

Responding to the pandemic in our communities

ON March 20 this year, all schools were asked to close their gates, not knowing when they would open again. Prior to this, Methodist schools around the country had been monitoring the Covid-19 situation, both at home and overseas, carefully. The understandable concern within the school communities was centred on the health of students, staff and their families and for independent schools in the group, practical issues for overseas boarders and responding to financial uncertainty ahead.

Care

In fact the schools remained partially open, even for some international boarders who had not been able to get home, but otherwise mainly for vulnerable children and children with keyworker parents, providing care and education to children whose parents were an integral part in the nation's response to Covid-19. Teachers in many schools turned, almost overnight, into creative providers of digital learning. Safeguarding issues were looked at afresh and opportuni-

ties developed to serve local community needs in ways hardly imagined a few weeks before. This article brings together some of the examples in which Methodist schools stood up to the challenges of school closures and community needs.

At the start of the lockdown there was a concern about the general availability of food, particularly for shielding individuals. Senior schools within the group decided that, with their kitchens no longer deployed to feed their whole school community, they could feed the wider locality, offering their facilities and employees to this cause. For example, Truro School in Cornwall partnered up with charity The Hive to produce up to 4,000 meals per week for people suffering from food insecurity. The teams used donated surplus foods from national suppliers and prepared and cooked a range of meals for children who normally qualify for free school meals, many of whose own schools were now closed, as well as providing victuals for elderly people.

The batch-cooked meals were being produced for fam-



Kent College Canterbury cards for MHA.

ilies of up to five members, then handed to charities in the area for distribution.

Truro High School also turned over two car parks, from April onwards, to NHS staff employed at the nearby Health Park to accommodate their longer shift patterns.

As many schools within the area closed completely due to staff and facility constraints, the school also extended its

half term provision to include children of keyworkers and vulnerable children not within the immediate school family but within the local communities, supporting those keyworkers who would not otherwise be able to perform their duties without child care.

During May, Truro High School also opened its school to provide fun activities for children within the area, with

staff sacrificing their time to ensure adequate social distancing was observed. Students also volunteered to pack food boxes for distribution by Cornwall Council to shielding families. The parcels contained a week's food supply to sustain some of the most vulnerable people in the community. While the school modestly calls these actions "small", we think that "small" actions have deep impacts on the well-being of our communities and its offerings were very well received.

With the lockdown came waves of loneliness, our elderly relatives being unable to receive visitors in care homes feeling it particularly sharply. In response to this, Kent College Canterbury students made cards for residents at Bradbury Grange MHA.

Kent College Pembury students and staff have continued to be active participants in their #heartsformyospice campaign. The local hospice in the Weald contacted the school in May to thank the school personally for its support. Meanwhile, back at Truro High School, students and staff offered a chat service to its elderly alumnae to support them through their isolation. Students also took part in Silver Stories, an initiative that sees students read books over the telephone to elderly members of the community who might otherwise have no one to talk to.

Families

Methodist Schools recognise that we are families within a wider community of families, and all schools give of themselves and their time. Another example of this is Ashville College in Harrogate who reported that in support of its wider community, members of staff at Ashville, very much acting as volunteers and private citizens, formed a Busy Bees team dedicated to making and distributing protective materials to local care homes. They have now delivered scrubs, headbands, masks and scrub bags to Berwick Grange and Heath Lodge, two local care homes. They have also made and delivered story-time activities and materials to the children's ward at Harrogate Hospital.

Queen's College Taunton has been providing community support in a variety of ways during the Covid-19 lockdown. The school teamed up with the "Somerset County Gazette" to subsidise hundreds of newspapers which were delivered each week to care homes ac-

ross the county.

Headteacher at Queen's Dr Lorraine Earps said, "At times like these, community is everything and we are extremely proud of the community spirit shown by Queen's students and their families, the staff, former students and everyone else associated with the college. To quote a phrase we are currently using a great deal at present, 'we truly are stronger together.'"

Request

Kent College Canterbury received, in April, a request from a parent - a keyworker in a local GP surgery - to produce PPE (personal protection equipment) as the practice was running low on supplies. The college responded by producing components for face shields using its 3D printer. Woodhouse Grove School also responded to a request from a parent, with the Head of Design and Technology coming into school to produce 73 visors for the Bingley Bubble GP Practices. Their care network includes practices in Bingley, Wilsden, Cullingworth, Eldwick and Baildon. Additionally, all of the school's own protective goggles, usually used in Science and Design and Technology classes - some 300 pairs - were donated to Leeds General Infirmary and a GP practice in Wetherby that cares for the local prisons at the beginning of April.

In the meantime, schools gathered surplus materials to produce more PPE to donate to their local communities and organisations in need. Truro High School formed its own "THS Textiles Army" to supply face masks and scrub caps to staff at the Cathedral View Care Home. Staff were struggling to access affordable PPE and were incredibly grateful for the school's support and parcels throughout the crisis.

Truro School also produced much needed protective face shields for those in the local community on the frontline fighting Covid-19. Truro School also received requests via social media for help in producing PPE.

In Wales, Rydal Penrhos School, following its own production efforts, received the following thank you note from a local organisation:

"Dear Sirs,
We were very grateful to receive the delivery of the visors for our staff to use during this awful time dealing with Covid-19... Attached is a photograph of some of our grateful staff,

Q&A WITH METHODIST SCHOOLS REGIONAL LEADER AND HEAD OF SELWOOD ACADEMY JEAN HOPEGOOD.

How have school families kept in contact during the closures?

The schools within the MAST regional network rapidly established the use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams to provide professional support and contact across school communities. For most, but not all, pupils online teaching was provided, which of course proved challenging. Our South West schools also produced inventive ways to promote learning, for example weekly video challenges, online WoW Wall to display excellent home learning outcomes etc.

Induction for the new September intake provided the challenge of anxious parents and children. School support has been inspirational - online video tours of schools, online one-to-one consultations with parents, videos to introduce new teachers etc. For some, using Microsoft Teams improved communication significantly; for others a socially distanced face-to-face conversation was possible outside.

You mention supporting children and parents; would you please tell us a bit more about the schools' pastoral care?

Schools have gone to great lengths to provide pastoral care. School websites signposted to a wealth of support groups. Weekly phone calls supported families, not just with physical needs, but also with mental health support. Some schools had door-to-door socially distanced checks and local churches, social care and community police



worked collectively to ensure highly vulnerable children were known to be safe.

We know schools provided facilities for children of keyworker parents together with vulnerable children. Would you please tell us a bit more about the good work done there?

All the Methodist schools in the South West opened throughout for keyworker and vulnerable pupils and remained open across holidays. While initially the numbers were small, they grew into much more robust provision from April onwards. For families not attending, schools had weekly contact to ensure families' needs were supported. For those not able to access online learning, face-to-face or work provided on the school websites, learning packs

were posted and updated as requested.

In my area of Frome, Selwood worked very closely with the local charities accessing Fair Frome for support with groceries and sourcing financial advice through Citizens Advice. Additionally, we have been able to access food parcels and charitable funding from Frome Lions.

Schools have been planning for the start of the 2020/21 academic year, would you be able to give us an idea of all the preparations underway?

The Government guidelines sent to schools in July gave us much to consider and thankfully enabled us all to prepare ahead. The greatest physical challenge lies in movement around the schools and several different strategies will be in place - staggered starts, zoning areas, separate bubbles, welfare zones for staff for breaks and lunchtimes. Academic and pastoral welfare is paramount. Schemes of work and acts of worship have been prepared to ensure that children can access learning again and assist them in understanding the emotional effect the pandemic has created.

What are you looking forward to as the school gates open?

It is so exciting to be opening our doors to all the children and see all our colleagues return. While the schools remained open and remote, communication has been strong, seeing the children in the playground being able to interact with each other again is going to be the best feeling for all teachers - the background noise of excited, happy chatter is such a simple expression of JOY!



Nutgrove puts Christian values into practice



Above: schools donated PPE to local services; below: schools used their kitchen facilities to provide meals for their local communities.



wearing your visors.
 We and our 115 staff at Coed Isaf and Bryn Marl thank you for your generosity."
 Queen's College Taunton donated safety glasses to the maternity unit of the local hospital. A parent who works on the ward said at the time: "Our staff are delighted with the goggles which will be invaluable PPE we are now required to wear at all births."
 "People have been so generous and kind and we are so grateful."
 PPE was also delivered to Somerset Neuro-Rehab Centre (SNRC) and to Bridgwater's East Quay Medical Centre. This was then also redistributed for other GP practices in the area. Finally, a member of the ITU (intensive treatment unit) team at Musgrove Park Hospital collected more than

100 water bottles from Queen's during lockdown. They were used for staff struggling to stay hydrated with the vagaries of wearing full PPE.
 For now, schools have reopened. They will seem quite different for a while: class and year group "bubbles", "socially distanced" teaching, no whole schools assemblies, no contact sports and possible delays in getting all international boarders back into our schools. But there will be much of what has been learned in lockdown that can add value to our previous provision: the acceleration of "blended learning" making the most of digital experiences during lockdown, for example, and continuing community service opportunities.
 Our schools are community hubs, we serve our communities to the best of our abilities

and we will continue to act as agents of Christian service. Some things may have changed for the better - what "our generation tolerates, the next generation will embrace" are wise and prescient words indeed. Some things are challenging and difficult to overcome - we will meet and overcome them together and we will be stronger for it.
 As we move now to a new academic year, we are ready to embrace the "new normal", but focused on ensuring the best possible opportunities for our children and mindful of the potential impact of the last six months on their development.
 Please keep praying for our schools and our school communities as we continue to respond to the impact and threat of the pandemic.

NUTGROVE Methodist Primary School, St Helens, has been praised by its community for the support it has offered to families during lockdown.
 Underpinned by its Methodist ethos and Christian values, the school, which is part of the Wesley Trust, has had not only to deliver online learning but also meet the health and well-being needs of many of its children.
 Headteacher Rachel Bottell said: "It is no exaggeration to say that for some pupils school is their sanctuary. Under the magnifying glass of Covid-19, which has amplified the financial and emotional struggles that some families face, we have had to make sure our children are well physically and emotionally."
 "This has included real practical support. We have partnered with a foodbank to ensure that children are getting the nutrients they need. We spoke to some of our children numerous times each week. Sometimes this was just for a chat to see how they were doing and other times we offered more comprehensive emotional and educational guidance. For those children we simply could not get in touch with, we undertook socially distanced home visits just to make sure they were OK."
 "When it comes to education, some of our families don't have internet connection. Alternatively, the only means they have to go online is via a mobile phone - which may

need to be shared with other family members and/or is not in the home during the typical school day. For these children we have hand-delivered work packs and had to explain some topics over the phone to them if they needed it. Our school business manager even had to act out 'Jelly on a Plate' standing in the middle of a road for one family.
 "It just goes to demonstrate that there is no one size fits all when it comes to support. Every initiative and project has had to be adapted for the individual child and their family."
 Chief executive officer of the Wesley Trust Julie-Ann Hewitt added: "Nutgrove Primary is a school strong in faith and rich in heart. The school has also been proactive in offering regular pastoral care for staff. Putting aside the pressures of work, everyone in the country has faced uncertainty and worries in their personal lives. They laugh a lot at this school and what I really love is that they didn't want to lose that during lockdown. It got to the point where staff were making out-take videos of all the Zoom calls which included those amusing and impromptu visits by dogs and children."
 "Nutgrove really lives out what it means to be a Methodist school. It is a shining example of the way all our schools in the trust serve their individual communities."



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