

## **Covid-19 & Church-21**

### **Paying attention to the voices of lay people in The Episcopal Church**

Andrew Village

Professor of Practical and Empirical Theology

York St John University, York UK

Leslie J. Francis

Visiting Professor of Theology and Religious Studies

York St John University, York UK

The Ven Jennifer McKenzie

Dean's Advisor for New Initiatives

Virginia Theological Seminary

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## Setting the context

Between 8 May and late July 2020, the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* attracted good participation from both Anglicans and Catholics across Great Britain and Ireland. The findings from this earlier survey have been made widely available (see the [survey webpage](#)).

The *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* online survey was launched on 22 January 2021 in order to capture an update on how clergy and laity across Great Britain and Ireland were faring after such a prolonged period of disruption caused by the pandemic. It coincided with another national lockdown introduced earlier in the month to cope with a third upturn in infections in the UK. Colleagues in Canada and in the USA who had become aware of our earlier survey asked if the survey could be run in their countries. We designed a survey for the Episcopal Church in the US (TEC) which was a slightly shorter version of the UK survey, and which contained some modifications to items that suited the US context. It was publicised and distributed through Virginia Theological Seminary, ran from 1 June to 23 August 2021, and collected over 5,000 responses from across the USA.

This brief paper has been designed to profile an overview of the responses of the 3,463 TEC laity who participated in the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* and who resided in the USA. This overview will both provide immediate insights into matters of core pastoral and liturgical concern, and also stimulate further questions that can be addressed by more sophisticated interrogation of these data.

### 1. Who took part?

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the demographics of the 3,463 TEC laity who participated in the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey*. The majority of the participants were

- white (90%)
- just under half were from suburban areas (46%), with only 12% from inner cities and 13% from rural areas.

There were respondents from all 52 US states (including Puerto Rico). Ten states, California, Virginia, Texas, New York, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Michigan accounted for half the sample.

The ratio of men (30%) to women (69%) reflects what is known of the profile of many church congregations, where women tend to outnumber men by about 2 to 1.

The age profile shows that half of the participants (52%) were in their 70s or older. Just under a third (29%) were living alone.

The employment status shows that one third (33%) of the participants were in full- or part-time work and over half (55%) were retired. For the 1,238 who were employed when the pandemic began, 24% had seen their income reduced, and 8% had been laid off during lockdowns.

Table 1.2 provides the service attendance profile of the 3,463 participants who provided this information

- before the pandemic, 84% attended offline services at least weekly
- since lockdown, 63% accessed online services at least weekly. Accessing services on most days doubled from 6% to 13%, perhaps reflecting increased opportunities for people to access daily offices online.

## **2. Impact of the pandemic on personal wellbeing**

Our assessment of the impact of the pandemic on personal wellbeing draws on the psychological theory that positive affect and negative affect work as relatively independent systems. Potentially challenging situations may result in increases both in positive affect and in negative affect. Dynamically, increases in positive affect may offset some of the deleterious consequences of increases in negative affect.

Table 2 profiles the effect of the pandemic on ten markers of positive affect and ten markers of negative affect as reported by 3,025 participants who completed this aspect of the survey.

The results show that there were increases in some of the markers of negative affect: 46% of the participants felt more anxious, 44% felt more stressed, 43% felt more exhausted, and 42% felt more frustrated and/or more fatigued.

At the same time, the results show that there were increases in some of the markers of positive affect: 67% felt more grateful and/or thankful and 41% felt more hopeful.

## **3. Impact of the pandemic on lifestyle**

The survey included two rather different types of question to assess the wider impact of the pandemic on participants and to complement the information provided by the balanced affect approach reported in the previous section.

Table 3.1 assesses perceived changes in behaviour and in consumption. Overall, the major change occurred in the amount of time spent on screen: this increased for 70% of the participants. The impact on exercise was reflected in 40% whose level of exercise decreased and 47% whose overall fitness decreased.

Overall, there were more participants who reported increase in consumption than who reported decrease in consumption.

- 19% drank more alcohol, compared with 15% who drank less
- 14% drank more coffee, compared with 8% who drank less
- 19% ate more chocolate, compared with 12% who ate less
- 36% generally ate more, compared with 20% who ate less

Change in junk-food consumption was more balanced, with 22% saying they ate more and 23% saying they ate less.

Table 3.2 assessed perceived changes in physical, mental, and spiritual health. These data reveal improvements in spiritual health.

- 44% reported better spiritual health, compared with 19% who reported worse spiritual health

The situation was more balanced for physical health and was less positive for mental health.

- 24% reported better physical health, compared with 29% who reported worse physical health
- 21% reported better mental health, compared with 31% who reported worse mental health

This table also shows a balance between approximately one third (32%) who found it easy to cope and one third (30%) who found it difficult to cope.

#### **4. Impact of the pandemic on religious life**

Table 4 assesses perceived impact of the pandemic on aspects of the participants' religious life. These data revealed some important positive signs where more participants reported increases than decreases.

- 51% reported increases in frequency of personal prayer
- 42% reported increases in the quality of their spiritual life
- 41% reported increases in their trust in God
- 38% reported increases in their motivation to serve

On the other hand, these data also revealed areas in which more participants reported decreases than increases.

- 48% reported decreases in their trust in the federal Government
- 44% reported decreases in their trust in their State or Local Government
- 43% reported decreases in their trust in the national Church
- 40% reported decreases in frequency of worship services
- 35% reported decreases in volunteering in the community

## 5. Perceived help and support needed and received during the pandemic

Table 5.1 reports the perceived personal help and support needed and received by the participants during the pandemic. The first finding from these data highlights the proportion of respondents who said they needed help with:

- keeping in touch with my congregation, 79%
- keeping in touch with the wider church, 64%
- faith, 55%
- Christian ministry 50%
- emotional difficulties, 44%
- isolation or loneliness, 42%
- mental health, 38%
- practical difficulties, 35%
- bereavement, 24%
- illness, 19%

The second finding highlights the areas of perceived needs for which no help was given, or it was given but not useful.

- keeping in touch with congregation, 17%
- emotional difficulties, 17%
- isolation and loneliness, 17%
- mental health, 16%
- keeping in touch with the wider church, 14%
- Christian ministry, 14%
- faith, 12%

The third finding highlights the areas of perceived needs for which the help given was rated highly.

- keeping in touch with the congregation, 31%
- keeping in touch with the wider church, 20%
- faith, 22%
- Christian ministry, 14%

Support given related to practical, emotional, and mental-health difficulties was less likely to be rated highly.

Table 5.2 lists various sources of support. In each case respondents were asked to indicate if they had expected support from that source and whether any support they did receive was useful.

The results show that expectations of support varied, which in some cases might be because that source was not relevant: for example, lay people living alone would not expect support from their household and people without lay ministers in their church would not expect this sort of support. There were some cases where sources would be common to most people, but expectations varied:

- 13% did not expect support from friends
- 20% did not expect support from their congregation
- 21% did not expect support from their vicar/priest
- 46% did not expect support from their church nationally
- 47% did not expect support from neighbours

The second finding highlights the church-related sources where support was expected but not given, or it was given but not useful.

- My vicar/ priest, 18%
- My congregation, 15%
- Lay ministers in my church, 13%
- My church nationally, 13%

These figures are low, but nonetheless would amount nationally to a large number of people feeling let down by their church.

The third finding highlights the areas of perceived needs for which the help given was rated highly.

- Friends, 45%
- My household, 42%
- My family elsewhere, 40%
- My vicar/ priest, 34%
- My congregation, 27%
- Lay ministers in my church, 19%
- My church nationally, 13%

Perhaps unsurprisingly, support from more socially (and physically) distant sources was rated really helpful by fewer people.

## 6. Attitude toward virtual church post-pandemic

The *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* concluded with five sets of attitudinal questions. The first set explored attitudes toward the virtual future for the Church. The responses to these questions presented in table 6 make the following key points.

First, there has been proper recognition that online provision has made an important contribution to sustaining church life during the pandemic.

- 77% agreed that the lockdown has helped the Church to move into the digital age
- 74% agreed that the lockdown is a great chance to re-think the Church's future

Second, there was also significant affirmation for the various application of social media and online platforms.

- 54% agreed that online worship is a great liturgical tool
- 51% agreed that social media is a great pastoral tool
- 43% agreed that social media is a great evangelistic tool

Third, however, there was less enthusiasm for virtual church becoming the norm for the future.

- 32% agreed that online worship is the way ahead for the next generation
- 21% agreed that we should put more effort into developing virtual churches
- 19% agreed that online services should replace some of our in-church services
- 7% agreed that virtual contact is as good as face-to-face

The consensus for the future remained with resourcing offline church.

- 87% agreed that we should put our effort into maintaining local churches

## 7. Attitude toward local church post-pandemic

The second set of attitudinal questions explored attitude toward local church post-pandemic. The response to these questions presented in table 7 make the following key points.

First, fewer than half the participants imagined that the local church would not be changed by the pandemic

- 44% agreed that their church will eventually return to how it was pre-pandemic

Second, a significant number of participants identified key ways in which their church will be weaker post-pandemic, though others were more optimistic.

- 35% agreed that many people will not return to church after the pandemic, but 24% disagreed
- 23% agreed that the church's income will be permanently lower, but 31% disagreed



- 22% agreed that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, but 44% disagreed

Third, there seemed to be more optimists than pessimists when it came to speculating about the future of their church:

- 11% agreed that their church building will not be financially viable, but 56% disagreed
- 12% agreed that their congregation will be too small to be sustainable, but 57% disagreed
- 14% agreed that they will not be able to serve children and young people, but 56% disagreed
- 10% agreed that they will need to merge with other churches to be viable, but 63% disagreed

## **8. Attitude toward my faith post-pandemic**

The third set of attitudinal questions explored attitude toward faith post-pandemic. The responses to these questions presented in table 8 make the following key points.

First, a large proportion of the participants considered that they would try to get back to their pre-pandemic commitment to their church.

- 75% agreed that they will get back to their previous pattern of worship if they can
- 68% agreed that they will cherish their local church more than they used to
- 40% agreed that they will give more time to serving their local church than they used to

Second, nearly half of the participants considered that they would develop online church life.

- 46% agreed that they will develop their online expertise
- 35% agreed that they will worship online more often than they used to
- 22% agreed that they will meet people online for daily offices or prayer
- But only 3% agreed that they will find a *new* online church to join

## **9. Attitude toward Holy Communion post-pandemic**

The fourth set of attitude questions explored attitude toward Communion post-pandemic. The response to these questions in table 9 suggest opinion was divided on whether to retain traditional practice and doctrine or introduce innovations that have suited Communion in lockdown.

- While 39% agreed that the priest needs to be physically present for the bread and wine to be consecrated, 38% disagreed
- While 50% agreed that properly prepared lay people should be authorised to preside at communion in their homes, 20% disagreed
- While 32% agreed that all lay people should be allowed to preside at communion in their homes, 30% disagreed
- While 51% would be willing to share the cup in future, 28% would not
- While 23% agreed that a congregation/assembly must be physically present at the Eucharist, 47% did not see this as essential.

## **10. Attitude toward the role of God in the pandemic**

The fifth set of attitudinal questions explored attitude toward the role of God in the pandemic. The responses to these questions presented in table 12 demonstrate a rich diversity of views. For example, views were mixed on how far God was able to control the pandemic independent of human action:

- 66% maintained that God has always been in control during the pandemic
- 26% maintained that God could stop the pandemic at any point whatever we do
- 66% maintained that God's power to save us from the pandemic depends on human co-operation
- 54% maintained that God will save us from the pandemic through science
- 51% maintained that the pandemic is a solely 'natural' event without any relation to God

Very few people viewed the pandemic as somehow being sent by God:

- 5% maintained that the pandemic is the result of human sin
- 3% maintained that God sent the pandemic to test our faith
- 1% maintained that the pandemic is a punishment from God

## 11. The pandemic and church-leaving: Giving up

The research group who designed the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* have had a long-established interest in the causes of church-leaving as displayed in the two books *Gone but not forgotten* (1998) and *Gone for good?* (2007). One of the main reasons for becoming a church leaver, voiced by 69% of the participants in our earlier survey, was simply ‘getting out of the habit’. People had stopped going to church, found that they did not miss going, and even more that no one there seemed to miss them. They simply got out of the habit and found no good reason for returning. It seemed to us that closing churches in the face of the pandemic could, for some people, break the habit of a lifetime of church attendance.

We decided to close the survey with the simple question, ‘Have you completely given up on online services, going to church, or God since the pandemic began?’. Of the 2,819 who answered this question, 460 (16%) of the participants responded that they had given up on something: 14% on online services, 12% on going to church, and 2% had given up on God. Among the 460 who had given up on something, 37% were in a recognised lay ministry of some sort. It is these statistics that may well need to stimulate the next serious piece of research.

Table 1.1

*Demographics (N = 3,463)*

	%
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
White	90
Black or African American	4
Latino or Hispanic	2
Other	4
<i>Location</i>	
Rural	13
Town	29
Suburb	46
Inner city	12
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	30
Female	69
Non-gender binary	< 1
Prefer not to say	< 1
<i>Age</i>	
20s	1
30s	3
40s	4
50s	11
60s	29
70s	39
80s	13
<i>Living status</i>	
Live alone	29
Live with others in your household	70
Live in community	1

*Employment status*

Full-time work	23
Part-time work	10
Self-employed	7
Homemaker/carer	3
Unemployed	1
Student	1
Retired	55

*Impact of Covid*

*(of 1,238 who were in employment when the pandemic started)*

Hours reduced	17
Income reduced	24
Laid off	8
Started new job	12
Given up work	8

Table 1.2

*Service attendance profile (N = 3,463)*

	%
<i>Church attendance pre-pandemic</i>	
A few times a year	5
Once a month	2
Twice a month	9
Once a week	78
Most days	6
<i>Online services since lockdown</i>	
Never	4
A few times	18
Once a month	4
Twice a month	11
Once a week	50
Most days	13

Table 2

*How would you rate how you are now compared with before the pandemic started? (N = 3,025)*

	Less %	Same %	More %
<i>Positive affect</i>			
Creative	23	53	23
Excited	37	49	14
Calm	31	54	16
Happy	24	56	20
Enthusiastic	29	55	16
Thankful	4	29	67
Hopeful	19	40	41
Confident	19	57	24
Grateful	4	29	67
Inspired	18	55	27
<i>Negative affect</i>			
Exhausted	11	46	43
Anxious	14	40	46
Stressed	17	39	44
Upset	19	54	27
Afraid	20	52	28
Irritable	18	48	34
Guilty	26	67	7
Despondent	28	58	14
Fatigued	15	43	42
Frustrated	15	42	42

Table 3.1

*Impact of the pandemic on lifestyle (N = 2,817)*

	Decreased %	Same %	Increased %
The time I spend in front of a screen	4	26	70
The amount I exercise	40	32	28
My overall fitness	47	33	20
The amount I eat	20	45	36
The amount of alcohol I drink	15	66	19
The amount of coffee I drink	8	78	14
The amount of chocolate I eat	12	70	19
The amount of junk food I eat	23	55	22

Table 3.2

*How has the pandemic affected you? (N = 2,684)*

	Agree %	Not certain %	Disagree %
Better spiritual health	44	37	19
Better physical health	24	47	29
Better mental health	21	48	31
Found it easy to cope	32	38	30



Table 4

*Impact of the pandemic on religious life (N = 2,817)*

	Decreased %	Same %	Increased %
Frequency of personal prayer	11	38	51
Frequency of worship services	40	40	21
Frequency of bible reading	16	62	22
Quality of my spiritual life	23	35	42
My motivation to serve	23	40	38
My volunteering in the community	35	44	21
My trust in God	7	52	41
My trust in my local church	24	44	32
My trust in the national Church	19	57	25
My hope for the Church	25	39	36
My trust in the Government	48	29	23
My trust in my State and Local Government	44	31	25

Table 5.1

*Personal help and support during the pandemic (N = 2,855)*

	Not needed %	Needed not given %	Given not useful %	Given some use %	Given helpful %
My faith	46	9	3	21	22
My Christian ministry	50	10	4	22	14
Practical difficulties	65	9	4	15	7
Emotional difficulties	56	13	4	18	9
Mental health	62	12	4	15	7
Keeping in touch with my congregation	22	10	7	31	31
Keeping in touch with the wider church	36	8	6	32	18
Isolation or loneliness	58	13	4	18	7
Illness	81	5	2	7	5
Bereavement	76	6	3	9	7

Table 5.2

*Sources of support during the pandemic (N = 2,848)*

	Not expected %	Expected: not given %	Given: not useful %	Given: some use %	Really helpful %
My household	31	2	2	23	42
Family elsewhere	21	4	2	33	40
Friends	13	2	2	38	45
Neighbours	47	2	2	29	20
My congregation	20	12	3	38	27
My Church nationally	46	7	6	28	13
My vicar/ priest/ minister	21	14	4	28	34
Lay ministers in my church	42	10	3	26	19
Non-church voluntary organisations	66	3	3	18	10

Table 6

*Attitude toward virtual church post-pandemic (N = 2,855)*

	Agree %	Not certain %	Disagree %
Online worship is the way ahead for the next generation	32	33	35
Virtual contact is as good as meeting face to face	7	8	85
Social media is a great pastoral tool	51	23	26
Social media is a great evangelistic tool	43	33	25
Online worship is a great liturgical tool	54	22	24
Online services should replace some of our in-church services	19	22	59
We should put our effort into developing virtual churches	21	31	48
We should put our effort into maintaining local churches	87	10	3
We should do everything we can to keep church buildings open	78	14	8
The lockdown has helped the Church to move into the digital age	77	15	8
The lockdown is a great chance to re-think the Church's future	74	17	9
All churches should live-stream their services in future	56	28	16

Table 7

*Attitude toward local church post-pandemic (N = 2,855)*

	Agree %	Not certain %	Disagree %
Our congregations will be too small to be sustainable	12	31	57
We will need to merge with other churches to be viable	10	27	63
My church will eventually return to how it was pre-pandemic	44	33	23
Many people will not return to church after the pandemic	35	41	24
My church will emerge stronger than it was before	39	44	17
The church's income will be permanently lower	23	46	31
New people will join the church as a result of our online services	38	41	21
Our church building will not be financially viable	11	33	56
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	22	34	44
We will not be able to serve children and young people	14	30	56

Table 8

*Attitude toward my faith post-pandemic (N = 2,855)*

	Agree %	Not certain %	Disagree %
I will go to services in church less often than I used to	16	14	70
I will worship online more often than I used to	35	18	47
I will get back to my previous worship patterns if I can	75	16	9
My religion will be less important to me than it was	5	8	87
I will develop my online expertise	46	31	23
My financial giving to the church will be less than it was	10	16	74
I will meet people online for daily offices or prayer	22	31	48
I will find a new local church to join	7	13	80
I will find a new online church to join	3	9	89
I will cherish my local church more than I used to	68	20	12
I will give more time to serving my local church than I used to	40	41	19

Table 9

*Attitude toward Communion post-pandemic (N = 2,855)*

	Agree %	Not certain %	Disagree %
We need to find ways of expressing communion spiritually without bread and wine	36	21	43
People at home should be allowed to take bread and wine during live-streamed services	51	30	18
People at home should be allowed to take bread and wine at home during pre-recorded services	42	35	23
The priest needs to be physically present for the bread and wine to be consecrated	39	23	38
In future I would prefer not to share the cup in church	28	21	51
Communion should not be part of online worship	14	24	62
I value online communion services even if I cannot receive	66	17	17
All lay people should be allowed to preside at communion in their homes	32	38	30
Properly prepared lay people should be authorised to preside at communion in their homes	50	31	20
A congregation/assembly must be physically present at the Eucharist	23	30	47

Table 10

*Attitude toward the role of God in the pandemic (N = 2,855)*

	Agree %	Not certain %	Disagree %
God has always been in control during the pandemic	66	20	13
God sent the pandemic to test our faith	3	11	86
God will save us from the pandemic through science	54	29	17
The pandemic is a solely 'natural' event without any relation to God	51	28	21
God could stop the pandemic at any point whatever we do	26	27	47
The pandemic is punishment from God	1	4	95
God's power to save us from the pandemic depends on human co-operation	66	16	17
Science will save us from the pandemic without God's help	20	26	54
The pandemic is the result of human sin	5	10	86