

ACET News

Christmas

2021



Staying with the Trouble: 2021

A friend recently took part in a podcast on themes of faith and justice called “[Staying with the Trouble](#)”. In this newsletter you will see the stories of how our staff and volunteers stay with the trouble. Covid continues to add layers and layers of complexity and challenge to the underlying impact of addiction, HIV and social exclusion. The temptation to walk away is strong. Walking away does not always take the obvious form: it can look like activities, goal setting or even generosity that is more rooted in our perception of what people need than what is really needed. Our desire to declare victory on our own terms needs reflection and careful consideration.

This Advent we are grateful for the support of our donors. We always talk about how our hampers are ‘integrated into our care plans’ but this year it is more true than ever as we are planning for further supports into January and February. Thank you that light will continue to be shone into darkness.



—Richard Carson is ACET CEO

Thank you for being part of our work! You are welcome to read a report on our care work (p. 2); health news from Dublin’s migrant community (p. 3); and some tasters from the world of art and HIV (p. 4). For thoughts on Dayenu and 15 stanzas of gratitude see page three.

Hampers 2021: We are Blessed

In 2020, we were amazed and encouraged by the response to our hamper appeal. It was the first time that we asked for financial donations instead of actual hampers: the generosity of so many made the programme a huge success.



With uncertainty continuing around hamper collection points, we decided that in 2021 we would do the same: individuals and groups contributing, and staff shopping and filling the hampers themselves. We hope that next year we will be able to return to our usual way of receiving hampers put together by friends of ACET.

Thank you to everyone who has given toward our 2021 hampers: they are currently being delivered. We and our clients are indeed blessed.

Thank you for being present with us this year, through your messages, time, giving, prayers and in so many other ways. Above all, we value our relationships with you, our partners, supporters, clients, friends.

We wish that you begin 2022 with hope, peace, good health and much joy, and that they remain with you throughout the year.

Happy Christmas from all of us in ACET Ireland: Richard, Terrie, Vivienne, Olivia, Hansi, Luky and Lynn.

Feast or Famine: care work in the extremes

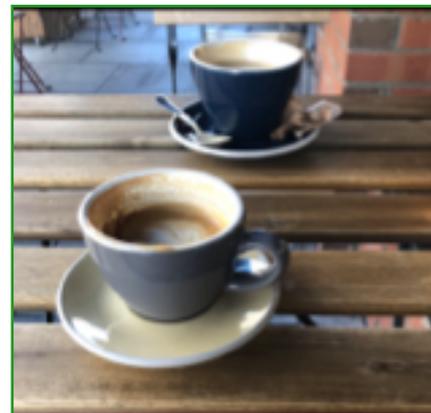
In this season, some clients are exploring a buffet of opportunities through newly emerging job possibilities, changes in accommodation, or starting college. They may be taking more care minding their physical and mental health, accessing community resources that have lain dormant for over 18 months, or re-engaging in social life with current outdoor options.

Meanwhile there are others who are still experiencing the 'famine' of hope: struggling in going out the door, engaging with others or picking up old — or new — ways to resource and to cope. In many ways they are not feeling safe or equipped to manage the complexities of the indoor and outside worlds.

Through feast and famine, the strains of the pandemic continue: some people are continuing to process bereavements and the unique trauma that came from losing loved ones in severe restrictions, some are feeling a lack of confidence or motivation to continue projects or plans that held some fun or joy. We are really seeing the impact on mental health from all of these challenging dynamics.

Care work still celebrates the ability to be present with one another where possible, working face-to-face where safe, but also considering the risks as we move closer to winter months where we see an increase in hospitalisations and higher rates of illnesses and practical hardships.

We expect that care presence, whether in-person or virtual, will continue to be a valued need as we press into the harder months; we are planning to stay flexible with this and continue to keep our care relationships safe.



The Same but Different: coping with two pandemics

There have always been challenges in our care work over the years relating to HIV, health and addiction. While these areas are exceptionally difficult they are familiar and we have created processes and support structures in collaboration with clients. The current pandemic has brought many additional layers to our work; we have been faced with familiar hardships and unfamiliar isolation and restrictions. During this time many clients have been very reflective of how the two pandemics intertwine, yet each has its own unique struggles and public response. It is hard to articulate how challenging this time has been for so many that we work with and the level of trauma they have experienced. We have had to try and be creative to be as present as possible despite the barriers.

How we are working through this time:

With clients in hospital we have delivered letters, food and practical items in the absence of being able to visit regularly. For one client who was an inpatient for many weeks and unable to use a phone we dropped in letters and stamps, books and a radio. While these are just small resources, she said it was her connection to the outside world and she wouldn't have been comfortable to ask anyone else.



We have prioritised face-to-face contact as much as possible knowing so many clients are isolated and vulnerable. We have met in homes when it is safe to do so; we have worked outside or on doorsteps when necessary. When there are appointments where access is limited we meet clients at home and walk with them to the appointment and debrief on the walk afterwards to add encouragement, support and guidance.

Unfortunately there have been some relapses with drugs over the past year. The resulting shame and family tension has created difficult environments to work in. Through months of finding confidential safe spaces to talk through and process some of the causes and implications, we have linked clients with community addiction supports and created at-home safety plans with resources they can access in emergencies.

Practical supports include getting people Covid tests and certs, vaccine appointments, updated information on symptoms and safety protocols, in addition to our ongoing work and advocacy.

While there is much familiarity to all of these supports and we have long felt the impact of them in our work, the disparity and inequity of what it means to 'live with Covid' is bringing an acute awareness that there are many more challenges for our clients ahead. As always we hope that our Christmas hampers will provide a practical support but also a joy and continuity to the care we have brought throughout 2021.



— Hansi Chisnall and Olivia Corbett are ACET's care workers

Pandemic upon Pandemic: Layering Up

We are slowly heading towards the end of the year 2021. When we look back, we could see how Covid-19 uncertainty has marked this year.

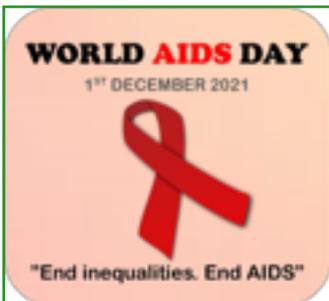


In the first part of this year, despite the ongoing pandemic, there was some hope of resuming a number of physical and social activities because of the positive outcome of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign. Some public health restrictions were either removed or alleviated. Community members started gathering again; churches started running services with physical presence; wedding ceremonies resumed. As the number of vaccinated people increased, there was a strong expectation that we may be going back to some kind of normal life with just basic restrictions.

Unfortunately, in the last few months that optimistic move was hindered by a new wave of Covid-19 infections. There were now cautious steps because the number of contaminated people started to increase seriously. There was a renewed call for people to abide by the protective measures. This drawback has led to a general tone of a dashed hope.

The new Covid-19 wave happened at a bad time, as vaccine hesitancy is still significant within migrant communities. It is also a cause of concern as the renewed restrictions applied to both the vaccinated and the un-vaccinated. This confused some migrants and blurred a little bit the advantage of being vaccinated.

Then, as if the infection recrudescence was not enough, the news broke of the discovery of a new Covid-19 variant (Omicron), reminding people the uncertainty that characterised the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though researchers are still collecting data to better understand the dangerousness of this new variant, the fact that the World Health Organisation expressed its concerns about this variant is not reassuring at all.



Another issue is that the prevention work on HIV infection is slowed down by the superseding focus on Covid-19. The current Covid-19 pandemic is so talked about that it is perceived by many as a more tangible threat. The truth is

that HIV is still there, stigma against people living with HIV is still significant among migrants. The 1st December is World AIDS Day. The theme for this year was "End inequalities. End AIDS". This is a good occasion to remind us of the necessity to actively work with communities to tackle stigma and eradicate HIV.

— Yvon Luky, *Migrant Plus*



DAYENU: that would have been enough

Over the last few days the song and refrain from a popular Jewish song has been ringing in my ears: "Dayenu". It has been sung for over a thousand years at the time of the festival of Passover, and means 'that would have been enough'. It gives thanks to God in all its fifteen stanzas for all that he gave to them while acknowledging that if he had given one gift instead of many "that would have been enough".



My thinking around this started as I bought gratefulness diaries as presents for Christmas. Now what a nice idea to give gratefulness diaries but do I really believe in gratefulness or do I secretly or indeed unconsciously constantly grasp for more?

For many of us, a mainspring of our lives at Christmas is a desire to have joy through having or getting much. And yet we know in our hearts that the stuff we get - and seek more of - is not what brings joy. We know so well that people who have much are often not happy and people who have little are often joyful. Is there not something wonderful about a spirit of gratefulness, the practise of acknowledging to our grasping hearts that less would have been enough?

Could we practice Dayenu this Christmas? Could we be grateful this week, this day, this moment?

Maybe it's as simple as taking a minute each day to start with "I am grateful this moment for..." and wait till it sinks to a heart level and the response emerges. Yes, it sometimes takes a little time, time to bypass the hard places of negativity of spirit, tightness, rivalry, the places of wanting more!

If we wait for seeping thankfulness the heart may whisper something simple but profound: I'm thankful for fresh air, for solid ground, for the one I live with, for my beautiful cat, this glass of lovely wine, the sound of children laughing. Perhaps this is the chance to begin to live a little every day with glimpses of the pure joy that extends from a grateful heart. And even one of these would have been enough!

Dayenu!



— Vivienne Morrow Murtagh is ACET's counsellor and supervisor

World AIDS Day: **LIVING**



Gay Community News and **HIV Ireland** have teamed up for a World AIDS Day initiative: a special project that seeks to give real visibility and celebrate the diversity of people living with HIV in Ireland. **LIVING** is an innovative, first-of-its-kind, photographic exhibition showcasing a powerful and

inspiring collection of portraits by the wonderfully talented photographer [Hazel Coonagh](#).

The project is kindly supported and funded by GSK, Dublin Pride, the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme, and EPIC and runs until 17 December at CHQ.



Strength for Today: a new devotional



November saw the launch of a new Christian devotional, [Strength for Today](#), for and by people living with HIV. Lolade Benson, based in London, has collected 30 days of spiritual and inspirational reflection.

This book may be for you if “you just got your diagnosis and are thinking: what is going to happen to me now? Are my goals still worthwhile? Am I still relevant? Can I still fulfil my God-given purpose? Or, you are living with HIV, have cancer or any other chronic but manageable condition and are constantly being weighed down by questions about life and purpose.”

Richard Carson spoke at the book launch on the history of HIV and faith with attendees joining from three continents.

Derek Jarman's Death

oil on photocopy on canvas, 1993

You can't see the headlines in black, white underneath: *gay plague*

scourge

vile doom

you feel them

melted under the shock

of cadmium red deep, cerulean

manganese, marigold

chrome green

pure flesh, raw

umber

trenches gouged

by the living fingers of the artist

scraping a cross

Death

the canvas still shakes

Art on Art: poetry from painting

In February 2020 after the launch of HIV Ireland's MPower Programme in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, we were invited to visit IMMA's exhibit of Derek Jarman's work, *PROTEST!*, a major retrospective of the British artist and filmmaker's work marking 25 years since his death from AIDS.

I stood in front of one painting for a long while: simply titled *Death*, its colours screamed from the canvas. *Death* is one of several paintings that Jarman created by photocopying tabloid headlines about the AIDS crisis, then painting over them. You could no longer see these cruel and abusive pronouncements, but you could feel them.

That painting inspired this poem which was published in *A&U*, *America's AIDS Magazine*, in November. Read the poem on their site [here](#).

— Lynn Caldwell is ACET's administrator



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