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Shielding, but not shielded: Comparing the experience of the Covid-19 lockdown for Anglican churchgoers aged seventy and over with those under the age of sixty

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Abstract

Given the importance of older churchgoers in maintaining and sustaining the functioning of Anglican churches, the present study draws on the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* to examine the impact of the pandemic, the national lockdown, and the national lock-up of churches on their attitude toward the Church. By comparing the responses of 867 churchgoers aged seventy or over with the responses of 924 churchgoers under the age of sixty, the data found that those aged seventy or over had less sympathy for the national leadership of the Church, had experienced the lock-up of churches more negatively, had less good experience of the online alternatives provided by the Church, and were more pessimistic about the longer-term sustainability of their churches. Those aged seventy or over may have been shielding during the lockdown, but may not have been shielded from the impact of the experience on their attitude toward the Church.

Keywords: Covid-19, empirical theology, older churchgoers, attitude toward church, religion

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and travelled the globe quickly. 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 lock-up on all its churches. The official statement on the website read

The archbishops and bishops of the Church of England have written collectively to clergy through their dioceses, urging them now to close all church buildings – other than when they are needed to keep a food bank running, but even then under strict limits. There will be no church weddings until further notice, funerals will not take place inside church buildings and the only baptisms will be emergency baptisms in a hospital or home. (Church of England, 2020)

The official statement was clear that churches would be closed for all private prayer, including by priests. Clergy were instructed to live-stream worship from their own homes.

Reflecting on this situation in *Journal of Anglican Studies*, McGowan (2020) suggested that this edict was likely to cause problems both for clergy and for lay people. He suggested that

Many worshippers, not just clergy, wanted to be connected with the spaces and places that meant 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 had become personal avatars of worship. (McGowan, 2020, p. 3)

Recognising that the ecclesial landscape was changing rapidly before our very eyes, we designed the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* in order to assess the impact of this policy on clergy and lay people. The survey was designed in dialogue 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). The survey was intentionally designed to address a range of discrete but interrelated issues arising from the pandemic, from the national lockdown, and from the Church's response with national lock-up of churches. Initial analyses of these data 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 (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020), given close attention to the experiences of retired clergy (Francis & Village, 2021), 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, under review).

Another key issue on our agenda when designing the survey concerned the experiences of older churchgoers aged seventy and over. This group was of particular concern for three reasons: first, the ageing profile of congregations may make this age group of particular significance in maintaining local church life; second, under fear of the pandemic those aged seventy and over had been advised to shield and may have been preparing for the long haul, largely avoiding group activities and human contact; and third, a couple of decades of research had already drawn attention to areas of dissatisfaction among this age group with church life. It is on this research question that the present paper is focused. The following section now reviews and assesses the context within which the research question is located.

Older people and the Church

According to data routinely generated by the British Social Attitudes Survey since 1983, the proportion of the population who self-identify as Anglican (Church of England, Church in Wales, and Episcopal Church of Scotland) has been in consistent decline from

40% in 1983 to 12% in 2018 (Voas & Bruce, 2019). It is, however, the age profile of self-identified Anglicans that is most revealing. According to the 2018 survey, while a third (33%) of participants who were aged 75 and above regarded themselves as Anglican, among the group aged between 18 and 24 just 1% regarded themselves as Anglican (Voas & Bruce, 2019, p. 22). It may not be surprising, then, if Anglican church congregations should also appear to be heavily weighted to the older generations.

Since the official record of church attendance published by the Church of England is undertaken by headcounts rather than by individual surveys, it is not possible from these published figures to chart the age profile of churchgoers actually in the pews (see Church of England, 2019). It is for this reason that the statistics published by Peter Brierley are of such importance. In *UK Church statistics: 2021 edition*, Brierley (2020) reported that in 1979 19% of Anglican churchgoers were aged 65 and over. The proportion for this age group then rose to 22% in 1989, 28% in 1999, 35% in 2005, and 40% in 2015 (table 13.7.1).

Given the growing visibility of older people within the life of churches, it is not surprising that over the past two decades there has emerged an increasing body of research into the spirituality of ageing and into the extent to which the spiritual needs of older people were being sufficiently recognised and met by churches (see, for example, Howse, 1999; Jewell, 2001, 2004; Knox, 2002; Woodward, 2008; Hawley & Jewell, 2009; Coleman, 2011; Albans & Johnson, 2013; Jewell, Cole, Rolph, & Rolph, 2016; Johnson & Walker, 2016; Babington, 2017; Rolph, Rolph, Cole, & Jewell, 2017; Day, 2017).

One of these research initiatives, the Halley Stewart Project began with six focus groups involving 59 individuals across a range of denominations. The focus groups were followed by a questionnaire that received over 2,000 responses. The results from the study published by Jewell (2001) found that older people tended to leave or express dissatisfaction with their local churches because of physical factors concerning accessibility, because of

disabilities including hearing loss and sight loss, and because of moving away and failing to connect with another church. This study also found that older people reported a reduced sense of belonging to their church through lack of pastoral care, through feeling unaffirmed as they grow older, and through changes to the patterns of services with which they had been familiar. The challenges of ageing and changing life experiences caused some older people to question their faith.

A research initiative commissioned by MHA Care Group explored the faith journeys of older people through interviews and a series of workshops for 60- to 90-year-old churchgoers. The results from this study, published by Hawley and Jewell (2009), identified the areas of pain experienced in their relationship with the church. Older people were feeling that their questions were not being listened to, and that they were being overlooked. Some felt abandoned by the church. The research workshops had given the participants the opportunity to be listened to, and they recognised that such opportunities were missing in their churches.

A somewhat different approach to researching the place of older people in the church is the ethnographic study reported by Day (2017). As ethnographer Day chose to observe the religious lives of older laywomen within their 'natural setting', that is within the life of the local congregation. She immersed herself in the daily routines of church life, engaging in close observation of and close conversation with women of Generation A (born in the 1920s and 1930s). She merged into their way of life, as vegetable peeler, dish washer and kettle boiler. From this deep ethnographic experience, Day identified key themes that characterised these women. Then she travelled further afield to broaden and to interrogate those themes within other Anglican churches both within the UK and overseas. Day concluded from her study that she had observed the last active Anglican generation. Other researchers, however, may not be quite so fatalistic (see Farr & Loftus, in press).

While studies that focus exclusively on older people are able to illuminate the specific experiences of this age group, surveys that are conducted across the age range of adult churchgoers are able to draw attention to the *differences* in the beliefs and attitudes of older churchgoers compared with younger churchgoers. One such analysis was offered by Francis, Robbins, and Astley (2005), drawing on the 2001 *Church Times* survey. These data allowed comparisons to be made among 1,093 lay people under the age of fifty, 3,006 lay people in their fifties or sixties, and 1,659 lay people aged seventy or over, across fifteen areas. There were some areas in which the responses of those aged seventy and over were quite different from the responses of those under the age of fifty. Older churchgoers were less likely to be helped in their faith by new forms of service (37% compared with 55%), were less likely to be in favour of admitting children to communion before confirmation (38% compared with 56%), were less likely to favour the ordination of women as bishops (53% compared with 71%), were less in favour of divorced people as bishops (29% compared with 57%), and were less likely to feel that they could influence their church's decisions (51% compared with 61%). In a repeat *Church Times* survey in 2013, Village (2018), found that age was a consistent predictor of attitudes and experience across a wide range of areas of church life. The overall picture was that for the over 70s church felt like 'home', but they were a group that was slightly less involved in group activities and who had less say in what happens.

The *Signs of Growth* survey that drew responses from 23,884 churchgoers aged twenty and over from across the Diocese of Southwark provided a second opportunity to profile the beliefs and attitudes of older churchgoers alongside those of younger churchgoers. In their report on these data Jewell, Francis, and Lankshear (in press) compared the responses between three age groups, the main body of churchgoers between the ages of 30 and 69 (N = 15,382) churchgoers in their seventies (N = 3,773) and churchgoers aged eighty and over (N = 2,141). The clearest and most important findings concerned the distinctive profile of those

aged eighty or over, compared with the profile of the main body of churchgoers between the ages of 30 and 69 years. Those aged sixty or over had a lower sense of belonging within their church: the proportion who felt part of their church's decision-making dropped from 44% to 35%. Those aged eighty or over felt less at home in their congregations: the proportion who could hear the services and readings clearly dropped from 91% to 65%. Those aged eighty and over felt that their faith was playing a less significant part in their daily lives: the proportion who agreed that their Christian faith influences their important decisions in life dropped from 81% to 70%. Those aged eighty and over had less confidence in the future trajectory of their churches: the proportion who felt that the membership of their church will grow in the next twelve months dropped from 45% to 28%. Those aged eighty and over were losing confidence in their faith: the proportion who felt that they were growing their faith dropped from 75% to 54%. Those aged eighty and over were wearied by contemporary liturgy: the proportion who agreed that they are helped in their faith by services that use up-to-date forms of English dropped from 53% to 33%. Those aged eighty and over were gaining less from participation in services, and not simply as a consequence of difficulty with hearing: the proportion who were helped in their faith by listening to sermons dropped from 84% to 67%; and the proportion who were helped in their faith by periods of silence in services dropped from 73% to 57%.

Research question

Current research literatures have both identified those aged seventy and over as playing a prominent role in maintaining and sustaining Anglican churches in England, and also suggested that churchgoers in this age group have been showing signs of dis-ease or discontent with church life. It is hypothesised that the lockdown (that has discouraged this age group from maintaining social contacts), coupled with the lock-up (that has completely removed the opportunities both of church attendance and of visiting the local place and

sacred space central to sustaining their faith), may now finally close the door on their church-related activity and have the consequence also of finally closing the door of some local churches. This hypothesis suggests that churchgoers aged seventy or over may have been shielding during the lockdown, but at the same time may not have been shielded from the impact of the experience on their attitude toward the Church.

The *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* has the capacity to test this hypothesis by assessing whether the experience of the lockdown and of the lock-up has had a greater impact on churchgoers aged seventy and over than on younger churchgoers.

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. Although this survey attracted responses from outside England and from non-Anglican participants, the main focus for our analysis is initially on Church of England clergy and laity within England.

Measure

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

Analysis

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by two age groups among the 2,496 lay participants identified as living in England and attending Anglican churches: 924 were under sixty years of age (34% male), 867 were aged seventy or over (38% male). For the purposes of this analysis attention is not given to the 705 participants who were in their sixties. The statistical significance of differences in the scores for Likert items reported by the two groups of laity 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

The key difference to emerge between the views of churchgoers aged seventy or over and the views of churchgoers under the age of sixty can be summarised within four main themes: attitude toward the national church leadership; attitude toward churches as local place and sacred space; attitude toward the online future; and attitude toward future sustainability. Each of these four areas will be reviewed in turn.

- insert table 1 about here -

The first set of two items in table 1 focuses on attitude toward the national church leadership during the pandemic. Across both items the older churchgoers aged seventy or over held a less positive attitude toward the national leadership. While 42% of those under sixty considered that their denomination at the national level had responded well to the crisis, the proportion fell to 36% of those aged seventy or over. While 43% of the younger group considered that their denomination at the national level had done a good job of leading us in prayer, the proportion fell to 36% in the older group.

- insert table 2 about here -

The second set of three items in table 2 focuses on attitude toward churches as local place and sacred space. Across all three items the older churchgoers aged seventy or over

held a more positive attitude toward the church building and consequently were less impressed by the lock-up and by the lock-out. While 25% of the younger group maintained that churches should stay open whatever the crisis, the proportion rose to 36% of the older group. While 61% of the younger group maintained that clergy should always be allowed into their churches, the proportion rose to 68% of the older group. While 53% of the younger group maintained that closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do, the proportion fell to 42% of the older group.

- insert table 3 about here -

The third set of four items in table 3 focuses attention on attitude toward the online future. Across all four items the older churchgoers aged seventy or over held a less positive attitude toward the online future. While 25% of the younger group considered virtual church to be more effective, the proportion fell to 11% of the older group. While 49% of the younger group considered social media to be a great pastoral tool, the proportion fell to 35% of the older group. While 47% of the younger group considered social media to be a great evangelistic tool, the proportion fell to 32% of the older group. While 38% of the younger group thought that more pastoral work will be done online, the proportion fell to 27% of the older group.

- insert table 4 about here -

The fourth set of three items in table 4 focuses on attitude toward the future sustainability of the local church after the pandemic. The first two items in this section reflect the fragile churches thesis advanced by Lawson (2018, 2019, 2020) which identifies the key vulnerability for sustainability to reside in human and financial resources. Across both of these items older churchgoers aged seventy or over held a less hopeful attitude toward the sustainability of their church. While 16% of those under sixty considered that after the pandemic key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, the proportion rose to

22% of those aged seventy and over. While 14% of the younger group considered that their church building would not be financially viable after the pandemic, the proportion rose to 20% of the older group. On the other hand, while the older churchgoers were less sanguine about future financial vulnerability, they were themselves less inclined to withhold their financial support. While 29% of the younger group agreed that their financial giving to the church had decreased during the lockdown, the proportion fell to 15% among the older group.

Conclusion

The present study set out to test the thesis that churchgoers aged seventy or over may have been shielding during the lockdown, but at the same time may not have been shielded from the impact of the experience on their attitude toward the church. Drawing on data generated by the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* this thesis was tested against four sets of items that assessed attitude toward the national church leadership, attitude toward churches as local place and sacred space, attitude toward the online future, and attitude toward the future sustainability of local churches. Across all four areas the data suggested that the experience of the pandemic, of the lockdown and of the lock-up had generated more negative attitudes toward the church among those aged seventy or over than had been the case among those aged under sixty. Those aged seventy or over had less sympathy for the national leadership of the Church, had experienced the lock-up of churches more negatively, had less good experience of the online alternatives provided by the Church, and were more pessimistic about the longer-term sustainability of their churches. These findings may carry two implications for the build-back strategy of the Church of England attempting to recover from the pandemic: one pastoral and the other financial. These two implications could, however, be closely interrelated.

The pastoral implications concerns the visibility of those aged seventy and over in rebuilding an offline presence and offline ministry during the period of build back. There will

be older churchgoers who have been shielding and who will have lost touch with their habit of churchgoing and who may have lost confidence to return. There will be older churchgoers who have been shielding and who may feel neglected and uncared for. They may have effectively become church-leavers during the extended period of the pandemic. Research on church-leavers, however, indicates that there is quicker return on investment in the dechurched (those who once belonged) than in the unchurched (those who never belonged) (see Richter & Francis, 1998; Francis & Richter, 2007). Strategic development funding invested in reconnecting the lost to their churches may be wiser than investing in new churches.

The financial implication concerns securing the resources to prolong the life of some of those fragile churches now apparently crippled by the pandemic. It is precisely here that local people, local initiatives, and local finance could come to the rescue. Yet such a rescue would need a vision of sustainability that made sense to the local environment. It could just possibly be the case that such a vision for the future might rehabilitate the good will of those aged seventy and over and unlock the resources (human and financial) to build back an offline 'Christian presence in every community', together with a ministry equipped to sustain such a presence. This, after all, remains the vision for the Church of England as re-expressed under the signature of the Right Revd Martin Sealey, Chair, Ministry Council, in the General Synod paper of June 2019 (Church of England, 2019).

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Table 1

Attitude toward the national church leadership

	Age group		<i>p</i> <
	< 60	70+	
	<i>N</i> =	<i>N</i> =	
	%	%	
My denomination at the national level has responded well to the crisis	42	36	.01
My denomination at the national level has done a good job of leading us in prayer	43	36	.01

Note. In this and subsequent tables, differences between groups were tested using chi-squared with 1 *df*. To save space, some rows are not repeated on subsequent tables.

Table 2

Attitude toward the churches as local place and sacred space

	< 60	70+	<i>p</i> <
Churches should stay open whatever the crisis	25	36	.001
Clergy should always be allowed into their churches	61	68	.01
Closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do	53	42	.001

Table 3

Attitude toward the online future

	< 60	70+	<i>p</i> <
Virtual church will be more effective	25	11	.001
Social media is a great pastoral tool	49	35	.001
Social media is a great evangelistic tool	47	32	.001
More pastoral work will be done online	38	27	.001

Table 4

Attitude toward future sustainability

	< 60	70+	<i>p</i> <
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	16	22	.01
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	14	20	.001
My financial giving to the church has decreased during the lockdown	29	15	.001