

Communities grappling with diseases old and new



Covid-19 has further pushed leprosy communities to the back of the queue and out of mind, writes Jason Osborne

Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, is a disease our Faith is well acquainted with, God himself healing both the disease and the social stigma around it during his embodied time among us on earth. Unfortunately, the disease persists today, plaguing communities around the world, with India, Indonesia and Brazil being a couple of the largest sufferers.

That hasn't stopped Christ's followers tending to this oft-marginalised and outcast community, the primary example being St Damien of Molokai, the Belgian missionary priest who contracted leprosy during his 16-year service to an isolated community of people who had the disease in Hawaii.

However, in the age of Covid-19, one could be forgiven for assuming other diseases and sources of physical suffering had disappeared – which is certainly not the case. What's more, in many instances, Covid-19 has further pushed communities of those living with leprosy to the edges of society, making it more difficult for them to secure the treatment they require.

“For those with leprosy, social distancing has unfortunately always been in place”

One organisation carrying on Christ's healing ministry to the leprosy community is St Francis Leprosy Guild, a British organisation founded in 1895 in London, and inspired by the examples of St Damien, St Teresa of Kolkata, St Marianne Cope and St Francis of Assisi.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, Chief Executive Officer of St Francis Leprosy Guild Clare McIntosh told of the harmful effects Covid-19 has had on leprosy communities around the world.

“It [Covid-19] is a problem to be honest. Firstly, there's a problem in terms of it impacting on leprosy treatment. Leprosy is now curable, but it takes about a year's worth of treatment and, actually, you no longer spread the disease from whenever treatment starts. Even though leprosy is contagious, as soon as you start the treatment, it's no longer so,” Ms McIntosh explained.



St Damien de Veuster is pictured with young people at the settlement for those with Hansen's disease, or leprosy, on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. Photo: CNS.

“So what we've been experiencing over the past year is that all the difficulties that we've been having with Covid, and in particular, the fact that international barriers have been shuttered and so on, have meant that the drugs haven't been getting to these communities.

“In effect, some people aren't making it through the year's worth of treatment and that therefore means that they could be becoming contagious again.”

Standard practice

“Social-distancing” has become standard practice throughout most of the world over the last year, but for those with leprosy, social distancing has unfortunately always been in place – a distance that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

“Another issue is that leprosy communities very often are communities outside of normal society. Because there's such a big stigma around leprosy and concern about it being contagious, they're set off from society and living very closely together,” Ms McIntosh said.

“So, what we've experienced with leprosy is that once Covid gets into these communities, it spreads incredibly quickly. I was just tweeting about a centre that's in India, where actually 25% of its people affected by leprosy at the moment are currently testing positive for Covid so that community is having to be isolated.”

As mentioned, India is the world's leprosy hotspot, with 60% of leprosy



Kwami, a man affected by leprosy. Photo: SFLG.

worldwide located there. This is followed by Indonesia and Brazil – the Brazilian leprosy communities also being “very, very badly” affected by the country's difficulties with the virus, according to Ms McIntosh. “There's a lot of concern about the impact on the community there,” she said.

“As Christ found during his time roaming the earth, social stigma was rife, especially for those with leprosy”

“The number of leprosy diagnosis worldwide each year is about 200,000. As you can imagine, generally in impoverished countries, so certainly data isn't incredibly accurate, it's thought actually that the real number of people with leprosy could be several times that, but that's a number that officially reported.

“And then as we say, we are hearing in individual communities of about 25% of those communities being affected with Covid at any single point in time.”

This results in an awfully large number of people suffering from the double-isolation of leprosy and Covid-19, a situation which deprives them of the treatment they need.

Struggles

In the West, a blind eye has often been turned to the struggles of those in the poorest communities of the poorest nations, and this attitude has continued under the pandemic conditions, as exemplified by the grabs for vaccines by developed countries. As a result, Ms McIntosh said they've watched the leprosy communities they work with struggling to access



Manuel, being examined for leprosy in Mozambique. Photo: SFLG.

the vaccines that would solve their Covid problem, at the least.

“We're trying to speak up to be honest. There's a programme called Covax, which is the international programme by which they're trying to get better-off countries to pass over vaccines that they don't need. There's been a lot of focus on that programme at a high level, but really people haven't been speaking out about it,” Ms McIntosh said.

The difficulty, Ms McIntosh continued, is how to get those vaccines to those who need them most – such as those with leprosy – so that they don't just go into “VIP and corrupt circles”.

It is a matter of the utmost importance because, as Christ found during

his time roaming the earth, social stigma was rife, especially for those with leprosy.

“The thing about leprosy is that it's a visible condition, often causes disabilities or deformities, and even once we cure the condition, people still live with those disabilities or deformities, which means that they get a lot of prejudice against them,” Ms McIntosh said, highlighting the importance of getting the vaccine to those who need it as quickly as possible, and so limiting Covid's interference.

“That's why we're saying really that the Church in particular needs to be really speaking out about this and making sure that it is fairly distributed amongst people that need it.”

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