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Increasingly Fragile? Assessing the Cumulative Impact of the Pandemic on Rural Anglican Churches

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ABSTRACT

In an earlier study Lawson's fragile rural church hypothesis was tested among participants in the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* conducted during the first lockdown from May 2020. The data demonstrated that a third of rural clergy and nearly a quarter of rural laity endorsed the thesis, a higher proportion than in non-rural areas. New data from the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* conducted during the third lockdown from January 2021 demonstrate that both rural clergy and rural laity have grown more pessimistic regarding the future of the rural church. The proportion of rural clergy who consider that as a consequence of the pandemic key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace has increased from 29% to 49%. Among rural laity the proportion has increased from 22% to 32%.

KEYWORDS: Fragile churches; rural churches; Covid-19; rural clergy; rural laity; Anglican

Introduction

Lawson (2018) introduced the fragile rural church hypothesis in an article in *Rural Theology*. The hypothesis emerged from her analysis of three focus groups conducted with rural clergy regarding the matters that they found stressful in rural ministry. When Lawson set her findings alongside the findings from an earlier study reported by Brewster (2007, 2012) she found that a new set of stressors had emerged during the intervening years. Clustering these

new stressors together suggested that they constellated around the fear that local rural churches were becoming so fragile that their ongoing sustainability was in question. Clergy were anxious about dwindling and ageing congregations, about the increasing financial pressure on small congregations, about the inability to replace churchwardens and other lay leaders, and about the relentless pressure to keep things going. Lawson (2019, 2020) developed the fragile church hypothesis in two further papers in *Rural Theology*, drawing on new data from interviews with nine clergy. Two other papers in *Rural Theology* by clergy with wide experience in rural ministry critiqued the thesis (Mynors, 2019; Wilson, 2019).

As a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic, the Church of England faced an unprecedented challenge during March 2020. On 23 March 2020 the UK Government imposed a lockdown on the nation. On the following day, the Church of England closed all its churches, except for essential ‘services’ like the provision of foodbanks (McGowan, 2020). Churches were closed for public worship and for private prayer. Churches were closed both to their laity and to their clergy.

For a number of reasons, we suspected that the national lockdown and the lock-up of churches would have an impact on clergy and on laity. In particular, from our research on church-leavers we suspected that for some the closure of churches would break the habit of a lifetime and that once broken there would be a reluctance to return. We recalled that in our survey of church leavers 69% said that they had not intended to leave, but had simply got out of the habit and did not find it easy to return (Francis & Richter, 2007).

Considering that it may be helpful to church leaders to have access to hard evidence about the impact of the pandemic on clergy and laity, we designed the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey*, and did so in dialogue with church leaders. This survey was launched on 8 May 2020 in collaboration with the *Church Times* and with the active support of a number of

dioceses. The survey was closed 23 July 2020, by which time there had been over 7,000 replies, including 5,347 from Anglicans living in England.

In order to test the fragile church hypothesis, the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* contained two key questions within a series of items designed to assess the wider impact of the pandemic on church life. Those questions concerned ‘how the crisis might affect the Church in the long term’:

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

Our intention was to learn two things from these two questions. First, we wanted to be able to assess how prevalent these fears were among rural clergy and among rural laity. Second, we wanted to test whether these fears were as strong in other geographical contexts or whether the rural church was really different.

In the November 2020 issue of *Rural Theology*, when we were still in the early days of analysing the data, Francis, Village, and Lawson (2020) reported on the response to these two questions by clergy who identified as being engaged in full-time parochial ministry. A third of the clergy engaged in rural ministry considered that their church building will not be financially viable after the pandemic, and three out of every ten considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace. The proportions of rural clergy who endorsed these two items were higher than among clergy serving in non-rural areas.

In the May 2021 issue of *Rural Theology*, when we had analysed the response of laity, Francis, Village, and Lawson (2021) reported on the responses to the same two questions by lay people who had received rather than given ministry during the pandemic. Two conclusions were drawn from these new data. First, laity were less pessimistic than the clergy about the fragility of the rural church. Just under a quarter of rural lay people considered that their church building will not be financially viable. Just under a quarter of rural lay people

considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace. Second, the proportions of rural laity who endorsed these two items were higher than among laity in non-rural areas.

When we launched the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* on 8 May 2020, the prevailing message was that the national lockdown would soon pass and life would return to normal. Such optimism had worn thin by 6 January 2021 when a third national lockdown was imposed on England. At that stage we considered the time was right to launch a second survey, *Covid-19 & Church-21*. This second survey included some new questions, but also retained some old questions (including the two fragile church questions) in order to test the extent to which opinions were changing. In terms of the fragile church hypothesis we framed two opposing theories. The first theory suggested that by 2021 the Church had adapted well to a new *modus operandi* and that clergy and laity alike would be embracing a new future for the Church with optimism. The second theory suggested that local experience may have been less positive and that clergy and laity alike would be increasingly fearful about the longer term future and sustainability of local churches.

Method

Procedure

The *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* was delivered online through the Qualtrics platform from 22 January 2021 to 23 July 2021. A link to the survey was distributed through the *Church Times* (both online and paper versions) and through a number of Church of England participating dioceses. By the time that this survey was closed there had been 5,853 responses, of which 2,328 were from Anglicans living in England.

Measures

There were two measures in both the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* and the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* of specific relevance to the present analysis.

Geographical location was explored by the question ‘Which of these best describes the area in which you live?’ followed by four options: rural, town, suburban, and inner city. For the present analyses these four options have been collapsed into two: rural and non-rural.

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 fragile church 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). For the present analyses these three options have been collapsed into two: agree and not agree.

Analysis

Relevant data from the two surveys were combined to compare the responses of 265 rural clergy and 480 non-rural clergy in the first survey with the responses of 143 rural clergy and 228 non-rural clergy in the second survey; and to compare the responses of 899 rural laity and 1,680 non-rural laity in the first survey with the response of 303 rural laity and 540 non-rural laity in the second survey. The statistical significance of difference between two groups was tested by 2x2 chi square analysis.

Results

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 compares the responses of rural clergy and of rural laity recorded in the two surveys to the two fragile church questions. These data demonstrate that there has been no significant change over this period of time in the way in which either clergy or laity assessed the financial viability of their church. Among the rural clergy, 34% at time one and 30% at time two considered that their church building will not be financially viable. Among the rural laity, 22% at time one and 24% at time two considered that their church building will not be financially viable.

However, these data also demonstrate that both rural clergy and rural laity have become more pessimistic about the potential for lay leadership over this period of time. Among rural clergy 29% at time 1 considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, but at time 2 the proportion had risen significantly to 49%. Among rural laity 22% at time one considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, but at time two the proportion had risen significantly to 32%.

- insert table 2 about here -

Table 2 compares the responses of non-rural clergy and non-rural laity to the two fragile church questions recorded in the two surveys. These data also demonstrated that there has been no significant change over this period of time in the way in which either clergy or laity assessed the financial viability of their church. Among the non-rural clergy, 20% at time one and 15% at time two considered that their church will not be financially viable.

However, these data also demonstrate that both non-rural clergy and non-rural laity have become more pessimistic about the potential for lay leadership over this period of time. Among non-rural clergy, 23% at time one considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, but at time two the proportion had risen significantly to 33%. Among non-rural laity, 16% at time one considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, but at time two the proportion had risen significantly to 25%.

- insert table 3 about here -

Table 3 completes the analysis by testing the significance of the differences between the responses of rural and non-rural clergy and between the responses of rural and non-rural laity in both surveys. These data indicate that all eight comparisons reach statistical significance. On each occasion clergy and laity representing rural churches have a less optimistic view of the future.

Conclusion

The initial lockdown of the nation and lock-up of churches presented the Church of England with an unprecedented challenge. The *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* provided an opportunity to assess how clergy and laity were responding to the challenges of the pandemic and to consider how they were construing the longer-term implications for a Church that was already experiencing decline in membership and in social influence. Lawson's earlier work had already drawn attention to the fragile rural church hypothesis. The *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* provided an opportunity to assess the extent to which rural clergy and rural laity recognised that thesis by testing their perceptions of the two key points of fragility, namely running out of money and running out of lay leadership. Without money and without people, the fear of unsustainability looms large.

The *Covid-19 & Church 21 Survey* launched during the third national lockdown in January 2021 provided the opportunity to test two contrasting theories as to how the ongoing experience of the pandemic may have impacted views on the fragile rural church hypothesis. The first theory suggested that by 2021 the Church had adapted well to a new *modus operandi* and that rural clergy and rural laity alike would be embracing a new future for the church with optimism. The second theory suggested that local experience may have been less positive and that rural clergy and rural laity alike would be increasingly fearful about the long-term future and sustainability of local churches. The data from the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* support the second of these two theories rather than the first.

The key finding from the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey* is that the proportion of rural clergy who consider that as a consequence of the pandemic key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace has increased from 29% during the first lockdown to 49% during the third lockdown. Among rural laity the proportion had increased from 22% during the first lockdown to 32% during the second lockdown. This key finding suggests that the experience of the pandemic caused both clergy and laity to recognise the human fragility of the rural

church, giving rise to significant anxiety around the capacity to replenish local church leadership. Running alongside this, the significant concern around financial sustainability remains a significant factor, also causing on-going anxiety for both clergy and lay people.

In our earlier paper, Francis, Village, and Lawson (2021), commenting on the findings from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, argued for consideration to be given to a serious programme of discipleship learning, building on a special issue of *Rural Theology* edited by Jeff Astley (2015). We concluded that paper with the following question:

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.

Our new data emphasise the urgency of addressing this issue.

Ethical Approval

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

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on rural church

	Survey 1 %	Survey 2 %	χ^2
<i>Clergy (survey 1, N = 265, survey 2, N =143)</i>			
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	34	30	0.64
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	29	49	15.31***
<i>Laity (survey 1, N = 899, survey 2, N =303)</i>			
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	22	24	0.58
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	22	32	13.31***

Note: *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on non-rural church

	Survey 1 %	Survey 2 %	χ^2
<i>Clergy (survey 1, N = 480, survey 2, N = 228)</i>			
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	20	15	2.88
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	23	33	8.33**
<i>Laity (survey 1, N = 1,680, survey 2, N = 540)</i>			
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	14	15	0.06
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	16	25	21.84***

Note: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on non-rural response

	Survey 1			Survey 2		
	Non-rural %	Rural %	χ^2	Non-rural %	Rural %	χ^2
<i>Clergy</i>						
Our church buildings ...	20	34	17.18***	15	30	12.28***
Key lay people ...	23	29	4.11*	33	49	9.52**
<i>Laity</i>						
Our church buildings ...	14	22	25.25***	15	24	10.49**
Key lay people ...	16	22	13.48***	25	32	5.23*

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$