

Mr Michal Siewniak – Written Evidence (LBC0119)

Introduction

It was Saturday, 28 March. I remember it well. It was, at least for us in the UK, first full week in the lockdown. It felt strange and unreal. At times, it felt like I was watching a science fiction movie. Towns deserted, very few people out, notices everywhere that only handful of people is allowed in to shop. Panic buying as if it was the end of the world. I have been asking myself, maybe it is the end on the world as we know it?

Deaths, people losing jobs, companies closing down, anxiety levels (for number of reasons) are going through the roof. Imposed isolation and loneliness of most vulnerable members of our community and our fantastic NHS stretched to absolute limits. The list was long, wasn't it? COVID-19 didn't and still doesn't recognise any barriers, borders and treats everyone 'equally'. It affects us all and there are very few, if any, spot on the planet where we could go and feel safe. One virus, complete standstill. Simply staggering.

For me, the lockdown started on Friday night, 20 March, when I came back late from work and I went straight to my local church to attend our last public Mass before the quarantine began. I was such a profound moment. Total and complete silence, no hand shaking, no sign of peace. It felt different and yet so beautiful. I felt deep unity and hope that God is with us, especially now when we, globally and in our local communities, are so badly affected by this crisis.

The next morning, I went to my local pharmacy. My town, Welwyn Garden City, looked so empty. The same Saturday, 21 March, I have helped to organise a very quick 'social action'. I have suggested to the Polish community in Welwyn Hatfield to support, in a practical way, one of the local charities. After a quick conversation with Welwyn Hatfield CVS (Community Voluntary Services), I rang Welwyn Hatfield Women's Refuge. This short phone call was quite emotional. I knew that our simple 'act of love' will help residents who found themselves in exceptionally difficult circumstances. In order to obey social distancing, we drove in 3 separate cars, most people who were donating food left everything on their doorsteps. All organised in 36 hours. What a relief and joy!

My learning during the first month of the lockdown

One phrase which particularly struck with me at the beginning, and which I am still learning to implement, was to 'count your blessing'. Being at home 24/7 takes a bit of time to get used to, it has its big challenges however, I have also started noticing some advantages: simple picnic in the garden (especially when the sun is shining) seemed like a great social outing. Reading or colouring in the garden probably can't replace a classroom however it was good to see that actual learning never stops and it can take place in any location! My youngest daughter, who is 5, while in the lockdown, wrote me first letter. I decided, for obvious reasons, not to take for our infrequent shopping. When I returned, she gave me a piece of paper which said: "To dad, you made Eva sad". It was heart-breaking but I was delighted that her letter had no spelling mistakes! Having a

garden is a luxury! It must be a lot harder when you stuck at home in a block of flat in a big city like London or Birmingham and your movement is limited.

I was so pleased that we are still allowed to go a family walk or a run which gives us opportunities to appreciate our neighbourhood and deepen our relationships with our family members. We are lucky to live in a beautiful county of Hertfordshire.

I have also understood that it is impossible to 'organise' schedules for our children. Yes, routine is important however I needed to remind myself that they also worry, they also, like us, are going through, in their own way, this challenging and very demanding experience. They need a bit of space, even if it means that they spend an evening on their phones.

Modern technology means that we were and are still able to stay connected. Online communication platforms teach us to listen to each other a bit better. However, we have to be careful. As we are all still semi-stuck at home, we might be occasionally bored, it is very important to strike the right balance between reading and watching news and being completely taken over by our mobile phones or Zoom meetings, which still are a very interesting social experiment! I had to listen, focus better and be interrupted less.

The lockdown - 4 weeks in

I must admit that I have actually enjoyed the first month of the lockdown. There was no need to take kids to school, no need to travel and generally there was no morning rush. I am glad that for once, I didn't have to be in various places at the same time. It was also good to stay at home, simply 'be' with the family in the present moment. I also had, maybe for the first time, more time to look after myself.

However, it was true that the COVID-19 experience of the lockdown was and is an emotional rollercoaster. I often felt like a bird who can't fly. It felt like my movements and freedom were hugely limited. The routine, being, living, relaxing and working in the same place was actually tiring. Zoom meetings were becoming more difficult. It was not always easy to listen, read the body language, especially if I was in a meeting with many other people. I missed the office environment, I missed opportunities for real 'human interactions'.

Easter, which this year happened during the lockdown, was so special. No ability to go to church, no physical presence in our places of worship and yet, the whole Easter period has been such an enriching experience. Taking part in online Church Services was profound and comforting. In the last 4-6 months, I have visited churches in Belfast, Glasgow and Limerick. I have been traveling a lot, online!

Work-life balance during the COVID-19 crisis

Working from home has a lot of advantages. The current pandemic has, even if for not for all of us, slowed things down. We are/ were stuck indoors with a very limited ability to go out.

For me, one of the greatest lessons during the health pandemic is the recognition that the work-life balance is essential in keeping us healthy. Our body needs to 'recharge its batteries' and it is so important for each one of us to know when to take a break. Yep, our head does need a space!

I have recently realised (yes, it took me 40 years!) that life is not always a sprint but more often a marathon and we need to know when to slow down and when to move a bit faster.

In October 2013, a friend of mine, who I was helping to run a Health MOT Event, checked my blood pressure. It was high. It is ok now however I had to start taking the medication. What she said to me then, will stay for me forever. We need to do is to LISTEN to our BODY. So simple and so hard to do, at least for me.

Has COVID-19 crisis changed my view on the way in which I portray leadership?

During the health pandemic, I often wondered what it meant to be a leader, what leadership is and what are the main characteristics of a good leader.

I remember when I was a child, I saw Lech Walesa, the Leader of the Solidarity Movement, who was standing on a balcony speaking to thousands of people. I remember seeing footage of Martin Luther King's famous speech, also in front of huge crowds.

There are moments in our history when we need charismatic leaders, who can inspire the nation and lift the spirit of a whole generation of people. There are also moments in our history, equally important, when we need leaders who 'silently lead' us, who are able to 'walk with people' and not 'in front of the people'.

I suppose that leadership requires many different skills, which need to apply in different situations. Today, we need leaders 'who don't listen to respond but listen to understand'. We need leaders who are not afraid to make mistakes but more importantly, who are not afraid to say sorry. We need leaders who are not stuck in their 'bubbles' but who are keen to be genuine, true to their beliefs, even if we disagree with them, and always keen to learn. We need Leaders who are able to compromise. After all, we are ALL called to be Leaders, wherever we are, whatever we do.

Economy during the Coronavirus crisis

"Adapt or die" said someone to my brother - in - law who lives in Croatia. This statement relates to the recovery of the Croatian economy during the COVID-19 crisis. During my holidays in Croatia, I spent quite a lot of time talking to people about the consequences of the health pandemic on various sectors of the economy.

Since 2007, each year, Croatian tourism has produced between 20-25% of their GDP. This relatively small but a stunning country has hugely relied on tourism. However, due to COVID-19 and the earthquake in Zagreb (March 2020), many industries have been badly affected. Quite a few of our friends lost their jobs. Although some companies managed to adapt quickly and were able to bounce back, the economy hasn't recovered yet.

The health pandemic has strongly demonstrated that countries, governments and businesses need to get better, in order to remain financially sustainable, competitive and attractive to customers, at diversifying their income streams.

How can faith and various religious groups help you to go through the health pandemic?

For people with faith and worshipers in the UK, one of the June weekends might have been quite strange and emotional. Some of us had an opportunity to return to churches, mosques or synagogues for the first time since March.

One Saturday, I also visited a church in Hatfield and attended 'socially distanced' Mass. Although it was lovely to be back and it was quite unique to come along to a 'real Mass', I have realised that God can't be present in my life only on Sunday.

For me, spiritually, one of the strongest experiences of the lockdown, has been the realisation that, if I want to be true to my beliefs, I need to try to, with all my weaknesses and limitations, live my faith 7 days a week, 24/7.

Last 4-5 months clearly showed me that God is always present in my life. I am always welcome to practise my faith, not only in a church building by being part of all the important church traditions, but by living well the present moment.

Have I 'missed' God? No, he was and is always here. In my 'boring' daily routines, on Zoom, at home, during my walks, in every person I meet & talk to, and many small and 'irrelevant' (to us!) moments. Has this period deepened my relationship with my own faith? I think so, even though I know that I have a long way to go!

Opportunities for dialogue during the lockdown

One of the best parts of the lockdown were my daily evening walks with my Polish male friends. They truly were a fantastic discovery. It is not often easy for guys to open up, however the longer we talk and the longer I actively listen, the more fruitful our dialogue becomes. Each one of us needed sometimes a 'friendly listening ear'. An opportunity to be for the other person can make a huge difference. My part in all of it? 'Not much'. It is often more important to simply 'be' in that moment with this person. Such a simple thing to say and not always easy to implement in our daily routines. During the lockdown, I have understood that active listening is a skill which we all should try and develop. It is crucial to enhance our relationships.

'Propaganda/ Campaign of Positivity' during the COVID-19 crisis

In May, during one of the Zoom meetings which I was attending, someone said that we need to create a 'Propaganda of Positivity'.

This 'Propaganda of Positivity' or Campaign of Positivity, as propaganda has a lot of negative connotations, is possibly needed more than ever before.

During the lockdown, I personally discovered once again that even the smallest act of generosity can help to build more cohesive society: phone call to a friend, text message to a work colleague who works for the NHS or a simple knock on the door to check that our elderly neighbour is ok. I was delighted to see, when one sunny June afternoon, while visiting Welwyn Garden City Town Centre, I saw a note displayed on a traffic lamp post which said: "Have a great day". Such a simple thing which kept me going throughout the week! So, in small and big things, it is important that we continue helping each other in these challenging times.

Moreover, I have understood that we should all try to cultivate the atmosphere of kindness and generosity. Any act, big or small, as they all make a huge difference to our wellbeing.

Conclusion:

Do I still worry? Of course. The current health epidemic is something we all, individually and collectively, have not experienced before. The fear of unknown and the unpredictability of our future means that we feel lost. There is still a long way to go, however we must remain faithful and hope that we will get through this crisis together.

When the battle with this health pandemic is won, maybe it is a good moment to start again and see a person in every human being, even if he/she comes from another country or has different religious or cultural background? I hope that this difficult and challenging chapter in our history will help us to build a sense of real family, global family which accepts each member with open arms and a big heart. Our journey continues (no one knows for how long) and I know that despite huge sacrifices and suffering, we will go through this crisis. We are ONE.

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