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Impact of Covid-19 on Fragile Churches: Listening to the Voices of Lay People

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ABSTRACT

The fragile church thesis was originally shaped by Lawson on the basis of qualitative research among rural clergy. A subsequent quantitative study demonstrated that, although the fragile church thesis was more strongly endorsed by rural clergy it was also endorsed by clergy serving in other areas. The present study conducted among 2,496 Church of England laity confirms that the thesis is not just in the mind of the clergy, but to a lesser extent in the mind of the laity as well. Once again the thesis is more strongly endorsed by laity living in rural areas than by laity living elsewhere. The current study points to serious investment in discipleship learning as a strategy for addressing the malaise underpinning the fragile church thesis and invites the rural church to rise to this challenge.

Keywords: Fragile churches; rural churches; Covid-19; laity; discipleship learning

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Introduction

The fragile church hypothesis has been shaped in a series of papers by Anne Lawson (Lawson, 2018, 2019, 2020; Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020). In her first paper, Lawson (2018) set out to test the earlier research reported by Brewster (2007, 2012) into the sources of stress experienced by clergy engaged in rural multi-church ministry. She did so by conducting three focus groups, with each group comprising three Church of England clergy holding responsibility for three or four rural churches in multi-church groups within one diocese. For Lawson, these focus groups identified a set of nine stressors that had not been evident in Brewster's work conducted fifteen years earlier. Lawson categorised these nine stressors as indicative of fragile churches. Clergy were anxious about the effect of closing churches on rural communities. They were anxious about increasing financial pressure on small congregations, about the relentless pressure to keep things going, about the inability to replace churchwardens, about the small number of active lay people, about too few people to work with children, about the lack of a critical mass of children with whom to work, about making mistakes that alienate extended families, about the lack of time to pioneer new initiatives, and about the lack of energy for new things.

In her second paper, Lawson (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with nine clergy holding responsibility for between four and 13 churches within another diocese. Drawing on these interviews Lawson crystallised her conceptualisation of fragile churches as involving five major marks, namely: financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources; inability to replace churchwardens and other officers and volunteers, or fear of this being the case; lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them; lack of time and energy among clergy to start new things; and tiny congregations consisting of single figures with a rising age profile of seventy-five plus.

In her third paper, Lawson (2020) examined more closely the impact of fragile churches on clergy wellbeing, drawing on interviews with the same nine clergy who had informed her second study. These clergy spoke at length and with great honesty about their day-to-day lived experience of caring for fragile churches. They could foresee the need to close churches for which they were responsible, and they recognised the impact of closing churches both on the rural community and on themselves. As one participant put it: 'You don't get made a canon or whatever by presiding over a load of failing [*sic*] churches' (p. 35). As another participant put it: 'It doesn't look all that good on a CV that a church that you've been vicar of could close because of lack of people' (p. 34). Such comments resonate with Cafferata's (2020) perceptive analysis of the effects of steering a closing church as the ordained leader in her book, *The last pastor*.

In the fourth paper, Francis, Village, and Lawson (2020) employed quantitative research in order to test two objections to Lawson's thesis. In doing so they drew on data from 745 full-time parochial clergy serving in the Church of England who responded to the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey*. The first objection was that the qualitative research had not demonstrated the *extent* of the support for the fragile church thesis among rural clergy. These new data demonstrated that one in three clergy serving in rural areas endorsed the thesis. The second objection was that the qualitative research conducted by focus groups and by interviews among rural clergy had not demonstrated that the fragile church thesis was *specific* to rural clergy. These new data demonstrated that the fragile church thesis was not limited to rural clergy, but is more prevalent among rural clergy. While 34% of clergy serving in rural areas concluded that, following the impact of Covid-19, their church buildings will not be financially viable, the proportions were somewhat lower among clergy serving in other types of areas: 24% in the inner city, 20% in towns, and 18% in suburbs. While 29% of clergy serving in rural areas concluded that, following the impact of Covid-19,

key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, the proportions were somewhat lower among clergy serving in other types of areas: 24% in town parishes, 23% in suburban parishes, and 20% in inner city parishes.

Two significant responses to Lawson's fragile church thesis have been offered by Mynors (2019) and Wilson (2019). Both recognise the five marks identified by Lawson, but also question whether it is wise to ground the thesis solely on the views of clergy. Thus, Wilson (2019) observed, 'I also have certain reservations. I noted that the research had been done with clergy, but not with churchwardens or other responsible laity' (p. 119).

Research questions

Responding to Wilson's (2019) challenge, the aim of the present study is to return to the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* in order to explore the views of the lay participants within that survey. These data will be employed to address two research questions. The first research question seeks to ascertain whether the level of support for the fragile church thesis is as high among rural laity as was evidenced in the earlier study among rural clergy. The second research question seeks to ascertain whether the higher level of support for the fragile church thesis found among clergy serving in rural areas compared with clergy serving elsewhere is reflected in a similar difference among laity living in rural areas and laity living elsewhere.

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 two items designed to explore the fragile church thesis: '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 and not agree.

Participants

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by 2,496 lay participants who identified as living in England, as members of the Church of England, and as people who had received rather than given ministry during the pandemic: 903 located in rural parishes, 771 in town parishes, 598 in suburban parishes, 222 in inner city parishes and two did not disclose their geographical location. Of these 2,496 lay participants, two thirds were female (N = 1,642) and one third was male (N = 854). In terms of age, 924 were under the age of sixty, 705 were in their sixties, 712 were in their seventies, and 155 were aged eighty or over.

Results

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 presents the responses of the four groups of 745 full-time stipendiary parochial clergy, as reported by Francis, Village and Lawson (2020), and the four groups of 2,496 lay people who had received ministry 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 sought to ascertain whether the level of support for the fragile church thesis is as high among rural laity as was evidenced in the earlier study among rural clergy. The survey specifically explored perceptions of the impact of Covid-19 on two markers of the fragile church. The data show that while one in three clergy serving rural parishes (34%) feared that their church buildings will not be financially viable as they attempt to rebuild after Covid-19, the level of endorsement dropped to 22% among laity living in rural areas. While 29% of clergy serving rural parishes feared that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, the level of endorsement dropped to 23% among laity living in rural areas.

The second research question sought to ascertain whether the higher level of support for the fragile church thesis found among clergy serving in rural areas compared with clergy serving elsewhere is reflected in the responses of lay people. The data show that while 22% of laity living in rural areas considered that in the light of the impact of Covid-19 their church buildings will not be financially viable, the proportion was lower among laity living elsewhere: 16% in towns, 15% in suburbs, and 8% in inner city areas. While 23% of laity living in rural areas feared that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, the proportion was lower among laity living elsewhere: 18% in inner city areas, 17% in suburbs, and 16% in towns.

Conclusion

The present paper was designed to respond to the invitation proffered by Wilson (2019) to check whether the fragile church thesis, originally formulated on evidence drawn from rural clergy, was also supported by rural laity. The opportunity to address that research question

was provided by the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* that drew responses from 745 Church of England clergy engaged in full-time parochial ministry and from 2,496 lay people living in England and identifying as members of the Church of England. Two main conclusions emerge from these new data.

The first conclusion is that there is less support for the fragile church thesis among rural laity than among rural clergy. At the same time, however, the level of support for the fragile church thesis among rural laity is far from being trivial. Between one in five and one in four lay members of the Church of England living in rural areas consider that the impact of Covid-19 will render their church buildings no longer financially viable and will lead to key lay people stepping down and being difficult to replace.

The second conclusion is that the fragile church thesis is more evident to lay members of the Church of England living in rural areas than to lay members of the Church of England living elsewhere. While the phenomenon of fragile churches is more evident to lay people in rural areas, it is far from being invisible to lay people elsewhere.

The fact that both rural clergy and rural laity are more aware of the urgency of the fragile church thesis than clergy and laity living elsewhere, may also empower the rural church in taking the lead to address the underlying causes of the current situation. Back in 2015 a special issue of *Rural Theology*, edited by Jeff Astley (2015a), suggested that the cause of the current situation resided in a loss of familiarity with and a loss of faith in the Christian narrative. In a largely secular and an increasingly multi-faith society, for the Church to regain traction Astley argues that it is necessary to invest in a serious programme of ‘discipleship learning’. In the opening article in this special edition, Astley (2015b) nuances this notion of ‘discipleship learning’ to distinguish it from cognate constructs like training for lay ministries, or religious education. For Astley, discipleship learning embraces the twin notions of education and formation and is concerned with shaping lives in the light of the

Christian tradition. For Astley, scripture, doctrine, and theology really matter, but really matter in conversation with the religious and spiritual experience shaped and interpreted by the ordinary theologians who bring life to our churches (see Astley, 2003).

Astley's special issue of *Rural Theology* then goes on to explore how a serious programme of discipleship learning can be delivered in dispersed and rural communities, and shape the lives of a new generation of disciples. In an article on 'setting priorities for the rural church', Francis (2015) described how a degree-level programme in discipleship learning was designed and delivered within North Wales. Neil (2015) interviewed graduates of the programme and reflected on how discipleship learning had invigorated parts of the rural church in North Wales. Peddle (2015) reported on how this programme of discipleship learning had been adopted by the Anglican Church in rural and dispersed Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador. Ellis (2015) reflected on the pedagogical processes by which Christian formation develops within facilitated learning groups and through 'transformative conversation'.

The notion of discipleship learning is a radical solution to the malaise identified by the fragile church thesis. It is radical in the sense of being rooted in scripture and inspired by the Marcan narrative of how Jesus invested so seriously in the call of twelve (or thirteen) individuals into this school of discipleship learning, and how this investment in forming disciples was a necessary precursor to the feeding of the five thousand and to the feeding of the four thousand in the Marcan narrative (Francis & Jones, 2015).

This radical solution, however, does not reap a quick return. It is no quick fix that will flourish within the three or five year investment of a strategic development initiative. The successful pilot projects run in North Wales and in Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador (and now also within the dispersed churches of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf), show that a ten-year period of investment is needed to embed the experience and to equip the facilitators

required to nurture the venture. But the model has been established and the experience is transferable.

As Jesus himself experienced, however, radical solutions are never really welcomed by the religious establishment, especially when they have been developed on the margins of accepted practice and conventional wisdom. It would be a shame, nonetheless, if the Anglican Church failed to learn from the example and experiences of the Jesus around whom it has shaped its identity and mission. Is there, perhaps, one rural diocese that could be tempted to address the malaise identified as underpinning the fragile church thesis, by investing in a ten-year programme of seriously considered discipleship learning? Properly nurtured such an investment should shape the gift of the rural church to those other areas in which the fragile church thesis is gaining traction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 by location

	Rural %	Town %	Sub %	Inner %
Clergy				
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
Laity				
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	22	16	15	8
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	23	16	17	18