

The Cost of Living Crisis as encountered by our Methodist Missions.

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Can you imagine being:

- On dialysis and only having £1.13 left on your meter
- On the minimum wage with only enough left from your wages having paid for travel and rent to buy one packet of wraps to feed you for a week alongside a bowl of cereal at breakfast
- In hock to the local loan shark (read paramilitary) needing to find £200 within a week or then £400 the following week in order to prevent you becoming a courier of drugs or other ill-gotten gain
- An addict with a dilemma – prescription drugs or alcohol?
- A recently arrived migrant looking for a fresh start only to find a city long swamped with a housing crisis.

These are not imaginary stories. These are real life stories as encountered by staff of the five Missions. This is what poverty looks like in Ireland in 2022!

I am very conscious of the various outreach initiatives being undertaken by congregations throughout the island and some of these have been recorded in this magazine. This article, however, concentrates on the impact on the 5 Missions. What follows are, primarily, the words of staff from our Missions based on recent experiences.

Impact on the service user: 2 case studies

The elderly:

Elderly Service Users are really struggling. Some are choosing not to put the heat on until later as costs have risen so dramatically. They are already fearful for the winter due to the rise in food, electricity, oil, gas and coal prices. This crisis will have a huge impact on the mental health of older Service Users because they will limit the number of journeys taken to go shopping, visit family or friends or attend outside activities.

Parents - often single parent - and young families:

This case study is illustrative and not uncommon: A single mum with 3 children aged 10 and under. She has had to rely on food banks, Mission and other support for food, oil, clothing and uniforms. They live in damp accommodation affecting the youngest child's health. Medical travel expenses need paid upfront but the mother cannot afford to do this. The mother has severe panic attacks. The eldest child is receiving counselling for anxiety, affecting schooling and socialising. They were unable to afford summer camps which are activities parents rely on for a much-needed break over the summer. This means the mother had no respite at all and having all 3 children at home only increased her food and fuel bills.

In terms of overall impact on the Service User, all respondents mentioned the likely detrimental effect on mental health, the life-changing choices being made affecting life chances, especially children's, and, in both urban – particularly the streets of Belfast, Derry and Dublin - and rural settings alike, an increasing number of clients signalling suicidal tendencies.

Impact on Mission staff

Staff are facing increased concerns from Service Users. They encounter people not eating properly, nor tending to their medical needs due to the expense of travel, and not socialising. The concern of Covid has not entirely gone away for many older people. Staff are aware that a lot of people whom they support do not have family members to help. The fear is for those people who do not have the Missions to support them will have no one to advocate for them.

The worries and concerns of Service Users impacts on staff wellbeing. It is, as has been described, a new strain of “**compassion fatigue**”. One respondent commented “You get into this line of work to do good. To help people. It’s getting harder and harder. The need of people is overwhelming and I am not sure how much more of watching people suffer I can take”.

Coupled with this, staff have their own personal concerns about affordability of travel and general living costs. Unsurprisingly, the cost of living crisis affects Mission staff just as much as anyone else.

Impact on Missions as businesses / charities

The 5 Missions vary considerably in location, outreach and resources but the mounting challenges being faced are common to all:

- Staff recruitment and retention: how can the charity sector compete with the supermarkets?
- Staff morale / wellbeing
- Increased waiting lists / demands matched by fears of reduced donations. The fear of reduced donations is considerable given the imminent Christmas programmes. More complex requests and cases are being referred to various services leading to a reduced throughput of Service Users, which in turn leads to people waiting longer for the service. This mirrors the issue of backlog in the health services.
- Energy and other costs
- Looking to expand social enterprise activities to generate additional funding streams, all in a very uncertain economic climate.

The article commenced with a challenge to your imagination, so likewise:

- Imagine seeing Jesus either on dialysis, on the minimum wage, in debt, as an addict or homeless?
- Imagine now what he would be prompting us by way of our response?

The article concludes, however, with a challenge to our action:

- What more can, and will, we do as individuals, congregations, Circuits, and Connexionally to support our Missions with **imaginative and wholehearted generosity**?

The future: November 2023

Can you imagine still being:

- On dialysis no longer needing the support of that Mission Superintendent because you now have a one-off £500 grant given to those on disability allowance as a result of lobbying perhaps by the Methodist Church
- On the minimum wage no longer having to pay an historic debt deduction due to an administrative error on calculating your Universal Credit as it has been, at least, paused due to pressure from many groups maybe including those Methodists

- In some debt but rather than having gone to the local paramilitary, the nearby Mission Superintendent signposted you to CAP and they are helping you with your budgeting
- An addict but much less dependent thanks to the support of the counselling service offered by that Methodist Mission
- Someone looking for permanent accommodation and moving in the right direction due to being given shelter in that Methodist hostel or support housing project

The future can be influenced; these outcomes can be achieved with your imaginative and wholehearted generosity.