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Impact of COVID 19 on fragile churches: Is the rural situation really different?

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Abstract

In a series of earlier papers in *Rural Theology*, drawing on qualitative research, Anne Lawson has advanced and documented the fragile rural church thesis. The present study draws on data from 745 full-time parochial clergy serving in the Church of England who responded to the *Coronavirus, Church and You Survey* to test two objections to Lawson's thesis. The first objection is that the qualitative research has not demonstrated the *extent* of the fragile church thesis among rural clergy. The new data show that one in three rural clergy endorse the thesis. The second objection is that the qualitative research has not demonstrated that the thesis is *specific* to rural ministry. The new data show that, although the fragile church thesis is not limited to rural ministry, it is more in evidence within rural areas.

Keywords: fragile churches, rural churches, Covid 19, empirical theology

Introduction

Empirical theology

The practice of empirical theology is deeply rooted in Jesus' invitation to his followers to go to observe the sower at work (see Francis & Village, 2015). Watching the sower of good seed at work in the broad light of day, they were invited to note the predictable patterns that occurred, distinguishing four kinds of soil. Things worked differently on the path where the birds ate the seed, on the stony ground where there was a lack of moisture, on the ground where the thistles flourished, and on the good soil. Having observed and categorised, they were invited to count the yield on the good soil and even to note the variation there between thirty fold, sixty fold, and a hundred fold. Observing the sower by day clearly involved both qualitative and quantitative techniques (see Mark 4: 3-9; Matthew 13, 3-9). Building on the foundations he found in Mark, Matthew added a second narrative about the evil sower sowing weeds by night (Matthew 13: 24-30); but this time the empirical theologians were caught off guard and had failed to observe the sower in action.

When Covid 19 struck, the work of the sower suddenly changed. The sower's natural habitat (the parish churches) were securely locked. The sower's natural *modus operandi* (meeting people face to face) was branded insecure and dangerous. Suddenly the new *modus operandi* emerged in the digital world of online delivery. As empirical theologians we recognised that amid such sudden and dramatic change there was much to observe and much to learn. As empirical theologians we designed a nation-wide survey and did so in dialogue with the *Church Times* and with a number of supportive dioceses. As empirical theologians we recalled the good experience of working with the 2001 *Church Times* survey (see Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005; Village & Francis, 2009) and the 2013 *Church Times* survey (see Village, 2018). The online *Coronavirus, Church and You Survey* offered diverging paths for church leaders and for church participants.

Designing a survey

Designing a survey of this scope allowed us to formulate a number of hypotheses that could be tested from the same set of data, and relevant to different constituencies. The major theme emerging from recent issues of *Rural Theology* is the theme of fragile rural church that is being shaped in a sequence of studies by Anne Lawson (2018, 2019, 2020). In her first study, Lawson (2018) employed three focus groups, with each group comprising three Church of England clergy holding responsibility for three or four rural churches in multi-church groups, all serving within one diocese. The aim for these focus groups was to replicate and to test the earlier research reported by Brewster (2007, 2012) into the sources of stress experienced by rural clergy engaged in multi-church ministry. The data gathered from this new study demonstrated that the stressors identified by Brewster (2007) remained largely visible, and that the categories used to classify these stressors by Brewster (2012) remained largely useful. At the same time, however, Lawson (2018) noted the emergence of a further group of stressors that she categorised as relating to fragile rural churches. At this stage Lawson (2018) spoke of nine marks which could be used to characterise fragile rural churches.

In her second study, Lawson (2019, 2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with nine clergy from a different diocese, this time with responsibility for between four and 13 churches arranged in multi-church groups, situated within a variety of communities ranging from tiny sparse rural communities to a small market town and large villages which acted as a service hub for smaller surrounding communities. As an outcome from these interviews, Lawson (2019) proposed the identification of what she described as the five major marks of fragile rural churches. These five major marks she styled: financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources; inability to replace churchwardens and other officers and volunteers, or fear of being unable to do so; lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to

work with them; and lack of clergy time and the relentless nature of keeping going; and tiny congregations consisting of single figures with a rising age profile of seventy-five plus.

The essence of the fragility underpinning these five major marks of fragile rural churches concerned resources, or rather the lack of resources. Fragile rural churches were, according to Anne Lawson's thesis, running out of resources, running out of financial resources and running out of human resources. It is crucial to note, however, that Anne Lawson's analysis was not one that suggested that the rural church was also running out of hope. From her interviews with rural clergy, Anne Lawson (2020) concluded that 'the rural church is by no means without hope, even where it is small and "fragile"' (p. 27). This note of clear hope is also reinforced by two experienced rural priests who have responded to Anne Lawson's research. In his response 'The marks of the fragile rural church', Wilson (2019) concluded that 'While I recognise fragility in what I observe, I also see signs of resilience and an enduring faith in the countryside' (p. 121). In his response 'Cherishing the fragile rural church', Mynors (2019) concluded that 'generally a more positive approach is appropriate rather than merely concern with survival. Closure should usually be unthinkable' (p. 114).

Testing the fragile rural church thesis

Anne Lawson has been faithful to the dominical invitation to go and to observe the sower at work in rural benefices, and in doing so she has been faithful to the rigours of qualitative research methods. However, within the discipline of scientific discourse Anne Lawson's thesis is subject to two challenges from colleagues working within quantitative research traditions. The first challenge is properly contained within the domain of studying rural clergy. While Anne Lawson has clearly identified these anxieties regarding the fragility of rural churches among the rural clergy whom she interviewed, can we really assume that such anxieties are widespread? A quantitative survey among rural clergy could contribute to this debate. While Anne Lawson has clearly identified these anxieties regarding fragile

churches among rural clergy, can we really assume that such anxieties are really distinctive of rural clergy, rather than shared among clergy more widely? A quantitative survey comparing the responses of rural clergy with clergy serving in other kinds of areas could contribute to this debate.

In order to test the fragile rural church thesis against these two objections to Anne Lawson's thesis, we shaped two specific items to be included in the *Coronavirus, Church and You Survey*. These items were placed within a series of items designed to assess the impact of Covid 19 on church life:

- Our church building will not be financially viable.
- Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace.

Method

Procedure

During April 2020 an online survey was developed using the Qualtrics platform. A link to the survey was distributed through the *Church Times* (both online and paper versions) from 8 May 2020. The link was also distributed through a number of participating Church of England dioceses. The survey was closed on 23 July 2020, by which time there were over 7,000 responses.

Measures

There were two measures included in the survey of specific relevance to the present enquiry.

Geographical location was explored by the question, 'Which of these best describe the area in which you live?' followed by the four options: rural, town, suburban, and inner city.

Impact of Covid 19 was explored by a set of 15 Likert-type items inviting participants to assess 'how the crisis might affect the Church in the long term'. This section included the

two items, 'Our church building will not be financially viable' and 'Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace'. Each item was rated on a three-point scale: disagree (1), not certain (2), and agree (3), which was recoded into a binary scale of 'agree' versus 'not agree'.

Analysis

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by 745 Church of England clergy who identified as being engaged in full-time parochial ministry: 265 located in rural parishes, 211 in town parishes, 182 in suburban parishes, and 87 in inner city parishes.

Results

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 presents the responses of the four groups of full-time stipendiary parochial clergy to the two items designed to test the fragile church thesis according to the geographical location of their parishes. These data enable the two research questions posed by the present study to be addressed in turn.

Discussion

The first research question posed for quantitative research by Anne Lawson's formulation of the fragile church thesis on the basis of her qualitative research concerned establishing the extent of anxiety among rural clergy regarding the impact of Covid 19 on the fragility of rural churches. The survey specifically explored two markers of the fragile church. The data show that one in three clergy serving rural parishes fear that their church buildings will not be financially viable as they attempt to rebuild after Covid 19 (34%). The data also show nearly one in three clergy serving rural parishes fear that key lay people will step down and will be difficult to replace as a consequence of Covid 19 (29%). That the experience of one in three rural clergy corroborate Anne Lawson's thesis may be a matter of considerable concern the rural dioceses.

The second research question posed for quantitative research by Anne Lawson's formulation of the fragile church thesis on the basis of qualitative research among rural clergy concerned establishing whether this experience was in any way distinctive of rural clergy, or more generalised within other geographical locations. The data show that anxiety among clergy regarding the impact of Covid 19 on the fragility of their churches is by no means restricted to clergy serving in rural parishes; but the data show that the levels of anxiety are considerably higher among rural clergy. Differences between rural clergy and the rest of the sample were tested using Chi-squared analysis and shown to be statistically significant at $p < .001$ for church buildings and $p < .05$ for key workers. The fear that their church buildings will not be financially viable after Covid 19 is shared by 20% of clergy serving town parishes, 18% of clergy serving suburban parishes, and 24% of clergy serving inner city parishes. The fear that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace is shared by 24% of clergy serving town parishes, 23% of clergy serving suburban parishes, and 20% of clergy serving inner city parishes. That at least one in five clergy serving in non-rural parishes also recognises two of the marks of the fragile church may be of no comfort to the rural church. Yet this discovery may suggest that Anne Lawson's thesis is of wider and more general relevance to Church of England dioceses. A problem that has been recognised and documented by the experience of rural clergy that is also more widely endemic throughout the Church of England may be worth wider recognition and fuller consideration.

The problem of fragile rural churches as currently formulated is a problem rooted in two resource issues: financial resources and human resources. Neither of these issues is trivial, but there are important theological and ecclesial issues at stake as well. Theological and ecclesial issues may be worth serious consideration by the Church of England alongside the more immediate pressures of financial resources and human resources.

The theological and ecclesial issues are best framed within the context of the current church growth agenda that stands at the heart of the allocation of financial and human resources. What is meant by growth? How is growth assessed? And what is growth for? The classic theological and sociological distinction between Church and Sect may help to sharpen the focus (see Swatos, 1976). Currently within the Church of England both streams of thought, linked to church and linked to sect, remain visible.

In sociological perspective, the strategy of the Sect is to establish a network of individuals called into separation from the host community in which they are located. The call is into the Ark of Salvation that survives the destruction of the wicked. The strategy of the Church is to remain embedded within the host community and to work toward transformation from within.

In theological perspective, the Sect and the Church hold fundamentally different understandings of God and of the *Missio Dei*. Fundamentally different emphases are placed on the weight given to doctrines of creation, fall, redemption, and sanctification. Such emphases involve serious consideration of the nature of God, the divine intention for creation, the place of human beings within the divine economy, and the eschatological intentions for God's salvific work through the ministry and mission of the Church in today's world. Such large theological issues were nicely captured within Bishop David Walker's serious discussion of 'how people engage with God today and how the church can help' in this book *God's believers* (Walker, 2017).

The experience of Covid 19 has hastened the urgency with which the Church of England needs to face these theological issues. Now may seem to be the time to engineer a second Reformation in England's green and pleasant land. At the last Reformation the great Abbeys were destroyed and today children can gaze on those ancient ruins and ask questions about the worldview such ruins recall. But at the last Reformation the local churches

remained and during the past five hundred years have nurtured a variety of responses. At times these local churches have thrived and at times they have struggled. Throughout that period Sects have sprung up alongside the churches. The stability and longevity of these Sects is well documented by the closed chapels that still litter the landscape (Francis, 1996).

The new post Covid 19 Reformation may well decide that the time has come to abandon the parish churches and to find a Sectarian future. This should offer a good short-term solution. What is so unfortunate, however, is that the lessons of history remind us that while the Church survives and endlessly reinvents itself, the Sect is relatively short-lived and vanishes with the morning mist.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to draw on data from the *Coronavirus, Church and You Survey* to test the strength of Anne Lawson's fragile rural church thesis. Two objections were raised from the perspective of quantitative research methods to Anne Lawson's fragile rural church thesis grounded in qualitative methods.

The first objection concerned the generalisability of Lawson's findings without more secure quantitative evidence regarding just how widespread the anxiety that she noted is among rural clergy. New data from the current survey has indicated that one in three stipendiary clergy serving in rural ministry share the anxieties identified by Anne Lawson's research. The fragile rural church thesis is to be taken seriously.

The second objection concerned the failure of Anne Lawson's methods to demonstrate that the fragile church thesis was really specific to the rural environment. New data from the current survey builds on Anne Lawson's qualitative work in two ways in response to this second objection. The new data demonstrate that the fragile church thesis is not limited to the rural environment, but is more in evidence in the rural environment.

Reflection on these new findings recognises that the evidence needs to be taken seriously. However, reflection also cautions against pre-emptive action before weighing fully the issues raised by sociological and by theological enquiry.

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Table 1

Assessing the impact of Covid 19 by location

| | Rural % | Town % | Sub % | Inner % |
|--|------------|-----------|----------|------------|
| Our church buildings will not be financially viable | 34 | 20 | 18 | 24 |
| Key laypeople will step down and be difficult to replace | 29 | 24 | 23 | 20 |