range of cumulative personal and professional circumstances that around this time impacted upon the Grant Holder and author of this article, it began to become apparent that the project goals could not be fulfilled in the ways originally envisaged. In light of this, an initially conditional and later confirmed contingency plan was agreed with the British Academy that, if it became clear that insufficient survey responses would be secured to deliver results of appropriate validity and reliability, the project would instead be adapted to undertaking a review of relevant research, with the results of which were to be presented in and through a seminar presentation and discussion, and the publication of a peer-reviewed article. The former took place in a hybrid way at Coventry University on 9 November 2023 in the context of a seminar organized by Coventry University’s Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (see Weller 2023a, 2023b), and the latter is being fulfilled with the publication of this article.

³ Some of this broader territory (including that which extended to FBOs and other collective forms of religious presence and activity rooted in other than Christian religious traditions) was addressed in a headline overview way in a presentation made to the 23 March 2021 National Meeting (held over Zoom) of the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom by the author of this article, Paul Weller (2021, pp. 67–71).

⁴ And of which the present author was a member until its abolition by the incoming Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government.

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