



SHIFTING SANDS

FEAR AND FAITH IN THE MIDST OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

There has been a sharp rise in the number of people seeking help for their spiritual distress – and this has led to some dangerous practices, write Gary Serra di Migni and Jayne Irlam, co-leads for the Baptist Deliverance Study Group

The Baptist Deliverance Study Group (BDSG) was set up five years ago to help Baptist ministers provide safe and effective deliverance ministry. As the pandemic tightened its grip from 2019 onwards, the organisation saw a sharp rise in those seeking help, both ministers struggling with cases and individuals desperate to find relief from the things tormenting them.

“It feels as if the pandemic has taken hold of people and shaken them out of their complacency”, says Jayne, lead for education, publication and research. “Suddenly, people felt that they were not sure of what to trust, what to depend on. People

were frightened, vulnerable and searching for meaning... sometimes in all the right places, sometimes not.” As a response to this increased demand, Gary Serra di Migni, formerly the Deputy Lead for the BDSG, took over responsibility for cases, leaving Jayne free to develop the much-needed education, publication and research branches of the BDSG.

‘A quest for power in the powerless’

Coordinating the cases has been most rewarding, writes Gary. Most of the people who come to us are non-believers; and if they are believers, they’re not part of a church. While some aren’t believers when they approach us, after Christ has liberated them, healed them, and/or restored them – they’re believers. So this role is grist to my evangelistic mill.

Before Jayne and I divided the roles, we were both handling

cases, but Jayne sensed God telling us to specialise and that, once we did, he’d send us people to help. And he did: we now have three case handlers who we can call on, and one in training.

And the pandemic? Both we and our siblings in the Church of England have noticed an increase in concern with the spiritual during the pandemic. How so? I can only speculate.

Some people turn to spiritualists and other mediums after a loss. How much more so when visiting passing loved ones and attending funerals is prevented, and pandemic restrictions hinder the bereavement process and closure? Can the confinement of lockdown lead people to experiment with, among other things, the preternatural, simply to relieve the boredom? I have in mind tarot cards, Ouija boards, and/or ghostly reality TV – anything that might spice up their lives a little. Does the

constant bombardment with statistics surrounding COVID-related deaths confront us with our own mortality? Does this in turn lead people to explore their own spirituality and spiritualities? Have the requirements to socially distance, to wear face masks, and be confined to our homes bred in people a sense of powerlessness? And does that sense of powerlessness tempt people to avail themselves of power through power-promising faith systems such as witchcraft? I've had personal experience of what I believe to be a quest for power in the powerless.

As a way into the community, I work as a security officer in a leading supermarket as part of my ministry. To help the customers comply with government requirements, I offer mask-less customers a free face mask. Most accept the masks thankfully, others reluctantly but graciously; some say they're exempt, and I'm certain that some of them are. But, on average once an hour, a customer flatly refuses to wear a mask. Not quietly so as not to attract attention to themselves; not politely out of respect to the shop worker offering something for nothing; rather, pointedly, loudly and in a manner best described as vitriolic that has reduced some shop workers to tears. I've even heard a customer shout, when challenged, "I know I'm putting people at risk, but I don't care!" This reckless display of power, I posit, is a manifestation of the powerlessness felt by many

in the face of the pandemic. Or could such devil-may-care attitude towards the welfare of others be indicative of a more preternatural influence?"

Protecting vulnerable people from exploitation

There has been a lot of talk about 'Covid spirituality' during this pandemic and much interest in how the effects of Covid 19 have played into the human thirst for meaning and security. In a largely secular society, people who formerly looked for their security in material wealth or medical science suddenly had their 'faith' rocked to its foundations as the world scrambled to find effective medical and economic solutions to the crisis. For the church, it has been a time when many have returned to their spiritual roots and looked to the one sure foundation in a difficult time. Others have become lost in a sea of endless online spiritual atrocities and countercultures, dangerous spiritual subcultures and half-truths.

The BDSG is now working with the Metropolitan Police and Greater Manchester Police in a joint project known as Operation Gideon, whose aim is to protect the vulnerable from exploitation during this time. These police forces become concerned with the proliferation of so-called exorcists offering their services, often encouraging the scapegoating of children and vulnerable adults. Some ethnic groups have found that their traditional belief systems have

become distorted under the unique pressures posed by the pandemic, with many of the safeguards which normally protect children – such as school attendance – suspended. There are some harrowing cases of children exposed to unimaginable cruelty when they are literally blamed for the misfortunes of their families, despite the fact that these issues could not possibly be created by these children.

As we see a sharp rise in the number of people seeking help for their spiritual distress, it is ever more vital that called, mature, balanced and experienced Christian deliverance ministers are able to help. However dark the situation may seem, Christ is still in the business of setting captives free through the power of prayer. The pandemic may have paralysed the world but it can never paralyse him.



Baptist ministers Gary Serra di Migni and Jayne Irlam are co-leads for the Baptist Deliverance Study Group. If you are struggling in this area, please contact the BDSG at: irlamjayne@gmail.com

For further reading:

Is deliverance ministry biblical? – interview with Jayne Irlam in which she explains more about the deliverance ministry, how it works, the situations she has encountered, and seeing Christ victorious 'time after time' baptist.org.uk/deliverance