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Viewing the impact of Covid-19 through the eyes of retired clergy

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Abstract

Although largely invisible in the ministry statistics published by the Church of England, ministry-active retired clergy continue to make an effective contribution to liturgical and pastoral provision. The present study compares the responses of 231 ministry-active retired clergy with the responses of 748 full-time stipendiary clergy to the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey*, to test the contrasting theses that retired clergy may be seen either as a helpful repository of wisdom or as unhelpfully out-of-date. The data suggest that retired clergy espoused the trajectory to the digital age with as much enthusiasm as stipendiary clergy. At the same time, however, retired clergy clung more keenly than stipendiary clergy to an Anglican model of ministry that valued both local place and sacred space.

Keywords: retired clergy, Anglican identity, Covid-19, empirical theology

Introduction

The idea of Church of England clergy reaching the age of retirement is still a relatively recent innovation. When Francis undertook research into the life and ministry of the Church of England throughout one rural diocese during the early 1980s¹, the impact of legislation to introduce compulsory retirement from beneficed livings at the age of seventy was only just beginning to filter through. While much of the research published in *Rural Anglicanism* was based on statistical profiles, the concluding chapter drew on insights generated by participant observation to profile one rural deanery. During the course of attending every service held in the deanery on one specific Sunday, the participant observers met and fell into conversation with two highly active parish priests who would by today's standards have been long retired. One of these priests had already been serving his Tractarian parish for over fifty years. The other one had been inducted into a quiet rural benefice of two churches at the age of sixty-five during the late 1960s. He saw this as his 'last living' and had set about with energy to develop his presence in the two communities.

The 1976 legislation introducing clergy retirement at the age of seventy has now worked its way through the Church of England. How retired clergy are seen by the Church of England may be reflected by their invisibility within the annually published ministry statistics. Statistics published by the Church of England² show that in 2018 there were 7,700 stipendiary clergy, 2,540 self-supporting ministers, 380 ordained local ministers, and 7,230 clergy holding PTO or LTO. It may be reasonable to assume that many included within this category are retired clergy, although it is impossible to estimate the precise proportion. The number of ministry-active retired clergy may not, therefore, be insignificant. The statistics published by the Church of England (p. 9) also show some important trends over the five-

¹ L. J. Francis (1985). *Rural Anglicanism: A future for young Christians?* London: Collins Liturgical Publications.

² Church of England (2019). *Ministry statistics 2018*. London: Church of England Research and Statistics.

year period, 2014 to 2018. There was a fall in stipendiary clergy from 8,797 in 2014 to 7,700 in 2018. There was also a fall in self-supporting ministers from 2,830 in 2014 to 2,540 in 2018, and in ordained local ministers from 480 in 2014 to 380 in 2018. The only increase during this five-year period was in terms of those holding PTO or LTO from 6,450 in 2014 to 7,230 in 2018. These trends may suggest that retired clergy are increasing rather than decreasing in terms of significance within the current landscape of Church of England ordained ministry.

Research on retired clergy

Given the potential importance of understanding the role of retired clergy within the Church of England, surprisingly little attention or research has been given to the experiences and expectations of retired clergy. In an initial enquiry into the ways in which bishops view the role of retired clergy, Neal, Francis, and McKenna³ found a range of attitudes from caution to enthusiasm, together with examples of retired clergy contributing to the life of dioceses, not only by helping to maintain the regular rhythm of church services and by helping to provide pastoral care, but also by serving as mentors to younger clergy, acting as interim ministers in vacant parishes, serving as the local minister for a congregation within multi-church benefices, and serving as rural deans.

In a second study Neal and Francis⁴ drew together reflections on the experience of retirement by fourteen Church of England priests, under the title, *A new lease of life?* Within that title the question mark is of considerable importance. For some clergy, retirement did indeed offer a new lease of life, while for others the experience was far from life-giving.

To conclude this book on the experiences of retired clergy, Bishop David Walker reflected on the individual narratives and drew out the important themes from which the

³ T. Neal, L. J. Francis, and U. McKenna (2017). A survey on mentoring, first incumbency, and the role of retired clergy: Listening to bishops. *Rural Theology*, 15(1), 39-47.

⁴ T. Neal and L. J. Francis (2020). *A new lease of life? Anglican clergy reflect on retirement*. Durham: Sacristy Press.

Church of England could possibly learn⁵. In his chapter Walker identifies the following recurring themes: getting over the initial hump of retirement; coming to terms with the loss of social life; feeling banned from the former parish where links remained strong; facing finance and housing issues; experiencing the unexpected bonus of feeling free to speak more openly; exploring opportunities for a wider canvas for ministry; having opportunities to support younger clergy; taking time to prepare for death and dying; and distinguishing between being considered by others as wise and helpful or as out-of-date and useless. It is this last theme that may be of particular relevance to taking a serious look at how ministry-active retired clergy viewed the impact of Covid-19 on the Church of England, compared with their stipendiary colleagues.

Covid-19

Covid-19 took the world by surprise and took the world by storm. Decisive action was needed and decisive action was effected. In England the government imposed a lockdown on the nation on 23 March 2020. The following day the Church of England imposed a lockup on all its churches. Churches were closed completely, even for private prayer, and even for the clergy⁶. Clergy who may have been accustomed to seeing the parish church as their natural habitat and as the centre for their liturgical and pastoral ministry needed to discover new ways through which to deliver ministry and mission and to fulfil the obligations of their ordination vows.

Recognising that the ecclesial landscape was changing rapidly before our very eyes, throughout April we consulted with bishops, clergy, and lay people to design the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, and we did so in dialogue with the *Church Times*,

⁵ D. W. Walker (2020). Reflecting on the narratives. In T. Neal & L. J. Francis (Eds.), *A new lease of life? Anglican clergy reflect on retirement* (pp. 179-188). Durham: Sacristy Press.

⁶ A. McGowan (2020). Communion and pandemic. *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 18, 2-8.

building on the successful collaboration experienced in the 2001 *Church Times* survey⁷ and the 2013 *Church Times* survey⁸. A link to the survey was distributed through the *Church Times* from 8 May 2020, and also distributed through a number of participating dioceses. The survey was closed 23 July 2020, by which time there were over 7,000 responses, from clergy and laity.

The current analyses drew on sections of the survey designed to assess attitudinal responses of clergy toward the scope of the lockdown, closing church buildings, developing virtual church, and how the crisis might affect the Church in the long term. Each section comprised a set of Likert-type items assessed on a three-point scale: disagree (1), not certain (2), and agree (3).

The current analyses were conducted on data provided by 231 ministry-active retired clergy, and 748 full-time stipendiary clergy engaged in parochial ministry. The profiles of these two groups obviously differed by age (24% of stipendiary clergy were aged 60 and above, compared with 99% of the ministry-active retired clergy) and sex (54% male among stipendiary clergy, compared with 64% male among ministry-active retired clergy), but also by church tradition (stipendiary clergy: 35% Anglo-Catholic, 46% Broad Church, 19% Evangelical; ministry-active retired clergy: 42% Anglo-Catholic, 43% Broad Church, 15% Evangelical). The higher proportion of men and Anglo-Catholics among retired clergy may explain some, but not all, of the differences between these groups. The statistical significance of the differences in the scores for Likert items reported for the two groups of clergy (retired and stipendiary) were tested using chi-squared analysis on 2 x 2 contingency tables, for which the three-point Likert scale responses were collapsed into two categories

⁷ L. J. Francis, M. Robbins, and J. Astley (2005). *Fragmented faith? Exposing the fault-lines in the Church of England*. Carlisle: Paternoster; A. Village and L. J. Francis (2009). *The mind of the Anglican clergy: Assessing attitudes and beliefs in the Church of England*. Lampeter: Mellen.

⁸ A. Village (2018). *The Church of England in the first decade of the 21st century: Findings from the Church Times surveys*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

differentiating between agreeing and not agreeing. For clarity of presentation, we report comparisons in terms of percentage of clergy in each category that agreed with each item.

Examining the evidence

Three items were designed to compare how clergy evaluated the responses to the pandemic of the Government, the Church, and the National Health Service. Looking first at the responses of the stipendiary parochial clergy, the majority applauded the National Health Service (91%), two-fifths applauded the Church (42%), and one-fifth applauded the Government (19%). The pattern of responses is quite similar for the retired clergy. Thus, 91% of both groups applauded the National Health Service, while 19% of stipendiary clergy and 16% of retired clergy applauded the Government. Where the disparity emerged is in appreciation of the Church. While 42% of stipendiary clergy considered that the Church has responded well to the crisis, the proportion fell to 33% among the retired clergy. Retired clergy seemed less inclined to have confidence in the current leadership.

Two items were designed to compare how clergy evaluated the responses of the local churches and of the national Church during the crisis. Roughly the same proportions of stipendiary clergy and retired clergy judged the national Church as having done a good job leading us in prayer (43% and 41%). The retired clergy were, however, less convinced by the performance of the local churches. While 69% of the stipendiary clergy considered that the churches in their area have responded well to the crisis, the proportion fell to 56% among retired clergy.

Three items were designed to explore how the clergy responded to the Church's policy to lockup churches. Here the divide between the views of the stipendiary clergy and the views of the retired clergy widened. The retired clergy were considerably less tolerant toward the policy of lockup. While nearly two-thirds of stipendiary clergy considered that closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do (61%), the proportion fell to a little

over one-third of retired clergy (36%). This difference was also reflected in the other two items. While 32% of stipendiary clergy agreed that the Church went too far in closing churches, the proportion rose to 50% among retired clergy. While 43% of stipendiary clergy maintained that clergy should always be allowed into their churches, the proportion rose to 70% among retired clergy.

Three items were designed to assess how clergy evaluated the role of church buildings within the context of ministry and mission. Once again there was a divide between the views of stipendiary clergy and retired clergy. Retired clergy were more likely to endorse the view that church buildings are central to our witness in the community (71% compared with 61%). Retired clergy were more likely to endorse the view that many people will lose faith without buildings in which to gather for worship (27% compared with 18%). The divide was less obvious in respect of the importance given to church buildings for the expression of priestly vocation. While 26% of stipendiary clergy endorsed the view that they need the church building to express their vocation fully, the proportion rose only slightly to 29% among retired clergy.

Three items were designed to assess how clergy evaluated what could be learned from the lockdown for the future of churches. Overall retired clergy had a somewhat more cautious reading from their experience. While one in every eight stipendiary clergy (12%) read the experience to show that church buildings are an unnecessary burden, the proportion fell to 4% among retired clergy. While 43% of stipendiary clergy read the experience as having made us focus on proper priorities, the proportion fell to 35% among retired clergy. There was closer agreement, however, on the way in which stipendiary clergy and retired clergy read the impact on church authorities: 25% of stipendiary clergy and 22% of retired clergy agreed that church authorities will use the crisis as an excuse permanently to close church buildings.

Three items were designed to assess how clergy evaluated the longer-term impact of Covid-19 for sustainability of church life. For some time, signs of fragility have been emerging in terms of dwindling and aging congregations, difficulty in recruiting volunteers for key posts (like churchwarden and PCC secretary), and growing gaps between income and expenditure⁹. The data showed that two in every five stipendiary clergy had come to the view that financial giving to the church would decline after the pandemic (39%). More seriously, one in every four stipendiary clergy had come to the view that their church building would not be financially viable (25%), and that they would face a crisis of key lay people stepping down and being difficult to replace (25%). On two of these three issues the retired clergy took a less pessimistic view: 19% thought financial giving would decline (compared with 39%); and 19% thought their church building would not be financially viable (compared with 25%). There was no significant difference, however, in the proportions of retired clergy (21%) and stipendiary clergy (25%) who thought that key lay people would step down and be difficult to replace.

Two items were designed to assess the attitude of clergy toward the sudden trajectory into the digital future. Looking first at the responses of the stipendiary clergy, four out of every five affirmed the positive view that the lockdown has helped the church to move into the digital age (81%) and three out of every five agreed that it has been good to see clergy broadcast services from their homes (60%). The retired clergy took a similar position, with 81% affirming that the lockdown had helped the church move into the digital age, and 66% agreeing that it had been good to see clergy broadcast services from their homes.

Three items were designed to focus attention more closely on digital worship. Well over half of stipendiary clergy (57%) affirmed that online worship is a great liturgical tool. In this sense stipendiary clergy agreed that the online response during the lockdown had been

⁹ S. A. Lawson (2020). Cracked pots: The lived experience of Church of England clergy with responsibility for fragile rural churches. *Rural Theology*, 18, 27-36.

well placed. However, stipendiary clergy seemed more cautious and less sanguine about the longer-term future for online worship: one in five stipendiary clergy regarded online worship as the way ahead for the next generation (20%), and one in four stipendiary clergy regarded the virtual church as being more effective than the inherited offline church (24%). Generally, retired clergy embraced online worship more cautiously. While 57% of stipendiary clergy agreed that online worship is a great liturgical tool, the proportion fell to 46% among retired clergy. While 20% of stipendiary clergy regarded online worship as the way ahead for the next generation, the proportion fell to 11% among retired clergy. While 24% of stipendiary clergy regarded virtual church as being more effective than the inherited offline church, the proportion fell to 14% among retired clergy.

Three items were designed to focus attention on virtual communication. Not only did the lockdown open up the challenge for online worship, but it also opened up the need to explore more intentional approaches to virtual forms of communication and pastoral care. Five in ten stipendiary clergy evaluated social media as a great evangelistic tool (51%) and four in ten evaluated social media as a good pastoral tool (43%). Retired clergy shared the evaluation of the stipendiary clergy regarding the pastoral effectiveness of social media, but not regarding the evangelistic effectiveness of social media. Thus, 43% of stipendiary clergy and 41% of retired clergy evaluated social media as a good pastoral tool. However, while 51% of stipendiary clergy considered social media as a great evangelistic tool, the proportion fell to 34% among retired clergy.

Three items were designed to explore whether clergy anticipated a return to an offline future. The data showed that retired clergy were slightly more sanguine than stipendiary clergy about such a future, but hopes regarding a return to the old normal were low among both groups. Just 4% of stipendiary clergy and 13% of retired clergy took the view that church life would soon return to normal. Around half of stipendiary clergy (52%) believed

that, when such a return did take place, we would appreciate better church as it normally is. For retired clergy the proportion was higher at 61%. What was, however, clearly shared by the great majority of clergy in both categories (90% of stipendiary clergy and 91% of retired clergy) was the conviction that there really would be an offline future for the post Covid-19 Church, when face-to-face contact would be valued even more than it was before.

Conclusion

Four main conclusions emerge from these data. The first conclusion is that ministry-active retired clergy were as willing and eager as the stipendiary clergy to endorse the digital future that the Church embraced to meet the liturgical and pastoral needs of the lockdown and lockup. For example, 81% of retired clergy and 81% of stipendiary clergy agreed that the lockdown has helped the church move into the digital age; and 66% of retired clergy and 60% of stipendiary clergy agreed that it has been good to see clergy broadcast services from their homes. Such statistics do not support the view of retired clergy being out of date and unwilling to join the digital age.

The second conclusion is that ministry-active retired clergy were less sanguine than stipendiary clergy to see this enforced lockup and trajectory into the digital age as solving a bigger question for the Church and as demonstrating the best solution for the future. For example, 11% of retired clergy commended online worship as the way ahead for the next generation, compared with 20% of stipendiary clergy; 34% of retired clergy commended social media as a great evangelistic tool, compared with 51% of stipendiary clergy.

The third conclusion is that ministry-active retired clergy attached greater significance and importance to churches. For example, only 36% of retired clergy argued that closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do, compared with 61% of stipendiary clergy. At the same time, 71% of retired clergy argued that church buildings are central to our witness in the community, compared with 61% of stipendiary clergy.

The fourth conclusion is that ministry-active retired clergy sustained greater optimism for the future in the face of the impact of Covid-19. For example, only 19% of retired clergy concluded that financial giving to the church would decline after the pandemic, compared with 39% of stipendiary clergy. At the same time, 61% of retired clergy concluded that the lockdown would make us appreciate better church as it normally is, compared with 52% of stipendiary clergy.

The way in which the components within the different perspective of ministry-active retired clergy constellate may help to illuminate what differentiates and sets apart the view of retired clergy. These components have to do with the way in which parish communities (local place) and parish churches (sacred space) stand at the heart of their view of Anglican identity and the call to Anglican ministry. Here are fundamental issues of theology and ecclesiology. Perhaps it may be the memory of these strands from the roots of the Anglican tradition into which they had been ordained that cause ministry-active retired clergy to reflect distinctively on the Church of England's response to Covid-19. Perhaps, too, it is quite understandable why some in the Church of England may applaud the voice of ministry-active retired clergy as reflecting radical wisdom, calling the Church back to its roots, and why others may see the voice of ministry-active retired clergy as anachronistic nostalgia and naïve reluctance to accept the wisdom of the present age.