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The pandemic and the feminisation of the Church? How male and female churchgoers  
experienced the Church of England's response to Covid-19

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**Abstract**

The Church of England responded quickly and decisively to the Government's lockdown of the nation on 23 March 2020 by a total lock-up of all its churches and a swift move to a new online presence. Drawing on data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* provided by 1,642 female and 854 male churchgoing lay Anglicans in England, the present analyses tested the thesis that the response of the Church of England would be assessed more favourably by women than by men. The data found that men evaluated the national leadership less favourably, were more critical of the policy to lock-up churches, and were less positive about the online future. These findings are read against the background of a Church in which men are already marginalised and may have become more so as a consequence of the pandemic.

*Keywords:* Covid-19, Church of England, survey, women, men

## Introduction

### Exploring sex differences in church attendance

Casual observation may suggest that church congregations tend to comprise more women than men, not just across the Church of England, but across other denominations as well. While most churches keep a clear record of how many people attend each service, generally by taking a head count, finer-grained data are generally not available, concerning factors like the ratio between men and women, age profile, and frequency of attendance (see, for example, Church of England, 2020). In an initial study designed to provide a finer-grained account of the composition of church congregations in rural England, Francis (1996) employed the method of participant observation. Working with a range of ministry training providers, groups of ordinands (ranging in number from 10 to 55) organised a schedule to visit every service within a given geographical area on a given Sunday. Over a period of time services were visited in 189 churches. Overall there were roughly two women in the congregations for every one man.

A more recent, more detailed and larger study has been reported by Francis and Lankshear (2021) employing the method of congregation surveys. Working in close collaboration with the Anglican Diocese of Southwark, every church within the three Episcopal Areas of the Diocese was invited to participate in the *Signs of Growth Survey*: Woolwich in 2009, Kingston in 2010, and Croydon in 2012. Overall 348 of the 360 churches in the Diocese participated and a total of 31,521 questionnaires were completed. Among the participants aged 20 and over, 65% were female in *each* of the three Episcopal Areas. What is remarkable is that this same proportion emerges from three quite different geographical areas in which some other aspects of the demographic profile of the congregations showed significant variation. For example, in terms of ethnicity, 62% were white in Woolwich, 76% in Kingston, and 86% in Croydon; in terms of marital status, 20% were single in Woolwich,

19% in Kingston, and 12% in Croydon; and in terms of age, 21% were aged 70 or over in Woolwich, 23% in Kingston, and 31% in Croydon.

Finding more women in church congregations is consistent with the broader scientific evidence that women report more signs of religiosity than men. For example, in their classic review of empirical research in the social psychology of religion, Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975) concluded that:

The difference between men and women in their religious behaviour and beliefs are considerable... This is one of the most important statistical comparisons made in this book. (p. 71)

Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi's assessment has been reaffirmed by Francis (1997), by Francis and Penny (2014), and by Saraglou (2021, p. 24).

The weighting of church congregations in general, and of Anglican congregations in particular, in the favour of women is not simply a recent phenomenon. In her essay 'The feminisation of nineteenth century Anglicanism', Mumm (2017) drew attention to the complex and multi-faceted nature of the notion of feminisation. Feminisation is not just a matter of women outnumbering men in congregations. Mumm (2017) draws particular attention to the influence of the Anglo-Catholic movement on the character of Anglicanism, and to the allegations voiced at the time that through his movement Anglicanism was becoming infiltrated by feminine modes of thought, practices, and preferences. The increasing elaboration of church decoration, ornate rituals, and musical tastes were all blamed for driving away 'manly men' from a religion that tended to be sentimental rather than intellectual, and emotional rather than rational (see Hilliard, 1982). At the same time, celebrated leaders of the Anglo-Catholic movement were identified as displaying feminine characteristics (Faber, 1942) and shaping a religion attracting effete men and alienating masculine men. Mumm (2017) also draws attention to the movement of muscular Christianity

as a reaction to the feminisation of the Church. Muscular Christianity set out to attract men by emphasising the ‘masculine’ virtues of Jesus, of Christian men, and of the Church Militant (see Brown, 2009, pp. 88, 96-98).

Recent theories in the psychology of religion have further illuminated the implications of the feminisation of the Church by drawing attention to the distinctive emphases placed by men and women on evaluating situations and on decision making. One well-established stream within this broader field has drawn on Jungian psychological type theory (Jung, 1971), as developed and operationalised by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Kiersey Temperament Sorter (Kiersey & Bates, 1978), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005; Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2017). Within psychological type theory, the psychological characteristic that most clearly differentiates between men and women is the judging process. The judging process is concerned with the basis of rationality according to which decisions are made, and differentiates between the thinking function (concerned with logic, systems, and justice) and the feeling function (concerned with values, relationships, and harmony). According to the UK population norms, 70% of women and 35% of men display the preference for feeling (Kendall, 1998). A series of congregation studies in the UK and in Australia have demonstrated that men in the congregation are more likely to prefer feeling than men in the population as a whole (see Francis, Robbins, Williams, & Williams, 2007; Francis, Robbins, & Craig, 2011; Robbins & Francis, 2011). At the same time, a series of clergy studies has demonstrated that male clergy are more likely to prefer feeling than men in the population as a whole (see Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley, & Slater, 2007; Burton, Francis, & Robbins, 2010; Francis, Powell, & Robbins, 2012). However, while the preference for feeling is higher among male churchgoers and among male clergy than among men in the general population, the preference for feeling

among male churchgoers and among male clergy is still considerably lower than among female churchgoers and among women in the general population.

Two main conclusions emerge from these findings. The first conclusion is that the judging or evaluative process exercised within church congregations will tend to emphasise harmony, acceptance, and compromise. The second conclusion is that this dominant judging preference is still more likely to be challenged by male churchgoers than by female churchgoers.

### **Exploring differences between men and women in the pews**

The notion of the feminisation of the Church suggests that the minority of men who sit among the majority of women within church congregations may also be feeling less comfortable with and less accepting of the dominant beliefs, attitudes, and values, and culture that characterise church life. Although there is a lack of systematic research consciously examining and comparing the judgements made by male and female churchgoers, such research as there is tends to support the view that significant differences exist between the opinions of men and women in the pews. For example, Francis, Robbins, and Astley (2005) compare the views of 2,428 men and 3,318 women, all committed lay Anglicans who responded to the 2001 *Church Times Survey*, across 15 conceptual areas. According to this study, men were less likely than women to want to engage with group activities designed to develop faith, like discussion groups, bible study groups, or prayer groups. Men were less likely to turn to fellow members of their church when they need help. Men were less likely to be helped in their faith by new forms of services or by new hymns. Men were less likely to have confidence in the leadership given by the General Synod, or given by the Archbishops' Council. Men were more likely to support the disestablishment of the Church of England.

Against this background it is hypothesised that male and female churchgoers may have perceived the response of the Church of England to the Covid-19 pandemic differently.

First, however, it is necessary to provide some context for considering the way in which the Church of England responded to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic**

During the opening days of 2020, Covid-19 took the world by surprise. It became clear that decisive action was needed and decisive action was implemented at short notice. In England the government imposed a lockdown on the nation on 23 March 2020. Going beyond the immediate requirements of the government, on the following day the Church of England imposed a total lock-up on all its churches. Churches were closed completely for religious and liturgical provisions, even for private prayer, and even for the clergy. According to the guidance for churches offered by the Church of England:

Our church buildings are therefore now closed for public worship, private prayer, and all other meetings and activities except for vital community services until further notice. (McGowan, 2020, p. 4)

Churches that pre-Covid were known primarily for offering vital religious services (like holy communion) could now only remain open to offer vital community services (like food banks).

The sudden closure of churches and opportunities for offline services prompted clergy and church leaders to grapple with establishing overnight an online presence and to provide services on a variety of digital platforms. Since church buildings were now closed, this online presence had to be implemented from the domestic space occupied by church leaders. This significant change was exemplified when the Archbishop of Canterbury presided at the Easter morning eucharist for the nation from his kitchen table, when and the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral began to conduct the daily offices from the deanery garden.

The closure of churches and the move to an online future was not met with total enthusiasm by Church of England clergy and churchgoers. In his editorial to *Journal of*



*Anglican Studies*, McGowan (2020) documented some of the disagreement voiced in the church press and on individual websites. McGowan concluded that:

Many worshippers, not just clergy, wanted to be connected with the spaces and places that meant so much to them. Members of the Church were now being offered alternative forms of prayer and worship, via technologies not always familiar or welcome, centred on clergy whose faces which have become personal avatars of worship. Without the context of stone and wood that spoke of a larger reality than personality or family, and reminded them of a past and future beyond the challenging present, this personalised corporate worship as never before. (McGowan, 2020, p. 31)

### **Researching responses to the Covid-19 pandemic**

Recognising that, in the long term, it may be found helpful to the Church to know how the pandemic (and the Church's response to the pandemic) impacted on clergy and church members, we launched the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* during early May 2020 in association with the *Church Times*, building on the successful collaboration experienced in the 2001 *Church Times* survey (see Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005; Village & Francis, 2009), and the 2013 *Church Times* survey (see Village, 2018). Initial analyses of data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* have examined the experiences of rural Church of England clergy and laity during the pandemic (Village & Francis, 2020), tested the impact of the pandemic on the fragile churches thesis through the eyes of clergy and laity (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021), given close attention to the experiences of retired clergy (Francis & Village, 2021a), explored the experiences of older churchgoers (Francis & Village, 2021b), explored attitudes toward church buildings (Village & Francis, in press), explored the balanced affect model of wellbeing (Village & Francis, 2021a), examined the diverging responses of clergy shaped in the Anglo-Catholic tradition and of clergy shaped in the Evangelical tradition (Francis, & Village, under review), and assessed the impact of

feeling supported on the wellbeing of clergy through the pandemic (Village & Francis, 2021b).

The objective of the present paper is to draw on data provided by the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* in order to explore the extent to which male and female churchgoers experienced the Church of England's response to the pandemic in similar or in different ways. More specifically, in light of the literatures discussed above we set out to test the hypothesis that the Church of England's response to the pandemic will have been more acceptable to women than to men. We will test this hypothesis against five core themes explored by the survey that we styled:

- assessing responses of the national Church and local churches to the lockdown;
- assessing the policy to lock-up churches;
- assessing the role of churches in ministry and mission;
- embracing the digital age;
- valuing a virtual future.

## **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 23 July 2020, by which time there were over 7,000 responses.

### **Measure**

The current analysis draws on sections of the survey designed to assess the attitudinal responses toward the scope of the lockdown and leadership, toward closing church buildings,

and toward the emerging virtual church. Each section comprised a set of Likert-type items assessed on a three-point scale: disagree (1), not certain (2), and agree (3).

### **Participants**

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by the 2,496 lay participants (1,642 women and 854 men) who identified as living in England, as Church of England, and as not having been involved in the provision of lay ministry during the pandemic, and who completed all the components of the survey used in the analyses. Of these 2,496 participants, 924 were under the age of sixty, 705 were in their sixties, and 867 were aged seventy or over.

### **Analysis**

The statistical significance of differences in the scores for Likert-type items reported by men and by women was tested using chi-squared analysis on 2 x 2 contingency tables, for which the three-point Likert scale responses were collapsed into two categories differentiating between agreeing and not agreeing.

### **Results and discussion**

- insert table 1 about here -

The first set of three items presented in table 1 was designed to explore the way in which church members evaluated the responses of the national Church and of local churches during the lockdown. The data are clear that men evaluated the responses of both the national Church and of the local churches less favourably than women. More than two fifths of the women (42%) felt that their denomination at the national level had responded well to the crisis, but the proportion dropped to 30% among the men. While 43% of the women felt that their denomination at the national level had done a good job leading us in prayer, the proportion fell to 29% among the men. While 62% of the women felt that the churches in their area had responded well to the crisis, the proportion fell to 48% among the men.

- insert table 2 about here -

The second set of four items presented in table 2 was designed to explore the way in which church members responded to the Church's policy to lock-up churches during the national lockdown. The data are clear that men evaluated the decision to lock-up churches less favourably than women. More than half of the women (52%) agreed that closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do, but the proportion dropped to 40% among the men. While 31% of women considered that their denomination at the national level went too far in closing churches, the proportion rose to 48% among men. While 27% of women considered that churches should stay open whatever the crisis, the proportion rose to 36% among men. While 62% of women considered that clergy should always be allowed into their churches, the proportion rose to 71% among men.

- insert table 3 about here -

The third set of four items was designed to explore how church members evaluated the role of churches within the context of ministry and mission. On this occasion the data are clear that men attributed great importance to church buildings than women. Two thirds of women (67%) agreed that church buildings are central to our witness in the community, but the proportion rose to three quarters of the men (74%). While 23% of women considered that people will lose faith without buildings in which to gather for worship, the proportion rose to 39% among men. While a third of the women (34%) agreed that they need church buildings to express their faith fully, the proportion rose to nearly half among the men (47%). While 33% of the women agreed that the church building is crucial for their identity as a Christian, the proportion rose to 47% among the men.

- insert table 4 about here -

The fourth set of three items presented in table 4 was designed to explore the attitude of church members toward the sudden trajectory into the digital age during the lockdown. The data are clear that men evaluated the move to a digital age less positively than the

women. While a third of the women (35%) considered that forced closure of churches has focused us on proper priorities, the proportion fell to 26% among the men. While 77% of the women considered that the lockdown has helped the church to move into the digital age, the proportion fell to 69% among the men. While 72% of the women agreed that it had been good to see clergy broadcast services from their home, the proportion fell to 59% among the men.

- insert table 5 about here -

The fifth set of four items presented in table 5 was designed to focus attention more closely on how church members evaluated a virtual future. The data are clear that men were less enthusiastic about the virtual future than women. While 63% of women evaluated online worship to be a great liturgical tool, the proportion fell to 49% among the men. While 21% of women considered that online worship is the way ahead for the next generation, the proportion fell to 15% among the men. While 47% of the women evaluated social media as a great pastoral tool, the proportion fell to 34% among the men. While 45% of the women evaluated social media as a great evangelistic tool, the proportion fell to 31% among the men.

### **Conclusion**

The present study set out to compare the responses of male and female churchgoers to the way in which the Church of England responded to the Covid-19 pandemic during the first national lockdown in England initiated by the government on 23 March 2020. The enquiry was set within a theoretical context that conceptualised church congregations as largely shaped by women for women, with the consequent marginalisation of men. Currently, men are in a minority in church congregations, outnumbered by women, two to one. It was hypothesised that women would hold a more positive attitude toward: the responses of the national Church and local churches to the lockdown; the policy to lock-up churches; the role of churches in ministry and mission; embracing the digital age; and valuing a virtual future.

These hypotheses were tested on data provided by 2,496 lay participants within the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* (1,642 women and 854 men) who identified as living in England, as Church of England, and as not having been involved in the provision of lay ministry during the pandemic, and who completed all the components of the survey used in the analyses. Three main conclusions emerged from these data.

First, men evaluated the responses of both the national church and of local churches less favourably than women. Men were less enamoured with the national leadership and with the local churches in their own area. This response may suggest that men will be less likely to wish to re-engage with church-life after the pandemic.

Second, men evaluated the decision to lock-up churches less favourably than women. Men attributed greater importance to churches both for their own faith and for witness in the community. Men were more likely to conclude that people will lose faith without buildings in which to gather for worship. This response may suggest that the policy of total lock-up may have caused greater alienation among men. Having experienced being locked out from their churches, men may after the pandemic be more reluctant to return.

Third, men evaluated the move to the digital age less positively than women. Men were less enthusiastic about the virtual future than women. This response may suggest that during the pandemic men may have been less well resourced by the online ministry and online services provided by local churches or by the national Church. As a consequence men may be more likely to have drifted away from the habit of Sunday worship. Having drifted away they may find that they feel no real need to return.

This reading of the data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* suggests that post-pandemic the Church of England may find itself facing a somewhat greater challenge in fulfilling its vocation for ministry and mission among men.

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Table 1

*Assessing responses of the national Church and local churches during the lockdown*

	Women %	Men %	<i>p</i> <
My denomination at the national level has responded well to the crisis	42	30	.001
My denomination at the national level has done a good job of leading us in prayer	43	29	.001
The churches in my area have responded well to the crisis	62	48	.001

Table 2

*Assessing the policy to lock-up churches*

	Women %	Men %	<i>p</i> <
Closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do	52	40	.001
My denomination at the national level went too far in closing churches	31	48	.001
Clergy should always be allowed into their churches	62	71	.001
Churches should stay open whatever the crisis	27	36	.001

Table 3

*Assessing the role of churches in ministry and mission*

	Women %	Men %	<i>p</i> <
Church buildings are central to our witness in the community	67	74	.01
Many people will lose faith without buildings in which to gather for worship	23	39	.001
I need the church building to express my faith fully	34	47	.001
The local church building is crucial for my identity as a Christian	33	44	.001

Table 4

*Embracing the digital age*

	Women %	Men %	<i>p</i> <
Forced closure of churches has focused us on proper priorities	35	26	.001
The lockdown has helped the church to move into the digital age	77	69	.001
It has been good to see clergy broadcast services from their homes	72	59	.001

Table 5

*Valuing a virtual future*

	Women %	Men %	<i>p</i> <
Online worship is a great liturgical tool	63	49	.001
Online worship is the way ahead for the next generation	21	15	.001
Social media is a great pastoral tool	47	34	.001
Social media is a great evangelistic tool	45	31	.001