

The Irish Catholic

The Irish missionary experience under Covid

By Ruadhán Jones August 5, 2021

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Co-operators in Kampala, Uganda, participating in the Symposium on ‘Effectiveness of Internal Control and Audit’ to Manage Risk in Cooperatives, January 2021.

The Covid-19 pandemic has become a monolith in our minds, spreading like a blanket over the entire globe. But its smothering embrace is not as uniform as we might think. Each country and region faces its own, unique challenges. I spoke to missionaries in Taiwan, Cambodia and Uganda about their experiences, which were a mix of the familiar and the strange.

Taiwan

In Ireland, the last 18 months have involved a series of lockdowns as the virus peaked and troughed. For one of China's closest neighbours, however, the first year after the virus emerged was a remarkable success. Fr Seán O'Leary, superior of the Spiritains in Taiwan, explains that the country's proximity to China was part of the reason it dealt so well with the virus.

"A lot of the Taiwanese work in China, so we got a bit of a heads-up," Fr O'Leary tells me. "The Taiwanese government knew early on that there was this disease, similar to Sars. They put up a blockade – even the Taiwanese had to quarantine – and they put all these measures in place before the World Health Organisation.

"Then the other thing they have going for them in Taiwan is contact tracing. Early on, there weren't many cases, but any that there were, they were able to clamp down on the contacts quickly. They could put them into mandatory quarantine.

"Every day on the news, you have this building in Taipei called the 101 and they'd have this big zero on it, one of the biggest buildings in the world. It was all, well done, well done, no cases, no cases. That went on for several months."

After a year of the pandemic, Taiwan had recorded less than 1,000 cases, and just 9 deaths. In contrast, by February 27 2021, Ireland had recorded more than 200,000 cases and 4,000 deaths.

On board

"Everybody is on board," Fr O'Leary continues. "You don't need the government telling you to stay indoors if you have Covid, they're staying indoors anyway. They're more or less obedient, you don't have any protests.

"Like, if I was leaving the Church in Taiwan and I didn't have any mask on, you don't need the police to tell you, the people will tell you – put on your mask! They're obsessed themselves; I suppose that comes from the experience of Sars as well."

As a result of Taiwan's success, Fr O'Leary and his confreres had great freedom to practice their ministry. But eventually, the Taiwanese government and people grew complacent. Having enforced a strict quarantine process for those entering the country, the Centre for Disease Control relaxed their guard, and the virus broke out in May of this year.

"The country basically went into lockdown," says Fr O'Leary. "People could go into work but the schools were closed, the churches were closed, all indoor activity was suspended. That happened for about three months. That was difficult for us being in ministry and that. Your main activities are around the church. My main activities are three areas – two parishes, teaching English and the prison ministry. All three were suspended."

Response

The response from the Church in Taiwan was much the same as Ireland – everything went online, with the exception of funerals, and priests were charged with reaching out to their congregations in whatever way they could.

"The bishops were encouraging us, ok you're not doing the public Masses, but you're still the pastor," Fr O'Leary said. "You have to use whatever means you have to contact people and make sure they aren't isolated. I think there was a good response. A lot of resources went into

this online stuff and trying to maintain the spirit of the group. You have these groups online that you message, and you contact individually.”

Those within the tight-knit Catholic community – it makes up less than one percent of Taiwan’s population – worked hard to support each other, through parish groups and any other means available.

“I didn’t feel isolated because I have a lot of friends in Taiwan, a lot of good support,” Fr O’Leary continues. “And on the Catholic side as well, because we’re not many, we really support each other. If anything happens – for instance, this week we have a typhoon, and people around the Church would be making sure that you’re ok and things like that.”

Local economy

However, though the lockdown only lasted three months, it had an immediate effect on large swathes of the population. Taiwan’s economy is roughly split between high-end tech companies, which were largely untouched by the lockdown, and the local economy. This comprises restaurateurs, small businesses, shops and more.

“They all suffered really badly,” Fr O’Leary says. “There was a big reduction, up to 70%. I know that because a lot of my friends run restaurants and local businesses and that kind of stuff. I’d ask them, how’s business and they’d say, oh business is down by two-thirds. That was a big suffering.

“They don’t have the same social security net as you would in Ireland. The people that were out of work there, I think they got a once-off payment of about €300 per family and that was it. Small businesses could get a loan which they had to repay in six months’ time... You do sense a lot of hardship, you feel a lot more hardship now in terms of the effects of Covid in the general population.”

Taiwan’s Covid outbreak is coming to an end, with the case rate down to 20 per day, and Fr O’Leary is hopeful of a reopening for the economy and the Church. However, they aren’t out of the woods completely – due to their initial success, no plan was put in place for procuring vaccines.

“Nobody has vaccines,” Fr O’Leary explains. “In the last couple of months, they’re trying to get the vaccines and there is a Taiwanese vaccine coming out. We weren’t expecting we’d need it, we were on top of it.”

Cambodia

The lack of vaccines or vaccine uptake is an issue echoed in the experiences of the other two countries, Cambodia and Uganda. Cambodia is perhaps the best off of the three countries in this regard, as China has donated more than 15 million doses, lay missionary Pat Mooney explains. “It would be said locally that in time of need, it was China that came and helped... and in August, another four million doses will come from China.”

However, it is not enough to halt the extended lockdown in place since February 2021, amidst a surge in cases. Mr Mooney, who works for Sustainable and Community Based Care for orphans and vulnerable children, tells me that prior to February, less than 500 cases were recorded – since then, there have been 70,000, with little sign of a let up.

“Last year, there was no effect on anything,” Mr Mooney says. “Life continued and we couldn’t understand all these reports we were getting from Europe, America, wherever, of the

number of cases and the number of people dying... As the time went on, it spread to all of the 26 provinces of Cambodia. That had a direct effect on how I could do my work.”

Supporting children

Prior to the pandemic, Mr Mooney’s project provided support to children in skills training, income generation, literacy, art projects for children, as well as savings and credit. They also organised social gatherings, including a youth club. This was all put on hold, and instead the project worked to raise awareness about how people could protect themselves from the virus.

“At a community level we began training families, by training children and child club leaders how to take care of themselves by following the government regulations such as the mask wearing, sanitising and distancing. In addition, the project provided community awareness. There was a fellow on a bicycle that was going around on a loudspeaker and was informing people what they should be doing to keep safe.”

Lockdown regulations

However, the regulations enforced by the government were quite complicated and many people continue to ignore them, Mr Mooney says: “The way the lockdown is working now is that it is house by house. For example, if number 40 has a case, that house is locked. If number 41 doesn’t, it’s not locked down. At one time, in Phnom Penh, they zoned the city into three colours, red, orange and green. If you were living in the red zone, you were not allowed to go out of your house basically.

“In the yellow zone, you could move within the area covered. If I wanted to go to the market, I couldn’t go because it was outside of the zone. One day I wanted to go to the pharmacy to get something. I had to go the barrier and ask the army man to see if I could go. He said yes, and pointed me to the pharmacy making sure I wasn’t going to go to another pharmacy, that I’d go to the one nearest.”

Though deaths are not as high as in Ireland, the pandemic has hit the community hard. As with Taiwan, there is no social security net and people in the informal economy are without work or support. Meanwhile, deaths continue to rise – a disused crematorium on Mr Mooney’s project’s campus is now having to be used twice or three times a day, he says.

“It has been difficult,” Mr Mooney says. “At certain times, I suppose the same as in Ireland, you noticed it more. There’s been no Church services for eight or nine months because the government has said no. There’s no immediate sign of the regulations coming down.”

Uganda

Africa, as with East and Southeast Asia, initially escaped the brunt of the virus. But now, many of its countries, where healthcare and social welfare infrastructures are basic or non-existent, surges in cases are causing great hardship. In Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, lay missionary Rita Formolo works with Caritas, providing support for 37 mostly rural cooperatives.

Uganda is in the midst of a second and more deadly wave of Covid cases and deaths, which Ms Formolo says is taking a great toll on the communities she works with: “In early June of this year, Covid hit us very badly. We passed three weeks in sorrow and mourning. Every day we received news of people lost in the cooperatives, people we had trained, beloved co-operators, our friends from church. Every day in the WhatsApp group, people were saying we lost this person, we lost that one.

“It was three weeks of sorrow and sadness. We are now in strict restrictions, no movement, no nothing. It was unexpected. In Africa, Covid was nowhere, but it suddenly increased in African countries and in Asia. If people were not convinced about being vaccinated, they are looking for it more now.”

This time of hardship was not a favourable one for the people Ms Formolo works with. These are “the little people”, who live day to day and could ill-afford the lack of work and food.

“The current environment isn’t favourable, it has affected funds used to support cooperative members,” Ms Formolo explains. “These funds have halved, with savings reduced in cooperatives, long repayment delays, no funds available for new loans, at a period where loans are needed most. It has had an immense effect on people’s livelihoods, all their businesses closed.”

On top of the pressures caused by Covid, Uganda faced major disruption following their elections, Ms Formolo tells me: “First it was Covid, then the elections. It created a lot of tension between the opposition and the government. From November to February, we had road blocks, riots, and tension. It was stressful for the team, I was conscious of protecting them and co-operators from the disease, but also from potential conflicts that could be around. These two things that happened to us increased the risks in a general sense for our cooperatives.”

The combination of tension from the elections and the unrelenting pressure for Covid placed the cooperatives under great strain, Ms Formolo continues: “I think a general thing I could say is that many underlying conflicts emerged in this period, because there was too much pressure in life. For a family home, they needed basic provisions, and that puts great pressure on people. I think this was worldwide as well. Several conflicts exploded in our cooperatives.

“We were instrumental in jumping in to help identify what the underlying issues and positions were within our cooperatives. Almost always in conflicts, personal interest collide with the needs of members in the cooperatives. We had to work there, helping to defend our members.”

Although the situation has only eased slightly, Ms Formolo says there were blessings that “counterbalanced but didn’t erase” the suffering. The support from the government and the archdiocese for the cooperatives was an especial bonus she believes.

“Despite all the challenges, the hardship, the adjustments and many times the realignment of our programmes, less facilities, increased risk, the conflicts that have emerged and sorrow and restrictions – I can say that we received many, many blessings,” Ms Formolo says. “Because different and new windows of opportunity opened to us through partnerships. Even though we have these challenges, the delivery of our project was great, really. It was a great achievement given the year.”