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Attitude Toward Virtual Communion in Relation to Church Tradition during the COVID-19  
pandemic in the United Kingdom

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### **Abstract**

Attitude toward virtual communion was assessed among 3,300 Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Free Church clergy and laity during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK in 2021. A six-item unidimensional scale (Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion, SATVC) assessed attitude related to receiving communion during online services, the necessity of priests for consecration and lay presidency of communion at home. Church tradition predicted attitude in ways that were in line with historical understandings of the Eucharist and ecclesial debates about the necessity of priests to preside over ritual. Within traditions, other factors operated in different ways, producing a complex web of interactions. Older people were more positive about virtual communion than younger ones, but mainly in Catholic traditions. Clergy were more negative in most traditions except Free Church. Having a generally conservative doctrinal stance drove Catholic and Reformed traditions in opposite directions. Liturgical stance predicted SATVC independently of doctrinal stance, and more traditional stance tended to lead to more uniformity, rather than divergence, between traditions.

### **Keywords**

pandemic, church, Eucharist, online ritual, virtual worship

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Catholic and Reformed views of the Eucharist**

The theology and ecclesiology of the Eucharist has long been a subject of church debate and academic study (Bradshaw & Johnson, 2012; Douglas, 2011, 2012; Kilmartin, 1994, 1998; O'Loughlin, 2015). The medieval Church in the West developed what Douglas (2011 termed eucharistic 'realism', which implies a close identification of the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements and a ritual that truly represented the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Alongside this was a stress on priests as representing Christ in the ritual and on practices that tended to restrict the reception of the elements to priests rather than people (Rubin, 1991). Stemming from this was the idea that 'reception' for laity could be solely by observing the raised consecrated host (Biernoff, 2002), which led to the idea of 'spiritual communion', notably in some mystical traditions (Cornet, 2020). The Reformation rejected or modified the realistic approach to the Eucharist, developing what Douglas termed eucharistic 'nominalism', which sees the elements as symbols of Christ's presence elsewhere (in heaven or among the gathered congregation) and the sacrifice being one of thanks and praise by the believer. Following Luther, many Protestant denominations retained the notion of Holy Communion as a sacrament of Real Presence and tended to restrict presiding at the Eucharist to ordained ministers (Wandel, 2006; White, 1999). There was a greater emphasis on participation through reciting liturgy and singing, and in receiving both bread and wine.

Post-Reformation reforms in the Catholic Church, and other historical developments such as the twentieth-century ecumenical and liturgical movements, have led to understandings of the Eucharist and its liturgy that are shared by most mainstream denominations (Bradshaw & Johnson, 2012). For example, the World Council of Churches (WCC) *Faith and Order Paper 111* outlined aspects of Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry that were agreed by participating churches (WCC, 1982). For the Eucharist, it identified five

central aspects: thanksgiving to the Father, memorial of Christ, invocation of the Spirit, communion of the faithful, and meal of the Kingdom. These are reflected in eucharistic prayers and liturgies, which encourage congregations to participate and receive both bread and wine. The trend for many Protestant churches has been to increase the frequency of communion services, something which was encouraged in the WCC report: “As the eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday. As this is the new sacramental meal of the people of God, every Christian should be encouraged to receive communion frequently.” (WCC, 1982: 16)

## **1.2 Christian worship during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Eucharistic practices have been shaped by both theological ideas and the contingencies of ecclesial life. The COVID-19 pandemic emerged suddenly in 2019, and by March 2020 churches were closed in many countries, including the United Kingdom (Corpuz & Sarmiento, 2021; Dowson, 2020; Martyr, 2022; McGowan, 2020). The Church of England went further than some other denominations by denying access to church buildings even for clergy (Anon., 2020). The rapid response of churches in developing worship online has been documented and discussed in many countries (Campbell, 2020; Campbell & Osteen, 2020; Ganiel, 2021; Newport, 2020; Oliver, 2022; Oxholm et al., 2021; Pillay, 2020; Przywara et al., 2021; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020), including the UK (Edelman et al., 2021; Lovell et al., 2022; Village & Francis, 2021b). Although ‘virtual churches’ had been in existence for many years (Campbell, 2010; Campbell, 2012; Hutchings, 2010) they had represented a small minority, and the vast majority of worshippers were used to attending a service in church. For most churches the pandemic demanded the rapid learning of new skills in digitally recording and distributing worship services that could be accessed by people in their homes.

In most cases the online solutions were to either live-stream or pre-record worship from churches (where this was allowed) or from homes. Many churches created pre-recorded services of the Word from material that individuals produced at home such as liturgies, intercessions, or music. Digital expertise allowed some churches to combine individually recorded singing parts into credible choir music. Acts such as lighting candles at home during worship allowed different participation, which may have fostered spiritual life (Francis et al., 2022). Many churches offered communion services, which were recorded in homes when churches were inaccessible. On Easter Sunday 2020, just after the first lockdown began, the Archbishop of Canterbury broadcast a communion service from his kitchen in Lambeth Palace. Where clergy could access churches, they offered pre-recorded or live-streamed Eucharists without the presence of an in-person congregation or a congregation limited by prevailing regulations. When restrictions eased and socially-distanced worship was allowed in churches, live-streamed Eucharists would have been similar to televised services that have been available to many people for decades (Davies, 1983; Zordan, 2014).

### **1.3 Eucharistic worship during the pandemic**

These circumstances raised particular issues related to eucharistic worship which, while brought into sharp focus by the pandemic lockdowns, had longstanding historical roots. BurrIDGE (2022) has usefully summarised the responses of various denominations in the UK to the question of what to do about eucharistic practice when churches were closed. The Church of England issued guidance on Holy Communion during the Easter season of 2020, which BurrIDGE noted contained three suggestions which ‘were to dominate our relationship to the eucharist in the coming months’ (p. 9), namely the solo celebration by clergy in their homes, abstaining from communion, or replacing it with ‘spiritual communion’. More specifically, the guidance was clear that people receiving elements while watching on-screen eucharists should be discouraged from imagining there could be any sort of ‘remote

consecration'. Methodists tended to follow similar practice to the Church of England, stressing that 'remote consecration' was not possible, but pointing to Catholic notions of 'spiritual communion' as being a helpful way of receiving sacramental grace at a distance. Baptists, with their very different notions of priesthood and sacrament, had fewer inhibitions in encouraging those in front of screens to participate by consuming their own elements at home. The Roman Catholic Church did not prevent priests from using churches in the first national lockdown, and many would live-stream Mass from churches. Those watching at home were not encouraged to participate by consuming elements, but the practice meant that Catholics may have had a greater sense of continuity and community, especially in the first lockdown when there were no services for gathered congregations.

#### **1.4 Issues related to eucharistic worship in lockdown**

In an article for the *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies*, Samuel Goyvaerts and Fokke Wouda (2020) examined the public debate about the sacraments and online worship during the early lockdowns in the Netherlands. Their categorisation provides a useful indication of issues about eucharistic worship in lockdown. They identified four 'adaptations' to liturgical life:

##### **1.4.1 Abstinence**

In this response, worshippers do not partake of Holy Communion in their homes. For some, this was complete break with liturgical worship, but for many it may have involved joining only services of the Word online. The drive in the last century to increase the frequency of partaking the Eucharist means both Catholics and many Protestants would be keenly aware of the absence of sacramental worship, but some traditions would see celebrating the Word as a higher priority than celebrating the Sacrament. Theologically it may be that some would argue that the lack of a gathered congregation would mean any eucharistic act was pointless or invalid, which harks back to Zwinglian debates about the symbolic meaning of

‘communion’. In the Netherlands, some commentators argued that not receiving the Eucharist was a positive way of recognising the brokenness of the faith community. On the other hand, Catholic traditions with a very ‘high’ sacramental view might also argue that online communion should not happen, but for the different reason that such acts are sacramentally invalid. Clearly one issue in this debate is whether online worship is an appropriate space for the Eucharist at all.

#### ***1.4.2 Spectator liturgy***

Goyvaerts and Wouda use this term to refer to a physically celebrated Eucharist that is recorded or live-streamed and where worshippers at home simply watch the service. Historically this seems to hark back to the idea that the priest celebrates and receives the elements on behalf of the gathered congregation, and to the more extreme medieval idea of ‘ocular communion’ (Biernoff, 2002). It is also aligned with the practice of watching televised communion services. The Catholic practice of ‘spiritual communion’ has been promoted during the pandemic, with a suggestion that this should be revitalised (Cornet, 2020; Foley, 2021; Parish, 2020). This might involve a more active participation than mere spectating, but what it does not involve is the receiving of consecrated elements.

#### ***1.4.3 Private domestic liturgy***

One solution noted by Goyvaerts and Wouda was for people to celebrate communion at home. This is not, technically ‘virtual communion’ but a response to the same context. This practise is in line with an emphasis of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ and would pose few problems in some Protestant denominations. Indeed, traditional doctrinal stances may actively encourage it, but for Catholic and many Protestant traditions it goes against doctrine or ecclesial order or both. Luther opted to restrict presidency to clergy for the maintenance of good order (Smith, 1996), something which has continued to guide practice in this area for most Protestant denominations (Newbigin, 1996).



The rise in the frequency of communion services and shortages of clergy have raised the issue of lay presidency for many denominations. For example, it has been debated for some years in parts of the Anglican Communion (Johnston & Pickard, 1995; McPherson, 1999; Newbigin, 1996; Taylor, 2009). A celebrated case has been the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, well known for its Reformed tradition, which has long argued for lay presidency on the grounds that there should be an equivalence of Word and Sacrament (Jensen, 2012). At stake are questions about whether a priest is necessary for the elements to be consecrated, and if not whether presidency of the Eucharist should be allowed for all lay people, or just those who are trained and authorised to do so.

#### ***1.4.4 Embedded domestic liturgy***

For Goyvaerts and Wouda this was a more active participation than ‘spectator liturgy’ which, in a sense, expands the sacred physical space of the church building into a virtual space. Participants would join in liturgical responses, and often consume bread and wine along with others on screen or in the virtual space. The authors noted that this bringing of a ritual usually reserved for a ‘sacred’ space into the ‘profane’ space of everyday life proved profoundly moving for some. This sense of sharing communion may depend on whether the elements are consumed in ‘real time’ in live-streamed worship as opposed to joining in pre-recorded worship. Presumably the theological assumption behind this practice is that the consecration ‘at a distance’ is valid and effective and that there is an implied, if not physically enacted, gathering of God’s people around the eucharistic feast.

#### **1.5 Virtual Communion in the UK in the 2021 national lockdowns**

This study examines attitude toward the practice of virtual communion during the 2021 lockdowns in the UK. The term ‘virtual communion’ here includes attitude toward ‘private domestic liturgy’ as defined by Goyvaerts and Wouda (2020) and which includes the wider issue of lay presidency. It is set in the context of particular studies in the UK during the 2020

lockdowns, which explored some of these issues and which indicated the need for more detailed quantitative analyses (see Grundy, 2022) . The British Ritual Innovation under Covid (BRIC) study examined the effects of lockdowns on a wide range of religious groups (Edelman et al., 2021). It included a sample of 175 from the Church of England, and smaller numbers from Catholic and Reformed churches. While the study found innovation, it also found that pandemic rituals were perceived less well than pre-pandemic rituals ‘By almost every metric, the experience of pandemic rituals have been worse than those that came before them. They are perceived as less meaningful, less communal, less spiritual, less effective, and so on.’ (Edelman et al., 2021: 7). This was also the conclusion of a study of 607 clergy and laity within the Church of England by the Church Army’s Research Unit, which found many people reported their experience of communion was worse, or much worse, than before the pandemic (Lovell et al., 2022).

The *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey in 2020 collected data from clergy and lay people in a range of traditions, but especially the Church of England. Three analyses of the data are particularly relevant to developing the research questions in the present study. The first examined attitude toward virtual church among the Church of England clergy and laity in the sample ( $N = 4,374$ ) using a six-item scale that assessed general attitude toward online worship and digital church (Village & Francis, 2021b). Results demonstrated that attitude toward virtual church were most positive among women, those in their 40s and 50s, those with psychological type preferences for intuition and feeling, clergy, those who did not live in inner cities, those who preferred modern worship or who had liberal views on doctrine, and among Evangelicals and Charismatics. This indicated that attitudes might be shaped by a range of factors interacting in a complex manner. A second analysis of data from the same study used a wider sample of 6,476 from Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Free Church denominations across England to explore attitude toward church buildings (Village &

Francis, 2021a). A key finding was that those from more Catholic traditions (Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics) held stronger notions of church buildings as ‘sacred’ space than those from more Protestant traditions (Anglican Evangelicals, Methodists, and Baptists). Long-standing historical views on the place of buildings in the economy of faith were present and heightened in the pandemic. The study also noted important differences in how other factors operated in different traditions. For example, young people in Catholic traditions held more positive attitude toward church buildings, but the opposite was true for more Protestant traditions. A third analysis of the *Coronavirus, Church & You* dataset looked specifically at attitude toward communion-at-home practices in the Church of England during lockdown by comparing responses of 3,275 laity and 1,351 clergy who self-identified as Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church or Evangelical (Francis & Village, 2021). Analysis showed the way in which different historic understandings of eucharistic worship were still present in these three traditions, especially so among clergy. Laity were also more positive about lay presidency at home than were clergy.

Together, these surveys conducted during the 2020 lockdown suggested that it was important to continue to monitor responses to online worship as lockdowns continued into 2021. The *Covid-19 & Church-21* survey was intended to do this, and included a range of items specifically related to the issue of eucharistic practice in lockdown. It builds on the previous analysis of attitudes in the Church of England by including responses from Roman Catholics and those in Free Churches, in a similar way to the study of attitude toward church buildings in the *Coronavirus, Church & You* dataset (Village & Francis, 2021a). It develops the study of eucharistic practice in the Church of England by positing a single measure of attitude toward virtual communion that embraces some of the historical issues that have emerged in new ways during the pandemic. It examines which factors predict this attitude and whether these differ between church traditions.

## 1.6 Research questions

This study addresses four related research questions:

1. Can attitude toward virtual communion be measured by a unidimensional scale based on eucharistic practices during the pandemic?
2. Does attitude toward virtual communion align with those predicted by historical differences between Catholic and Protestant traditions?
3. How does attitude toward virtual communion vary with sex, age, ordination status, doctrinal stance, and liturgical stance?
4. Do predictors of individual differences in attitude toward virtual communion vary in their effects between church traditions?

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Procedure

During the third lockdown in England an online survey, named *Covid-19 & Church-21*, was delivered through the Qualtrics XM platform from 22 January to 23 July 2021. It built on an earlier survey of the Church of England run during the first lockdown in 2020 (Village & Francis, 2020) but was designed to be used by people from a range of church traditions. It was promoted through church networks as well as church newspapers such as the Anglican *Church Times* and the Roman Catholic *Catholic Voices*. Of the 5,853 total responses, 74.2% (4,344) were from people living in the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland) and, of these, 76.0% (3,300) were from Anglican, Roman Catholic, or Free Church (Methodists, Baptist, or Presbyterian) churches.

### 2.2 Sample profiles

The final sample of 3,300 comprised 58% women and 42% men, the majority (52%) were in their 50s or 60s, and 27% were ordained (Table 1). In terms of denomination, 61% were Anglicans, 31% Roman Catholic, and 9% either Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian. Profiles

differed slightly between the different traditions (Table 1); the main disparity was the lower proportion of clergy in the Roman Catholic sample, which reflected the way in which the survey was promoted mainly through *Catholic Voices*, a lay network.

-Insert Table 1 about here-

### 2.3 Instruments

*Attitude toward virtual communion* by a new scale, Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion (SATVC), based on six Likert items with a five-point response ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ (= 1) to ‘Strongly Agree’ (= 5) (Table 2). The items covered the taking of communion at home during live-streamed or pre-recorded services, the necessity of a priest to ensure the elements are consecrated, whether communion should be part of online worship, and presidency at home by everyone or by authorised lay people only. A high score indicated a positive attitude toward communion being received as part of an online service and the possibility of permitting lay people to preside.

-Insert Table 2 about here-

*Theological and liturgical stance* were measured using two semantic differential items derived from Randall’s LIBCON scale (Randall, 2005; Village, 2018). The original seven-point scale was introduced by the question ‘Where would you locate your faith position?’ and anchored by ‘liberal’ at one pole and ‘conservative’ at the other. A study of Church of England clergy and laity (Village, 2018) showed that this scale functions well to identify those who hold to traditional doctrinal beliefs and conservative moral values, but it works less well in identifying those who have preference for modern versus traditional forms of worship. Village (2018) suggested using separate scales for doctrine and worship and these were adopted in the survey. ‘Doctrinal stance’ was assessed by a single seven-point scale anchored by ‘Liberal about doctrine’ at one pole and ‘Conservative about doctrine’ at the other. ‘Liturgical stance’ was assessed by a

single seven-point scale anchored by ‘Modern worship’ at one pole and ‘Traditional worship’ at the other. In each case, a high score indicated a more conservative or traditional stance.

*Church tradition* was categorized initially using a forced-choice item that included the responses ‘Anglican’, ‘Catholic’, ‘Methodist’, ‘Baptist’, and ‘Presbyterian’. For the purposes of this study, Anglicans were further defined using another of Randall’s semantic seven-point differential scales anchored by ‘Catholic’ and ‘Evangelical’ (Randall, 2005). This scale has been widely used in the Church of England (Village, 2012), and is a useful indicator of those who belong to the two main wings, or who are ‘Broad-Church Anglicans’ (a term used in this context to refer to those who do not identify strongly as being either Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical). Those who responded ‘Methodist’, ‘Baptist’, or ‘Presbyterian’ were classed as ‘Free Church’.

*Other predictor variables* were sex (male = 0, female = 1), age (by decade 18-29 = 2, 30 = 3 etc. to 80+ = 8), and ordination status (lay = 0, ordained = 1).

## **2.4 Analysis**

The first step in analysis was to compare the bivariate associations between SATVC scores and predictor variables. The second step was to examine the independent main effects on SATVC scores of individual predictor variables by controlling for the effects of others. Model 1 used the Generalized Linear Models (GENLIN) procedure in SPSS 28 (IBM Corporation, 2021), with ordained as the reference category for status, Broad-Church Anglicans as the reference group for church tradition, and age, doctrinal stance and liturgical stance treated as continuous variables. The final step of analysis examined whether the effects of age, ordination, liturgical stance and doctrinal stance varied between church traditions. Interactions effects were tested using four separate models nested within model 1. Model 2 tested the interaction of age and church tradition, model 3 tested the interaction of ordained status and church tradition; model 4 tested the interaction of doctrinal stance and church

tradition, and model 5 tested the interaction of liturgical stance and church tradition.

Significant interaction effects were displayed graphically to ease interpretation, using parameter values from the various fitted models.

### **3 Results**

#### **3.1 Creating the Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion**

Factor analysis (principal components extraction and varimax rotation) indicated a single-dimension scale with a high internal consistency reliability of .87 as measured by Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951). The item stating communion should not be part of online worship loaded less well on the scale than others because it was less likely to be endorsed; removing it would have increased the alpha reliability to .91. It was retained, however, because of a high face validity and because it allowed differentiation of the minority with strong negative attitude toward virtual communion. In this sample, the scale was approximately normally distributed (skew= 0.003; kurtosis = -0.945); mean score was 17.6 ( $SD = 6.3$ ).

#### **3.2 Bivariate associations**

Mean SATVC scores were as might be expected for the different church traditions (Table 3), with the Catholic traditions (Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic) being the least positive, the Protestant traditions (Anglican Evangelicals and Free Church) being the most positive, and Broad-Church Anglicans falling between these two groupings. Bivariate correlations of the other variables (Table 4) suggested that those with more traditional liturgical stance and conservative doctrinal stance tended to be less positive about virtual communion. Women were more positive than men, older people more positive than younger ones, and laity more positive than clergy. There were correlations between predictor variables that partly resulted from contingencies in the cross-sectional dataset (for example, clergy were more likely to be male than female) and partly reflected trends found in earlier surveys such as more liberal

views among older people and among women (Village & Francis, 2021b). These correlations suggested multiple regression was necessary to isolate the effects of tradition and doctrinal or liturgical stance on attitude toward virtual communion.

-Insert Tables 3 & 4 about here-

### **3.3 Multiple regression**

Model 1 (Table 5) confirmed that the effects of age ordination status, church tradition, doctrinal stance, and liturgical stance persisted after controlling for other variables in the model. The sex difference disappeared, perhaps because it was a proxy for liturgical and doctrinal stance, where men were generally more conservative than women. The effects of liturgical and doctrinal stance remained significant after controlling for each other: although they were positively correlated, the coefficient was small, and it seemed that the positive effects of being more drawn to modern worship and liberal doctrine were additive in influencing attitude toward virtual communion.

-Insert Table 5 about here-

Model 2 tested the interaction of age and church tradition, which was statistically significant. This was because the positive correlation of age and SATVC scores was apparent in Catholic traditions but less so in Broad-Church Anglicans or those from Protestant traditions (Figure 1)

-Insert Figure 1 about here-

Model 3 tested the interaction of ordination status and church tradition, which was statistically significant. Clergy tended to be generally more negative than laity about virtual communion, but this was more pronounced among Catholic traditions than among others (Figure 2). Among Free Churches, clergy were, if anything, more positive about virtual communion than were laity.



-Insert Figure 2 about here-

Model 4 tested the interaction of doctrinal stance and church tradition, which was statistically significant. Across all five traditions, those with strongly liberal doctrinal views tended to have positive attitude, with average scores in the range of 15 to 20 in each case. However, among those with conservative doctrinal stances, there was greater divergence, with Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics having lower scores, and Free Church members having higher scores (Figure 3). The effects of doctrinal conservatism seemed to work in opposite directions in Catholics and Protestants.

-Insert Figure 3 about here-

Model 5 tested the interaction of liturgical stance and church tradition, which was statistically significant. This interaction worked in the opposite direction to doctrinal stance (Figure 4), with greater divergence among those who preferred modern rather than traditional worship. The interaction was less marked and arose mainly because Anglo-Catholics showed little effect of liturgical stance and were consistently negative about virtual communion, whereas those from Free Churches showed a marked decline in positivity with more preference for traditional worship. This was in the opposite direction to the trend for more conservative doctrine in this group.

-Insert Figure 4 about here-

These interactions were tested separately and in the same model (not shown) and remained statistically significant, suggesting that they indicated independent effects whereby age, ordination, doctrinal stance, and liturgical stance operated differently in Catholic and Protestant traditions, with Broad-Church Anglicans usually falling between the two groups.

## **4 Discussion**

### **4.1 Measuring attitude toward virtual communion**

This study among a convenience sample of 3,300 people from Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Free Churches has demonstrated the usefulness of a single measure of attitude toward virtual communion developed during the third national COVID-19 lockdown in 2021.

Restricted access to church buildings allowed underlying theological differences to emerge more sharply because of the pressure to depart from long-standing eucharistic practices in different denominations. This measure is based on attitude relating to online communion services and lay presidency, which seem to reflect a common overall stance: those who have more positive attitude toward the possibility of online communion services also tend to be more positive about the idea of lay presidency of communion in peoples' homes. Opinions were nuanced, and there was slightly less support for receiving at home during pre-recorded than during live-streamed worship, and less support for lay presidency by any lay person rather than by properly authorised lay people.

### **4.2 Differences between traditions**

The SATVC scores reflected the broad theological divisions between Catholics and Protestants concerning who should preside over communion and under what circumstances elements can be received. Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics tended to be more restrictive (reflected in lower scores), Free Church members and Anglican Evangelicals less restrictive (reflected in higher scores), and Broad-Church Anglicans fell between these two. These findings parallel a similar analysis of attitude toward church buildings during the first pandemic lockdown in 2020, when Catholic traditions showed more positive attitude toward church buildings than did Protestant traditions (Village & Francis, 2021a). Both studies show that although the theologies being examined have a long and complex historical development,

they remain salient today and, crucially, are amenable to empirical investigation. The pandemic gave a time-limited opportunity to explore these theologies: future work may be able to develop more nuanced instruments that have greater validity in post-pandemic church contexts.

#### **4.3 Predicting attitude within church traditions**

It is useful for Churches to understand who is or is not likely to be more favourably disposed towards virtual communion. The overall trends were for more positive attitude among women than among men, among the elderly than among the young, among laity than among clergy, among those with more liberal stances on doctrine, and among those with greater preference for modern than traditional worship. Men tended to be doctrinally conservative and to prefer traditional worship compared to women, and in this sample a higher proportion of men were ordained in Catholic traditions. These factors seemed to explain the overall sex difference, which did not persist when these factors were controlled for. Gender *per se* may not tell us much about who is likely to support virtual communion.

Age was a more consistent predictor, with younger people tending to be less supportive of virtual communion than were older people. This might seem counter-intuitive, since younger generations are likely to be more familiar with the online world. However, it echoes attitudes toward virtual church generally identified in the Church of England during the pandemic. In the first lockdown, it was people in their 40s and 50s who were most pro virtual church, and younger people and those over 60 tended to be less enthusiastic (Village & Francis, 2021b). When it came to affective responses to online worship in the third lockdown, younger people tended to show more negative affect than did older people (Village & Francis, 2022). In terms of the attitude toward virtual communion, this study has shown that this attitude is predicted by age mainly in Catholic rather than in other traditions. It is younger Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics who tend to eschew online communion.

They are also the ones who most value church buildings (Village & Francis, 2021a). Among Protestant traditions, such as Anglican Evangelicals and Free Churches, young and old tend to have a more uniform and positive attitude toward virtual communion.

It is perhaps not surprising that clergy tend to be more restrictive in their attitude toward virtual communion, especially in Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, where there are rules restricting presidency to the priestly office. What is apparent from this study is that not all lay people agree with this sort of clericalism, even if they go along with the rules. In Free Churches the notion of ‘priesthood of all believers’ means that communion can be led by those not ordained, though it is interesting that in this small sample, it was the ministers who were slightly more in favour of virtual communion than were the people they served.

Having a general liberal or conservative stance toward matters of doctrine was a key predictor of attitude toward virtual communion, but it operated in different ways between traditions. For those in Free Churches, conservative doctrine seemed to drive them toward a more positive view, with greater freedom for receiving at home and lay presidency. More liberal views in these traditions perhaps points to a greater ecumenism such that clerical supremacy becomes more important. In Catholic traditions conservative doctrine strengthens clericalism, whereas liberal doctrine opens the way to less clerical control of the Eucharist. Broad-Church Anglicans, true to the *via media*, fell neatly between these positions. The key points here are that conservatism may drive attitude toward virtual communion in opposite directions depending on traditions, and that liberalism tends to draw traditions closer to a common attitude.

Communion is an act of worship, and views about worship also predict to some extent how people will view virtual communion. This is not necessarily related to their views on doctrine, and the two stances had independent effects. This was also true for the differences between traditions, which followed a different pattern than for doctrinal stance. Take Free

Churches, for example, where preference for modern over traditional worship was associated with much more positive attitude toward virtual communion. Among Anglo-Catholics, however, liturgical stance had little effect; for them, it was their doctrinal stance that really mattered.

#### **4.4 Limitations of the study**

This study was based on an opportunistic sample that assessed attitude during an unusual time in church life. It was part of a survey with a wide scope, rather than a study focused on one particular issue. Although the sample was reasonably large for this kind of study, it was weighted toward Catholic traditions, and there were fewer from Free Churches. It would be useful in future studies to sample a wider range Free Churches more thoroughly. Random probability samples are difficult to achieve for churchgoers but would allow more confidence in generalising the findings. The SATVC scale is commendably short and dealt with issues raised during the pandemic lockdowns. It would be helpful to devise more nuanced measure that assess different dimensions of eucharistic theology when churches have adjusted to post-pandemic patterns of worship.

### **5 Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to examine the way that attitude toward virtual communion varied between church traditions in the UK during the third COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2021. The main interest was the Church of England but including Roman Catholics and those from Free Churches (Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian) in the study allowed the Catholic and Postestant wings of the Church of England to be interpreted in a wider ecclesial context. Analysis of a sample of 3,300 clergy and lay people led to the following conclusions:

Attitude could be summarised by a single measure that showed those who were positive about people taking part in online communion services (and receiving the elements at home) also tended to be in favour of some sort of lay presidency of communion at home.

Church tradition predicted attitude in ways that were in line with historical understandings of the Eucharist and ecclesial debates about the necessity of priests to preside over ritual. Anglo-Catholics aligned with Roman Catholics, Evangelical Anglicans with Free Church members, and Broad-Church Anglicans occupied the middle ground.

Other factors modified attitude within traditions in ways that were complex, but sometimes explicable in theological terms. On average, older people were more positive, and younger people less positive, about virtual communion. This was largely because of a strong correlation among Catholic traditions, where those under 50 were the most opposed to virtual communion. On average, clergy tended to be more opposed to virtual communion than were laity, especially in Catholic traditions. In Free Churches the trend may have been reversed.

Doctrinal and liturgical stances also predicted attitude independently of one another. In Catholic traditions conservative doctrine implied more negative attitude toward virtual communion but in this was less so in Protestant traditions, and the reverse was true in Free Churches. Liberal views on doctrine tended to bring traditions together while conservative views emphasised long-standing differences. For worship it was preference for modern rather than traditional worship that led to more positive views of virtual communion. However, there was more divergence between traditions among those who preferred modern worship than among those who preferred traditional worship.

The pandemic raised urgently the question of virtual eucharistic ritual, and this is still a live issue as churches wrestle with hybrid church in the post-pandemic era. Churches such as the Church of England may allow some flexibility of practice or may wish to impose common rules across the various traditions. This research shows how opinion varies across the Church and gives important insights into the factors that shape those opinions. Future detailed, specific surveys may help to explain with more certainty the trends observed in this sample.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

#### **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-AV0420-01). 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.

#### **Conflict of interest**

No conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Table 1

*Sample profile*

		RC	AC	BA	AE	FC	All
<i>N</i> =		1005	582	1026	396	291	3300
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Sex	Male	38	51	39	52	42	43
	Female	62	49	62	48	58	58
Age	20s	7	2	1	2	4	3
	30s	9	5	3	5	7	6
	40s	14	9	10	10	16	11
	50s	22	16	21	25	27	21
	60s	25	32	34	38	27	31
	70s	20	30	26	17	17	23
	80s+	3	5	5	3	3	4
Status	Lay	94	60	66	60	73	73
	Ordained	6	40	34	40	27	27

Note. RC = Roman Catholic, AC = Anglo-Catholic, BA = Broad-Church Anglicans, AE = Anglican Evangelicals, FC = Free Church,



Table 2

*Items in the Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion (SATVC) scale*

Item	SD	DA	NC	AG	SA	CITC
	%	%	%	%	%	
People at home should be allowed to take bread and wine during live-streamed services	22	14	20	24	19	.85
People at home should be allowed to take bread and wine at home during pre-recorded services	24	18	23	20	15	.84
The priest needs to be physically present for the bread and wine to be consecrated	13	20	17	19	30	.75
Communion should not be part of online worship	28	33	22	10	6	.25
All lay people should be allowed to preside at communion in their homes	30	21	25	14	10	.74
Properly prepared lay people should be authorised to preside at communion in their homes	25	16	26	22	10	.64

Note:  $N = 3,300$ . SD = Strongly Disagree, DA = Disagree, NC = Not Certain, AG = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree, CITC = Corrected Item-Total Correlation. Cronbach's alpha = .87.

Table 3

*Mean SATVC scores by church tradition.*

Church tradition	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Roman Catholic	1005	14.6	5.6
Anglo-Catholic	582	14.9	5.8
Broad-Church Anglican	1026	19.1	5.5
Anglican Evangelical	396	21.1	5.8
Free Church	291	23.3	4.9

Note:  $F(4, 3295) = 241.2, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$ .

Table 4

*Bivariate correlations of SATVC with predictor variables*

	SATVC	Traditional worship	Conservative doctrine	Ordained	Age
Sex (female)	.06***	-.05**	-.13***	-.21***	-.02
Age	.16***	.01	-.15***	-.01	
Status (ordained)	-.09***	-.14***	.02		
Conservative doctrine	-.24***	.20***			
Traditional worship	-.29***				

Note: SATVC = Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion. \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 5

*Multiple regression of SATVC*

Parameter	Category	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(Intercept)		19.34	20.71	19.45	18.13	19.28
Sex (female)	Male	-.06	-.02	-.10	-.09	-.05
Age		.49***	.24	.49***	.45***	.51*
Status (ordained)	Lay	2.73***	2.75***	2.79***	2.75***	2.55***
Church Tradition	Roman Catholic	-4.19***	-6.32***	-4.57***	-.63	-3.58***
(Broad-Church Anglican)	Anglo-Catholic	-3.39***	-7.03***	-4.38***	-2.41***	-6.69***
	Anglican Evangelical	2.83***	1.40	3.38***	.83	3.55***
	Free Church	4.23***	5.70***	6.98***	.57	6.97***
Conservative doctrine		-.65***	-.65***	-.66***	-.41***	-.67***
Traditional worship		-.63***	-.61***	-.66***	-.48***	-.60***
Tradition*age	Roman Catholic		.38*			
	Anglo-Catholic		.62**			
	Anglican Evangelical		.25			

	Free Church	-.30	
Tradition*status	Roman Catholic	.40	
	Anglo-Catholic	1.72**	
	Anglican Evangelical	-.92	
	Free Church	-3.78***	
Tradition*Doctrine	Roman Catholic	-.89***	
	Anglo-Catholic	-.32*	
	Anglican Evangelical	.33	
	Free Church	.95***	
Tradition*Worship	Roman Catholic	-.12	
	Anglo-Catholic	.65***	
	Anglican Evangelical	-.20	
	Free Church	-.72***	

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Note. SATVC = Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion. Figures are parameter values relative to reference values. Reference categories are shown in parentheses. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Models 2 to 5 are nested in Model 1.

Figure 1

*Interaction effect of age and church tradition on Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion (SATVC) scores. (Note. RC = Roman Catholic, AC = Anglo-Catholic, AE = Anglican Evangelicals, FC = Free Church, BA = Broad-Church Anglicans)*

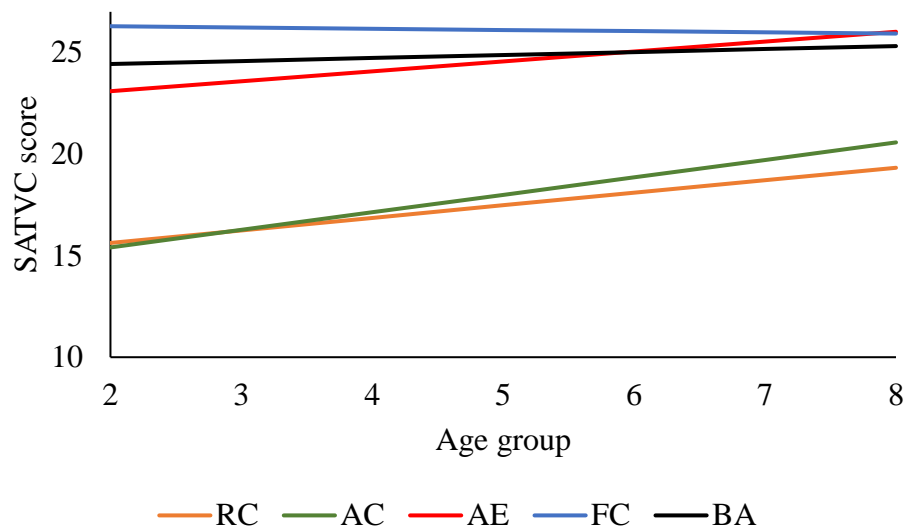


Figure 2

*Interaction effect of ordination status and church tradition on Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion (SATVC) scores.*

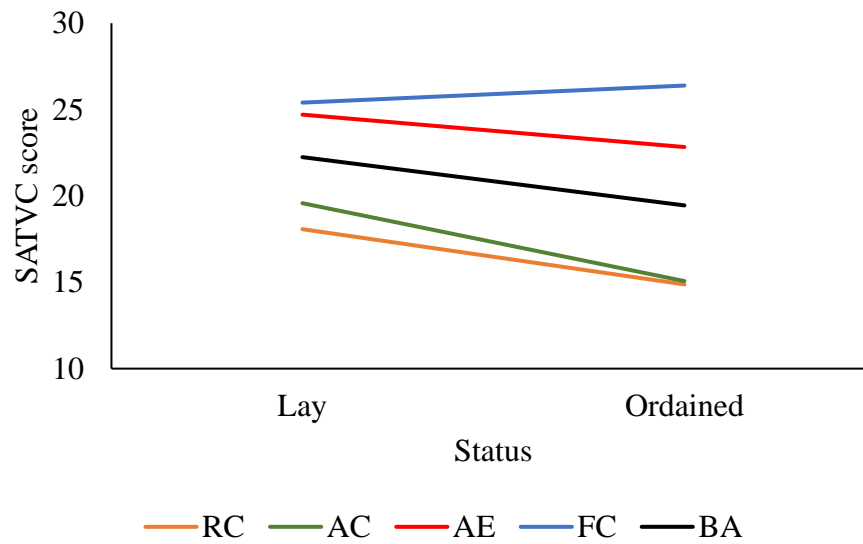


Figure 3

*Interaction effect of doctrinal stance and church tradition on Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion (SATVC) scores. (Note. RC = Roman Catholic, AC = Anglo-Catholic, AE = Anglican Evangelicals, FC = Free Church, BA = Broad-Church Anglicans. Higher doctrinal stance indicates a more conservative stance)*

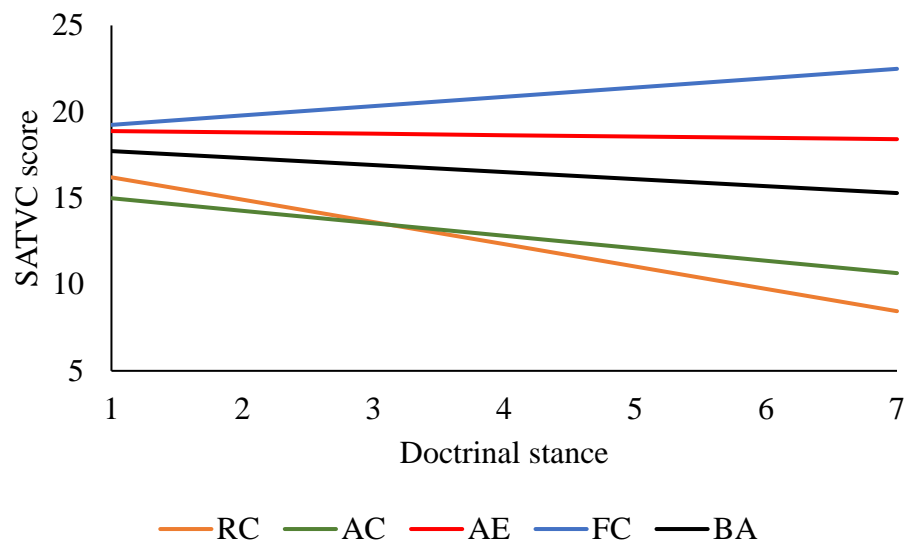
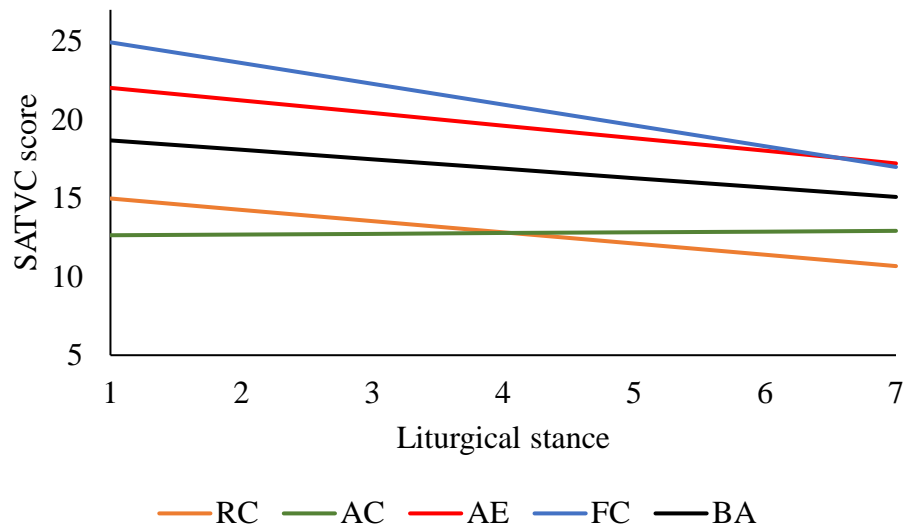




Figure 4

*Interaction effect of liturgical stance and church tradition on Scale of Attitude Toward Virtual Communion (SATVC) scores. (Note. RC = Roman Catholic, AC = Anglo-Catholic, AE = Anglican Evangelicals, FC = Free Church, BA = Broad-Church Anglicans. Higher liturgical stance indicates preference for traditional rather than modern worship)*



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