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Faith in lockdown: Experiences of rural Church of England clergy and laity during the
Covid-19 pandemic

Andrew Village*

York St John University, England, UK

Leslie J. Francis

University of Warwick, England, UK

Author note:

*Corresponding author:

Andrew Village

York St John University

Lord Mayor's Walk

YORK

YO31 7EX

Email: a.village@yorks.j.ac.uk

Abstract

An online survey examined the experiences of clergy and lay people in the Church of England during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic from May to July 2020. Comparison of 1,001 people who received ministry in rural areas with 1,823 who received ministry elsewhere suggested fairly similar experiences in terms of accessing online worship and support from their churches. Rural worshippers were slightly less likely to access worship from their own churches. Comparison of 274 rural stipendiary parochial clergy with 507 counterparts ministering elsewhere suggested their churches were equally busy in offering online worship. Rural clergy offered more Services of the Word, and fewer communions, which may have reflected the greater prevalence of Anglo-catholics in urban areas. Although the support and care offered by clergy was similar in both sorts of area, rural clergy seemed better placed to serve their local communities and to offer occasional offices. They felt better supported by the public, the national church, and funeral directors than did clergy in towns and cities.

Keywords

Church of England; covid-19; ministry; online worship; pastoral support; survey

Introduction

The UK Government imposed a lockdown in response to the Covid-19 virus outbreak on 23 March 2020. On the following day, the Church of England closed all its churches completely, including for private prayer. This was applied to clergy as well as to lay people. The online *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey was constructed in April after consultation with bishops, clergy, and lay people. The aim was to document the experience of churchgoers, clergy and lay, as they adjusted to delivering and receiving ministry in new ways. We used previous experience of surveys in the *Church Times* to launch it through that newspaper on 8 May. We also asked bishops and clergy to promote it directly, and other denominations also joined in. The survey closed on 23 July 2020, by which time there over 7,000 replies.

This paper reports on responses from the Church of England in order to document the experiences of people in rural areas and to compare these with those of people living in towns or cities. The Church of England has long recognised that rural or urban extremes may offer

particular challenges and opportunities for ministry, highlighted first in *Faith in the City* (Church of England, 1985) and later *Faith in the Countryside* (Church of England, 1990). Although these reports highlight some significant differences, it is easy sometimes to overestimate these. The 2013 *Church Times* survey asked a wide range of questions about belief and attitudes, and the responses from those in rural areas were generally similar to those from elsewhere (Village, 2018). Covid-19 might also have had a levelling effect by removing the geography of the parish and replacing it with the geography of the internet. A first step is to see if people in rural areas gave and received ministry in similar patterns to those in other parts of England.

Method

The survey was delivered online through the Qualtrics platform. Respondents were asked for their location, with four possible responses: ‘Rural’, ‘Town’, ‘Suburb’, and ‘Inner city’. For the purposes of this paper this was recoded to ‘Rural’ and ‘Elsewhere’.

The experience of people giving ministry is different from the experience of people receiving it. The question ‘Have you been acting in a ministry capacity (ordained or lay) during the lockdown?’ was used to direct respondents to separate sets of questions relevant to these two types of experience. Some people may have both offered and received ministry, but we did not want them to have to complete both sets of questions. We did not want to be too specific about what a ‘ministry capacity’ might be because we might otherwise have missed important work done by those who are neither ordained nor licensed to a particular ministry. It allowed lay ministers, who may have been busy during the lockdown, to share their experiences. The downside was that some people who offered ministry in a limited way (such as reading the Bible or doing intercessions for an online service) may have gone down the ‘giving ministry route’ and then struggled to relate to questions about wider service provision. For this reason, we limited the analysis of ‘giving ministry’ to stipendiary parish clergy, who were in the best position to know what their churches had been doing during the lockdown.

Sample profiles

The profile of those giving and receiving ministry in different locations are shown in Table 1. Overall, there was a slightly higher proportion of women in rural areas, both among the ministers and others. The disparity in age was more apparent, with rural areas having an older age profile than that of other areas. As you would expect, the vast majority of those receiving

ministry in all areas were not ordained. Among those offering ministry, around 60% were ordained, but this figure was slightly higher for those in rural areas (62%) compared to elsewhere (57%). There were 279 stipendiary parochial clergy from rural areas (37% of those offering ministry) and 526 from elsewhere (38% of those offering ministry). It seems likely, then that people in rural areas were equally likely to receive ministry from a full-time ordained person as were people in towns or cities.

[Table 1 about here]

Receiving ministry

Accessing online worship

Of the 2,824 people who received rather than gave ministry in the lockdown, 92% accessed services online, a figure that was similar for those in rural areas (90%) and elsewhere (92%). This high figure undoubtedly reflects the fact that this was an online survey: accessing the experiences of those who were free from the entanglements of the virtual world will require different sorts of survey work.

Those who did access online worship used a variety of sources (Table 2). By far the most frequently used was worship from a person's own church. Nearly everyone seemed to be able to see or hear their ministers and/or some fellow congregants worshipping, even in rural areas. Those from rural areas were slightly less likely to have accessed services from their own church or another church in the denomination.

[Table 2 about here]

Contact with ministers and receiving support

We asked about contacts people had had with clergy and/or lay ministers, and over 80% in both rural and other areas reported some contact (Table 3). For many this was ministers 'just checking', which suggests a high level of activity by ministers keeping an eye on people. Some 40% received pastoral support, and a fifth said they had some sort of practical help. Again, the figures for levels of contact were very similar in rural areas compared with elsewhere and none of the differences in Table 3 were statistically significant.

[Table 3 about here]

Giving ministry

Those who gave ministry included a both clergy and lay people, and some may not have known fully what was happening in their church. To report activity on giving ministry we have confined the following analysis to reports from stipendiary parochial clergy; 274 in rural areas and 507 from elsewhere.

Providing online worship

Clergy from both locations reported high levels of activity in terms of offering online services. In both areas, about three quarters of clergy reported their churches offered online services every Sunday. In rural areas, 26% offered services every weekday, compared with a significantly higher figure of 36% for churches elsewhere. Combining these figures, 23% of rural clergy were offering services everyday of the week, compared with 32% elsewhere. Rural churches seemed more likely to offer Services of the Word on Sundays, but less likely to offer Sunday or weekday communion. In part this may be due to differences in church tradition, with a higher proportion of Anglo-catholics (who generally offered more communion services) in urban areas compared to rural ones.

[Table 4 about here]

Giving care and support

Parish ministry is much more than offering worship, and we wanted to find out how far those who offered ministry were involved in other kinds of work. The pandemic created the need for more practical help (such as delivering food or medicines to those who were sheltering), but also created difficulties in offering pastoral care. The impossibility of visiting patients with the virus in ICU wards, or the severe limitations on funerals, were widely publicised. We asked about various forms of ministry and, in each case, clergy were asked to say what their church had been doing, or tried to do, during the lockdown.

[Table 5 about here]

Most churches had tried to do most of the things listed in Table 5, and it was unusual for them not to be able to if they had tried. Delivering food and medicine were practical tasks that were probably done by parishioners. Support for the vulnerable seemed to have been the main tasks for churches on some or most days. Figures for rural areas were generally similar to those from elsewhere, and there was little evidence that rural clergy were engaged in very different activities or different levels of those activities. The one exception was supporting ‘core members’, where 57% of rural clergy did this most days compared to 66% of clergy

from elsewhere. This might reflect the more eclectic nature of urban congregations, but the trend was not particularly marked and clergy from both groups spent similar amounts of time supporting occasional attenders or the vulnerable.

A second question asked more specifically about how well individuals had felt they could carry out various ministries. They were asked to tick only those things that they had tried to do, and to indicate if they have found it impossible, felt it had been done mostly poorly, or felt it had been done mostly well. Table 6 again shows the results for stipendiary parochial clergy and is sorted according to tasks that rated most often as either impossible or done most poorly. Things near the top of the list were those that involved networking in the wider community, such as working ecumenically or being a spokesperson, or which were requested but not possible, such as weddings. Funerals were low on this list, so despite the restrictions imposed by crematoria on numbers, clergy generally seemed to have managed well.

There were some statistically significant differences between clergy reporting from different locations. Rural clergy found it more difficult to support their congregation (13% versus 8% elsewhere) or offer daily worship (31% versus 26% elsewhere), but less difficult to work with the local community (24% versus 35% elsewhere), to provide support for funerals (11% versus 15% elsewhere), the bereaved (24% versus 26% elsewhere), weddings (42% versus 49% elsewhere), or baptisms (44% versus 52% elsewhere). These differences make sense if rural clergy are more rooted and better networked in the community beyond the regular congregation than are clergy in urban areas.

[Table 6 about here]

Ministers receiving support

A final question for ministers was about the support they received during lockdown. They were asked to indicate if they had no support, some support, or were well supported by a range of people listed in Table 7. They were asked to tick only rows that applied to them, so these were people or places that might have been expected to offer some sort of support for clergy during the lockdown. Again, we focus here on parish clergy, and the table is ordered by those sources that seemed to offer the most support.

Where clergy had others in the household, this was by far the best form of support. Their ministry team (if they had one) and their congregation were the next best sources of support, and funeral directors ranked alongside these in terms of the quality of support when

they were needed. Support from the diocese and bishop was next, with over a third of clergy feeling well supported. The figure was lower for the national Church, and here only about a quarter felt well supported from this source. There was some support from the public and IT experts (perhaps needed more than usual for coping with online service production), but levels of support were lower, even though about the same numbers expected support from these sources. Fewer clergy expected support from hospitals, presumably because many were unable to make regular pastoral visits as they might in normal times.

Levels of support similar for clergy from rural and other areas when it came to sources such as household, ministry team, congregation, diocese and bishops. Rural clergy felt better supported by the public and by the church nationally than did clergy from elsewhere. The difference in public support might reflect a generally higher profile of rural clergy in their communities compared to clergy in urban areas. Clergy in rural areas also felt significantly better supported by funeral directors, perhaps because they often deal with a more limited number of firms and have a chance to build stronger relationships.

[Table 7 about here]

Conclusions

This paper examined the reports from those who received or offered Church of England ministry during the Covid-19 lockdown to assess how far the experience of people in rural areas differed from those from elsewhere. In terms of receiving ministry, the data suggest a fairly similar experience for people in both areas, with similar patterns of accessing online services and having contact and support from ministers. Rural churchgoers were slightly less likely to access online worship from their own church, but whether this reflected a lower availability or a reluctance to use what was offered is hard to tell.

Overall, the picture that emerges from those who gave ministry is that churches were offering a wide range of support during the lockdown, and that most had found ways of maintaining ministry despite the restrictions. The most difficult tasks were either related to specific restrictions (for example on weddings or baptism) or perhaps things that tend not to be done very often anyway (such as being a spokesperson, working ecumenically, outreach and mission). In many areas, the experience of rural and other clergy seemed to be fairly similar, especially in terms of what their churches were offering by way of worship and trying to do in other areas of ministry. Rural churches seemed to offer more Services of the

Word and fewer communion services, but this may have reflected the distribution of Anglo-catholic clergy, who made up a smaller proportion of rural clergy than those from elsewhere.

There was some significant difference in clergy ministry and sense of support between locations. Rural clergy may have spent less time supporting their core members than did clergy from elsewhere, perhaps because they were more able to work beyond their congregations. They seemed to be more successful in lockdown ministry that required them to work with the community and especially in supporting those who were looking for the occasional offices. The greater rootedness and prominence of rural clergy in their local communities might explain why they felt more support from the public and funeral directors.

These results suggest we should be cautious in assuming the lockdown was experienced very differently in the countryside from elsewhere, but there is some evidence that the particular context of rural ministry may have resulted in better outcomes in terms of relationships with those beyond the church congregation. Levels of work may have been similar, but hard to tell from these data. Further analyses and data collection may be needed to see if rural clergy or lay people were more or less stressed by the lockdown.

References

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Table 1 Profiles of those receiving and giving ministry during lockdown from rural and other areas

		Received ministry		Gave ministry	
		Rural	Other	Rural	Other
Number:		1001	1823	755	1401
		%	%	%	%
Sex	Male	33	38	41	46
	Female	67	62	59	54
Age	< 50	10	24	17	34
	50-69	45	46	63	53
	70+	45	31	20	14
Ordained	No	94	93	38	43
	Yes	6	7	62	57

Table 2 Sources of online worship for those receiving ministry in rural and other areas during the lockdown

	Rural	Elsewhere
Number:	904	1678
	%	%
Own church	79	83**
Another church in the CoE	40	48***
Church from another denomination	17	19
Diocesan service	24	21
CoE nationally	15	19*
A broadcaster	31	31
Individuals	4	6*
Other	6	6

Note. Differences between Rural and Elsewhere tested by Chi-squared analysis: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; otherwise not significant.

Table 3 Contact with clergy and/or lay ministers for those receiving ministry in rural and other areas during the lockdown

	Rural	Elsewhere
Number:	852	1482
	%	%
Just checking	74	77
Pastoral support	41	42
Practical help	21	20
Prayer	24	25
Other support	14	17
At least one of the above	84	86

Note. For statistical explanation, see Table 2.

Table 4 Frequencies of various sorts of Sunday and weekly services reported by stipendiary clergy in rural and other areas during the lockdown

	Rural			Elsewhere		
Number:	274			507		
Sundays:	No	Some	Every	No	Some	Every
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Service of Word	27	15	58	42	10	48***
HC (Celebrant only)	57	18	25	54	13	32*
HC (People at home)	83	8	8	85	9	6
Weekdays:	No	Some	Every	No	Some	Every
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Morning Prayer	50	30	20	52	24	24
Evening Prayer	69	22	9	68	18	14*
Weekday HC	89	10	2	82	12	6**

Note. For statistical explanation see Table 2.

Table 5 Care and support offered by churches during the lockdown as reported by stipendiary parochial clergy in rural and other areas during the lockdown

Category of support:	Number:	Rural				Other			
		274				507			
		Not tried	TNP	Some days	Most days	Not tried	TNP	Some days	Most days
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Praying FOR people		5	0	11	84	7	0	11	82
Supporting core members		5	0	38	57	7	0	28	66*
Supporting the elderly or lonely		6	0	37	58	7	0	29	64
Supporting occasional attenders		6	4	65	25	8	5	65	23
Praying WITH people		8	10	53	29	9	9	45	38
Supporting the bereaved		7	0	64	29	8	2	61	29
Supporting the sick		8	6	65	22	10	6	58	27
Delivering food		12	20	50	19	11	16	54	19
Supporting other clergy		9	11	64	16	11	14	58	17
Delivering medicine		16	20	48	16	16	24	47	13

Note. TNP= Tried, not possible. Sorted by frequency of being done on most days in the overall data. For statistical explanation, see Table 2.

Table 6 Difficulty of doing tasks during lockdown as reported by stipendiary parochial clergy in rural and other areas during the lockdown

Task	Number:	Rural			Other		
		274			507		
		NT	DIFF	MW	NT	DIFF	MW
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Working with other denominations		29	49	22	22	52	26***
Baptisms		25	44	31	28	52	20**
Weddings		18	42	41	25	49	26***
Being a spokesperson		36	38	26	34	45	22
Outreach and mission		14	35	51	15	39	46
Eucharistic ministry		25	39	36	24	35	42
Supporting fellowship groups		28	38	34	23	36	42
Receiving help		20	34	46	18	31	51
Supporting the sick or dying		14	32	55	16	28	56
Working with the local community		12	24	64	14	35	51**
Daily worship		26	31	43	20	26	54*
Your own spiritual life		7	29	64	9	26	64
Supporting the bereaved		10	24	66	14	26	60*
Your own theological reflection		9	24	67	10	26	65
Supporting work colleagues		15	19	66	13	20	68
Funerals		9	11	80	14	15	71**
Supporting your congregation		6	13	81	7	8	84*
Offering prayer / spiritual support		6	11	82	8	10	81
Holy Week & Easter services		10	10	80	10	11	79

Note. ‘NT= Not tried; DIFF = Difficult (the proportion that tried this and either found it was not possible or felt it was done mostly poorly); MW = Mostly done well. Based on reports from stipendiary parochial clergy, ordered by proportion finding the task difficult. For statistical explanation, see Table 2.

Table 7 Sources of support for stipendiary parochial clergy during the lockdown

Source	Rural				Other			
	N	Support:			N	Support:		
		No	Some	Well		No	Some	Well
		%	%	%		%	%	%
Household	228	2	16	82	351	3	14	83
Ministry team	228	9	32	60	424	6	37	58
Congregation	259	5	49	45	407	5	44	51
Funeral directors	245	6	38	57	423	21	35	44***
Bishop etc.	258	11	47	42	463	16	47	37
Diocese etc.	261	7	56	37	470	10	55	35
Public	242	20	48	32	439	32	43	25**
church nationally	255	18	56	26	462	28	49	23*
IT experts	243	32	43	26	435	27	40	32
Hospitals / medical	159	49	28	23	335	42	38	20

Note. N = number expecting support from this source. ‘No = support expected but not received; Some = some support received; Well = well supported from this source. Based on reports from stipendiary parochial clergy, ordered by how well supported. For statistical explanation, see Table 2.