

Learning from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey: Coping with the Crisis

Andrew Village

Leslie J. Francis

Coronavirus, Church & You was an online survey promoted through the *Church Times* and in a number of dioceses around the country. It ran from the beginning of May, and we have already summarized some key findings from a snapshot of the data in June. The survey closed in mid-July as the lockdown was easing and churches reopened, and we are now analysing the full dataset in more detail. The final tally of responses was just shy of 7,000, of which 5,347 came from people in the Church of England. In this, the first in a series of more focused articles, we explore the way in which different parts of the Church coped with lockdown.

Psychological wellbeing during the lockdown

A key section of the survey asked respondents to rate how they had been affected psychologically and emotionally since the lockdown began by indicating if they felt better, the same or worse. One group of items related to levels of stress (stress, exhaustion, fatigue and anxiety), another to what we have termed 'negative affect' (lack of excitement, unhappiness, boredom, and frustration), and a third to 'positive affect' (thankfulness, hopefulness, neighbourliness, and trust). Responses to these groups of items were related to one another in a predictable fashion: people who reported increased stress also tended to report more negative affect and less positive affect. As we shall see, however, these three aspects of wellbeing played out slightly differently across various groups within the Church. We used a simple scoring system to calculate individual levels for these three measures of wellbeing. Whatever your opinion of using numbers to study people, the beauty of quantitative data is that it allows us to see how wellbeing was distributed across large groups, something that qualitative data just can't do.

When it came to stress, for example, we can spot some differences using simple percentages. There were 1,496 clergy in the sample and 38% of them reported increased stress over lockdown compared with 32% of 5,240 lay people. For exhaustion, the gap was even bigger (48% versus 29%) and so too for fatigue (54% versus 40%). When it came to negative affect, however, the difference was much less marked with 24% of clergy and 24% of laity feeling unhappier, 23% of clergy and 25% of laity feeling more bored, 32% of clergy and 34% of laity feeling less excited, and 46% of clergy and 41% of laity feeling more frustrated. Using the scoring system allowed more rigorous comparison, and it seemed that although clergy were on average more stressed than the laity, they were also slightly happier on average, with lower negative affect and higher positive affect.

More subtle differences emerged when we used the more sensitive scoring system. There was a strong relationship with age: older people reported lower stress compared with younger people. The difference in stress levels between clergy and lay people was most pronounced for those aged under 70, but levels were pretty much the same among older (mainly retired) people (Figure 1). It was working clergy, as we might expect, who were feeling the strain and their stress levels were higher than working lay people of the same age.

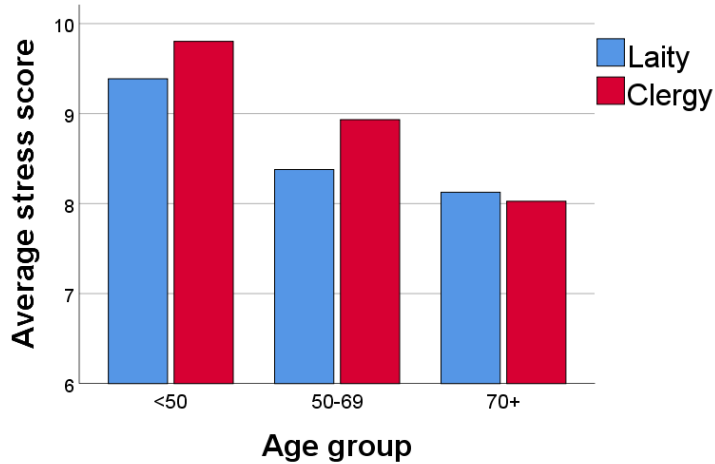
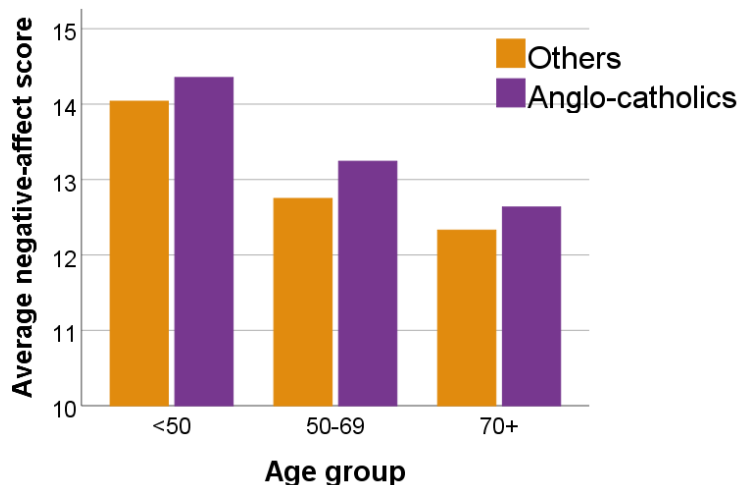


Figure 1. Age and stress among clergy and laity.

Younger people tended to be more stressed than older people. Clergy of working age tended to be more stressed than laity in the same age group.

There were also differences in wellbeing between people living in different environments. Those from the inner cities reported higher stress and higher negative affect than those living in towns or suburbs, and they in turn reported higher levels than people from rural areas. This trend seemed to persist across the age range and for clergy and lay people.

The differences in wellbeing between other groups were more varied. There was little difference in levels of stress or negative affect between the sexes, but women were more likely than men to report an increase in positive affect. Anglo-catholics had similar stress scores to other traditions within the Church but scored higher on negative affect and lower on positive affect. Something about the crisis seemed to create a more negative mood among Anglo-Catholics than among Evangelicals or the majority of the 'middle of the road' Anglicans in the Church of England. We will explore elsewhere possible reasons for this, and whether it might be related to the particular understanding of buildings and sacred space that seems to be more prevalent in that tradition. Lockdown brought about all sorts of changes, but the sudden and complete loss of worship by the gathered community in places set apart for that purpose was perhaps the starkest change for many churchgoers.



Age and negative affect among Anglo-catholics.

Younger people tended to have more negative affect than older people, as did Anglo-catholics in all age groups.

As we examine the statistics in detail, we can see how different aspects of wellbeing varied across the Church during the lockdown. Stress, linked to fatigue, exhaustion and anxiety, hit clergy harder. The demands of trying to develop new patterns of worship, while also trying to service the needs of congregation and community must surely have left their mark. Yet this was a specific effect, and

clergy generally maintained an upbeat mood. This was harder in some traditions than in others, and it might be worth thinking about whether this was because lockdown affected more core aspects of faith for some than others, or whether there are some who felt marginalised and isolated within the Church. That is not a new phenomenon, but perhaps a crisis tends to expose underlying insecurities.

Clergy were not immune to the wider trends across the Church which may well have reflected wider trends in society. The UK's response to the virus was shaped all along by the fear that it would overwhelm the NHS, and by the more serious effect it has on the elderly. The paradox that it was those least likely to get ill from the virus who had to make the biggest changes in lifestyle has not gone unnoticed. The greater strain this response put on young adults, rather than the middle aged or elderly, emerged clearly in this survey. We can see how this trend persisted across men and women, across ordained and lay, across town and country, and across various traditions in the Church. One thing to take into any future lockdown might be to focus support where it is most needed and, apart from those who actually have the virus, that is not necessarily old people.

Coping during the lockdown

In a different section of the survey we asked people to rate how well they thought they had coped overall during the lockdown, using a single five-point scale that ranged from 'very poorly' to 'very well'. This is a purely subjective scale, of course, and one person's coping might be another's collapsing. Even so, such subjective impressions are crucial because they probably tell us more about personal resilience than measures of external coping based on observed behaviour. Across the sample, 35% thought they had coped very well, while only 6% felt they had coped poorly or very poorly. Whatever the wider effect in society, many people in the Church of England managed well through the lockdown, and we should not forget that in the months ahead as we assess the impact of Covid-19 on the Church. Nonetheless, despite the overwhelmingly positive sense of coping, it might be worth trying to understand why some people failed to cope as well as others. Coping might be a product of how much stress someone is under and how much support they have to cope with that.

We asked clergy and lay people about how well-supported they felt from various sources. The list for lay people were things like family, friends, neighbours, congregation, and church. The list for clergy was little different to reflect their different circumstances and it included additional sources such as a ministry team or the public. When we looked at stress, positive affect, and support in relation to coping it was clear, as you might expect, that those with more stress or less positive affect tended to cope less well. Psychological wellbeing is one factor that determines how well we cope with what life throws at us. For clergy and laity alike, support in the home was the source that most powerfully predicted better ability to cope with the pandemic. This was not just having people living with you, but also whether they were a source of support rather than a drain on reserves. There was some evidence to suggest that those who lived with another person had slightly lower stress and coped slightly better, on average, than those living alone. However, the effect was reversed in larger households, especially for clergy. Support from the congregation also helped both clergy and laity to cope, but support from more distant agents like the church at diocesan or national level had little effect.

Lessons to take into the next lockdown?

The talk at the end of July as this article is being written is of a 'second-wave' of pandemic and the re-introduction of lockdown measures in local areas. The possibility of another severe, national lockdown in the winter looks more likely than it did a month ago. What, then, have we learnt about how the Church of England at large coped with the Covid-19 crisis from May to July?

- Stress and psychological wellbeing were unevenly distributed. Younger people and working clergy felt most stressed. Anglo-catholics and those in inner cities reported more negative affect. We should be wary about making broad generalizations because different parts of the Church reacted differently. This doesn't mean we cannot recognise some important trends that tell us where the pain and stress may have been most acutely experienced.
- Most people in the Church of England felt they coped well or very well with the lockdown. Those that coped less well tended to be the more stressed, but being well supported, especially at home, seemed to mitigate some of pressures and increased the sense of coping.

In future articles we will examine in more detail attitudes towards the lockdown and how they varied across the Church.