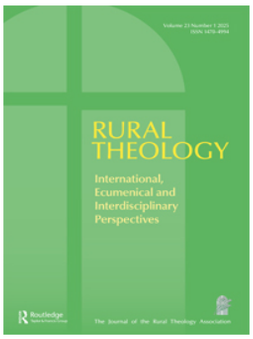

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The Fragile Rural Church Hypothesis Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Taking two marks of the fragile church as financial anxiety over maintaining the building and human resource anxiety over replacing key lay leaders, two surveys conducted during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 confirmed higher anxiety among lay people and clergy in rural areas compared with those in other areas. New data from the *Church 2024* survey demonstrated that this difference still pertained. In 2024 25% of rural clergy and 17% of rural lay people concluded that their church building is no longer financially viable. In 2024 87% of rural clergy and 58% of rural lay people concluded that key lay people are proving difficult to replace. The vision for a rejuvenating lay-led future needs to be read against this statistical background.

KEYWORDS

Fragile churches; Rural churches; anglican churches; Empirical theology; Church 2024 survey; Lay leaders

Introduction

The fragile rural church hypothesis has its roots in two qualitative studies conducted by Lawson (2018, 2019). The first of these studies analysed data from three focus groups conducted among clergy serving in rural ministry in one Church of England diocese. The second study analysed data from nine semi-structured interviews conducted among clergy serving in rural ministry in another diocese. Lawson's conceptualisation of fragile churches identified five major marks: financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources; difficulty in replacing volunteers including churchwardens and other officers, or anxiety that this will be the case; the absence of children and volunteers equipped to work with them; lack of energy and time among clergy to provide new things; and unsustainable aging congregations. Drawing these two studies together, Lawson (2020) concluded that, although the fragile rural church hypothesis needed to be taken seriously, there remained other encouraging signs of hope and sustainability among rural churches.

The strength of Lawson's qualitative research resides in the depth and richness of the narrative. Building on this strength, the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey launched on 8 May 2020 in collaboration with the *Church Times* provided an opportunity to test the fragile rural church hypothesis with quantitative data. These quantitative data addressed

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three specific questions: the extent to which rural clergy recognised the phenomenon; the extent to which the recognition of the phenomenon in the rural church differed from the observation of clergy serving in other environments; and the extent to which the perception of clergy was shared by lay people. To address these three questions the survey shaped two items focusing on two of Lawson's five marks. These two items were: Our church building will not be financially viable; Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace.

Drawing on data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, Francis, Village, and Lawson (2020, 2021a) drew two main conclusions. The first conclusion was that rural clergy were more pessimistic about the future than rural laity. Thus, 34% of rural clergy considered that their church building will not be financially viable, compared with 22% of rural laity; 29% of rural clergy considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, compared with 23% of rural laity. The second conclusion was that both rural clergy and rural laity were more pessimistic about the future of their church compared with colleagues in other geographical environments. Thus, while 34% of rural clergy considered that their church buildings will not be financially viable, the proportions stood at 24% in inner city parishes, 20% in town parishes, and 18% in suburban parishes. While 23% of rural laity considered key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, the proportions stood at 18% in inner city parishes, 17% in suburban parishes, and 16% in town parishes.

These same two questions designed to test the fragile rural church hypotheses were also included in the *Covid 19 & Church-21* survey launched on 22 January 2021 in collaboration with the *Church Times*. The purpose behind repeating these two questions was to test the extent to which the ongoing experience of the pandemic, including prolonged periods during which churches were closed for public worship (see McGowan, 2020), may have exacerbated support for the fragile rural church hypothesis. Comparing data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, and the *Covid-19 & Church-21* survey, Francis, Village, and Lawson (2021b) drew three further conclusions.

The first conclusion was that both rural clergy and rural laity had become more pessimistic regarding the sustainability of sufficient lay volunteers to keep rural churches active. The proportion of rural clergy who considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace rose from 29% to 32%. At the same time, the proportion of rural laity who took that same view rose from 22% to 32%. The second conclusion was that the same trend emerged among non-rural clergy and non-rural laity. In other words, the perception of fragility was growing across the Church of England in respect of human resources. The third conclusion was that the proportions of rural and non-rural clergy and laity who were pessimistic about the financial viability of church buildings remained constant between the two surveys. In other words, the wake-up call of the pandemic for the Church of England highlighted the vulnerability of a voluntary associational organisation increasingly dependent on an aging constituency.

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to revisit perceptions of the fragile rural church hypothesis within the immediate post-pandemic years. The opportunity to do so arises from the *Church 2024* survey also run in collaboration with the *Church Times*. This time the two key questions were re-voiced, not to assess anxieties about the future, but to

capture an account of the current post-pandemic experience: Our church building is no longer financially viable; Key lay people are proving difficult to replace.

Method

Procedure

The online *Church 2024* survey ran from March to November 2024 using the Qualtrics platform. It was intended primarily to measure a wide range of attitudes and opinions as a follow-up from two previous *Church Times* surveys in 2001 and 2013 (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005; Village, 2018). The *Church 2024* survey was promoted in the Church of England through the *Church Times* and the *Church of England Newspaper* as well through diocesan newsletters. It was also promoted through Roman Catholic networks in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Of the 5,141 total responses to the survey, 3,826 (74.4%) were from the Church of England. The sample used here consisted of 701 stipendiary parochial clergy and 1,943 lay people who completed answers to both the fragile church items.

Instruments

The survey included two items modified from the 2020 and 2021 Covid-19 surveys intended to assess perceptions of the future fragility of churches as a result of the pandemic: 'Our church buildings will not be financially viable' and 'Key laypeople will step down and be difficult to replace'. These were replaced by corresponding items in the present tense in the 2024 survey: 'Our church building is no longer financially viable' and 'Key lay people are proving difficult to replace'. Each had a five-point response scale ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly', which was recoded into two categories: agree (combining agree strongly and agree) and not agree (combining disagree strongly, disagree, and not certain). An item asking about location had four possible responses: 'Rural', 'Town', Suburban', and 'Inner city'.

Participants

Table 1 profiles the 701 stipendiary parochial clergy and 1,943 lay people who provided data on the two fragile church items in terms of sex, age categories, and geographical

Table 1. Profile of laity and stipendiary parochial clergy.

	Lay %	Clergy %	All %
Female	58	43	46
Male	42	57	54
<50	23	40	28
50–69	44	59	48
70+	33	1	25
Rural	32	29	32
Town	35	32	34
Suburban	23	27	24
Inner city	10	11	10

Notes: N = 2,644; lay = 1,943; clergy = 701.

location. These data reflect the general profile of Anglican congregations (see Francis & Lankshear, 2021) in terms of the prominence of women (58%) and of people aged fifty and over (77%). Among clergy the age profile reflects the situation reported in 2020 that the mean age of stipendiary clergy was 53 years (Church of England, 2021).

Results

Table 2 presents the levels of agreement for each of the two fragile church items for clergy and for laity within the four locations (rural, town, suburban, and inner city). Three main trends emerged from these data. First, stipendiary parochial clergy were generally more pessimistic than lay people in terms of the financial viability of church buildings (18% of clergy agreeing their building was no longer viable versus 11% of lay people) and the difficulty of replacing key lay people (72% of clergy agreeing key lay people were proving difficult to replace versus 51% of lay people).

Second, both clergy and lay people were more pessimistic about replacing key lay people (72% of clergy and 51% of lay people) than they were about the financial unviability of their building (18% of clergy and 11% of lay people).

Third, those in rural areas were consistently more pessimistic than those from other areas. This was tested using contingency tables and was statistically significant in each case (Table 3). The starkest contrast was among stipendiary clergy relating to replacing key lay people, where 87% from rural areas agreed this was proving difficult, versus 65% from elsewhere.

Discussion and conclusion

Building on Lawson's (2018, 2019) articulation of the rural fragile church hypothesis, two surveys conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 provided quantitative data designed to test this hypothesis differentiating between the perceptions of stipendiary parochial clergy and laity and differentiating among four geographical locations (rural, town, suburban, and inner city). Alongside these two surveys conducted during the pandemic, the present study has added new data collected in 2024. In this most recent survey, the two fragile church items were re-shaped, not to assess future expectation but to assess recent experience. The following conclusions emerge from drawing together the findings from these three sets of data.

The first finding concerns the perception of rural clergy. In 2020 34% of rural clergy considered that their church buildings will not be financially viable. In 2021 the proportion of rural clergy stood at 30% (a non-statistically significant drop). In 2024 25% of rural clergy had concluded that our church building *is* no longer financially viable.

Table 2. Agreement with items by location.

	Rural	Town	Suburban	Inner city	All
Stipendiary Parochial clergy (N = 701)					
Our church building is no longer financially viable	25	16	14	17	18
Key lay people are proving difficult to replace	87	61	70	64	72
Lay people (N = 1943)					
Our church building is no longer financially viable	17	12	7	5	11
Key lay people are proving difficult to replace	58	50	50	35	51

Table 3 Changes in affect item responses between surveys for non-ministering laity.

		Rural	Other	χ^2
Stipendiary Parochial clergy (N = 701)				
Our church building is no longer financially viable	Agree	25	15	
	Not agree	75	85	10.5**
Key lay people are proving difficult to replace	Agree	87	65	
	Not agree	13	35	34.0***
Lay people (N = 1943)				
Our church building is no longer financially viable	Agree	17	9	
	Not agree	83	91	24.6***
Key lay people are proving difficult to replace	Agree	58	48	
	Not agree	42	52	17.2***

Notes: Agree combines agree strongly and agree; Not agree combines disagree strongly, disagree, and not certain. Differences between rural and other locations were tested with contingency tables with 2 *df*. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

In 2020 29% of rural clergy considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace. In 2021 the proportions of rural clergy stood at 49% (a statistically significant increase, $p < .001$). In 2024 87% of rural clergy had concluded that key lay people are proving difficult to replace. In light of the earlier study by Francis, Laycock, and Brewster (2015) on the burdens of rural ministry and the connection between perceived burdens and higher levels of poor work-related psychological wellbeing and professional burnout, the perceived collapse of the volunteer infrastructure that makes the rural church viable may prove to be bad for clergy morale, wellbeing, and health.

The second finding concerns the perception of rural lay people. Throughout the three surveys lay people have been more optimistic than the clergy. In 2020 22% of rural lay people considered that their church buildings will not be financially viable. In 2021 the proportion of rural lay people stood at 24% (a non-statistically significant rise). In 2024 17% of rural lay people had concluded that our church building *is* no longer viable. In 2020, 22% of rural lay people considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace. In 2021 the proportion of rural lay people stood at 32% (a statistically significant increase, $p < .001$). In 2024 58% of rural lay people had concluded that key lay people *are* difficult to replace. While rural lay people remain more optimistic than rural clergy, realism may begin to erode this optimism. Nearly one in five rural lay people (17%) are questioning the sustainability of their church building and nearly three in five (58%) are questioning the sustainability of their church community. Such data may not provide a highly optimistic platform on which to build a lay-led future for the rural church.

The third finding is that throughout the three surveys, conducted in 2020, 2021, and 2024, signs of the fragile church were recognised by clergy and lay people in other geographical areas (town, suburban, and inner city), but to a lesser extent than perceived within rural locations. In other words, while the fragile church hypothesis is not exclusive to the rural church, it is more in evidence among rural clergy and rural lay people.

The obvious limitation with statistical research of this nature is that, although it can describe a situation with greater precision than some may welcome, it fails to prescribe the instant solution to the problems thus identified. Nonetheless, such data may provide a sensible background against which posited suggestions may be tested. At core the rural church is running out of funds to maintain its buildings and running out of people to employ these buildings in pursuit of ministry and mission. Bowden (2025) is clearly

correct in arguing that some existing strategies may not be demonstrating success and that a different vision valuing place, location, and wider community investment may be worth further investment.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy ay York St John University (approval codes: HRP-RS-AV-04-20-01 (2021) and ETH2324-0130 (2024)). All participants had to affirm they were 18 or over and give their informed consent by ticking a box that gave access to the rest of the survey.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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