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Churches and faith: Attitude towards church buildings during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown
among churchgoers in England

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Abstract

Attitude toward church buildings was assessed among a sample of 6,476 churchgoers in England during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020. The six item Scale of Attitude toward Church Buildings (SACB) assessed a range of aspects of attitude that included the importance of buildings for Christian faith generally, buildings as witness to the faith, buildings as a motivation for faith, buildings as part of Christian identity, and buildings as central to the expression of Christian faith. The scale showed good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$). Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics showed similar positive attitude towards buildings, Anglican Evangelicals showed a less positive attitude on average that was similar to those from Free-Churches, while Broad-Church Anglican attitude lay between these two extremes. Among Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics, younger people had a more positive attitude than older people, but this was not evident in other traditions, where the trend was if anything reversed. On average, men had more a positive attitude than women, and lay people a more positive attitude than clergy, though both trends were small in magnitude. These findings suggest that the significance of buildings varies among traditions in ways that may still reflect historical issues of the Reformation, but more detailed and nuanced work would be needed to explain some of the trends evident in this study.

Keywords: Age-effects, church buildings, Church of England, Covid-19, Free Churches, Roman Catholics

1 Introduction

When the UK government instituted a nationwide lockdown on 23 March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Church of England followed the next day by banning clergy as well as lay people from entering churches.¹ There followed an unprecedented period of several months during which nearly all churchgoers across the country were unable to access church buildings at all, even for private prayer. Instead, they had to find alternative means of worshipping and maintaining contacts with their fellow congregants, without actually congregating. The remarkable growth of online worship and other virtual ecclesial activity will no doubt in time be thoroughly documented and perhaps will lead to lasting changes in the way that Christians practise their faith. In the meantime, the sudden loss of access to churches must have made many reflect on the place of such buildings in their life of faith. How important were buildings to their Christian identity and faith expression, and did they think the loss of access to buildings was likely to be detrimental to the Church generally?

This paper reports on some of the data collected as part of the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, which was conducted during the height of the first lockdown in England. The survey assessed a wide range of experiences and responses to the lockdown, including attitudes toward buildings. We use the latter measure to explore how attitudes varied within and beyond the Church of England, and in particular how these varied among churchgoers from different faith traditions. Our underlying assumption was that there is a continuum between seeing buildings as in some sense ‘sacred’ spaces that are important to expressing Christian faith and seeing them as largely functional spaces that are of secondary importance. While this is a rather crude distinction, it has wide and deep ramifications that relate to fundamental issues in ecclesiology.

¹ A. McGowan, ‘Communion and Pandemic.’ *Journal of Anglican Studies* 18, no. 1 (2020), pp. 2-8.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355320000285>

1.1 *Theologies of place*

Ambivalence about buildings could be said to stem from the New Testament itself, as many have pointed out. While his disciples may have stood in awe of the magnificent temple buildings in Jerusalem, Jesus himself was less sanguine: ‘Not one stone here will be left on another’ (Mark 13:2). For the New Testament writers, the role of the Temple as the meeting place with God was taken over by Jesus and the fellowship of believers.² In a profound sense, the risen Christ universalises faith and moves it beyond any particular nation, place, or building. On the other hand, Christology also proclaims a radical particularity in speaking of Jesus as fully human as well as fully divine. As Andrew Rumsey points out in his exploration of parishes: ‘...the early Church’s ambivalence towards place was, in part at least, a consequence of its Christology. Its faith could not be over-localized because Christ’s divinity transcended human culture; at the same time, his full humanity meant it could not be anything but embedded in place.’³

Rumsey stands in a burgeoning tradition of writers who have explored the theology of place,⁴ perhaps as a reaction to those who have tended to draw a sharp divide between sacred and secular. John Inge argues, along with others, that the notion of ‘sacrament’ can help to re-establish the importance of place in the Christian tradition.⁵ He also stresses the ‘particularity’ of what he termed ‘sacramental events’ and noted that these occasions, when the presence of God is sensed in a heightened fashion, are often associated with place. Such sacramental encounters can become integral to the story of some places, which can lead them to being shrines and places of pilgrimage.

The importance of place may not be limited solely to ‘sites of special spiritual interest’. Rumsey’s work on Anglican parishes also draws on a range of theoretical sources,

²D. Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 256.

³A. Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM, 2017), p. 40.

⁴ For overview, see S. Bergmann, ‘Theology in Its Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God.’ *Religion Compass* 1, no. 3 (2007), pp. 353-79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2007.00025.x>.

⁵ J. Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

including some from the field of human geography, to stress that ‘parish’ is a socially constructed space, but also that social relationships are spatially constructed. ‘In this light, parish emerges as a particular form of theological space, grounded in the practice of neighbourhood.’⁶ His historical analysis of Anglican parishes uses the notion of ‘common ground’ to stress the blurring of the ecclesial and secular parishes for much of the history of Christianity in England. Parishes are places of encounter in many different senses. This kind of work on the nature and theology of place generally forms a backdrop to study of church buildings as specific examples of places that can carry significance. It gives both theological and sociological reasons why church buildings could become a focus for different kinds of religious expression and behaviours, and why they might have been particularly missed by some Christians during the pandemic lockdown. To explore this further, it is necessary to look more closely at the role of buildings themselves in English church life.

1.2 Church buildings as sacred places

The general issues raised in discussions of the theological significance of place find sharp focus when it comes to attitudes towards sacred buildings. This is a subject that has a long and complex history, especially in England where the design and reordering of parish churches has fascinated academics and aroused the passions of churchgoers. A story sometimes mentioned by writers on the subject⁷ illustrates nicely the way that different traditions might view the status of church buildings. It comes from George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury and Anglican Evangelical, who earlier in his career was incumbent of St Nicholas parish church in Durham. He describes how the radical re-ordering of the building, which stripped out and completely re-orientated the interior, was vehemently

⁶ Rumsey, p. 127

⁷ E.g. Brown, p. 256 and W. Whyte, *Unlocking the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 177.

opposed by conservationists.⁸ A banner erected by the church congregation greeted visitors with the words 'It's people that matter, not buildings'.

While this may be true at some level, history suggests that buildings themselves do in fact matter a great deal in English ecclesial life. Historians and architects have shown various ways in which buildings functioned as symbolic spaces that were metaphors and analogies for religious beliefs and ideals.⁹ The degree to which the Reformation penetrated the far reaches of England has been contested for some time,¹⁰ but there is no doubt that Protestant iconoclasm stripped many an altar and led to changes that testify to the importance of the sermon over the Eucharist in the minds of many.¹¹ Churches are designed and ordered to permit the sort of worship that particular Christian traditions value, and ancient parish churches often carry traces of how this has changed over the centuries.¹² Behind some of these changes are deeply held views about what buildings and their furnishings actually mean in terms of individual relationships with God. Such views can be complex, as some historians are discovering. Alexandra Walsham's study of how sacred objects were 'recycled' after the English Reformation showed that for some the 'profane' use of previously sacred items such as chalices was a deliberate act of iconoclasm justified by a theology that stressed the indifference of such things for faith.¹³ Others may have taken and used such objects in a domestic setting in order to keep them safe and to revere holy objects, rather than desecrate them. Walsham makes the point that it is not always easy to tell from historical records the motivations of individuals who report such recycling. In another example, Christopher

⁸ G. Carey, *The Church in the Market Place* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1984).

⁹ M. Delbeke, and A.-F. Morel, 'Metaphors in action: Early Modern church buildings as spaces of knowledge.' *Architectural History* 53 (2010), pp. 99-122. A.-F. Morel, 'Preserving the nation's zeal: Church buildings and English Christian history in Stuart England.' Chap. 24 In *The Quest for an Appropriate Past in Literature, Art and Architecture*, edited by Karl Enekel and Konrad Ottenheim. *Intersections*, (Lieden: Brill, 2018), pp. 707-730.

¹⁰ E. Duffy, 'The English Reformation after Revisionism.' *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2006), pp. 720-31.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/ren.2008.0366>. D. MacCulloch, 'The Myth of the English Reformation.' Article. *Journal of British Studies* 30, no. 1 (1991), pp. 1-19.

¹¹ J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English people* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). J. F. White, *Protestant worship and church architecture: Theological and historical considerations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

¹² N. Yates, *Buildings, faith and worship: The liturgical arrangement of Anglican Churches 1600-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹³ A. Walsham, 'Recycling the Sacred: Material Culture and Cultural Memory after the English Reformation.' *Church History* 86, no. 4 (2017), pp. 1121-1154.

Marsh's study of attitudes to church seating 1560-1640 suggested that where people sat was not simply a matter of socio-economic position, but something that carried deeper significance, and which reflected a powerful popular attachment to church buildings.¹⁴

Although the division of opinion about the sacredness of buildings dates back at least to the Reformation, William Whyte has shown that it was the Victorians who bequeathed us many of our current attitudes towards church buildings. Not only is this evident in the sense of many that a Gothic-looking building is what a church is 'supposed' to look like, but more profoundly and implicitly that 'architecture *did* something, that it helped to shape faith'.¹⁵ Whyte distils the complexity of Victorian understandings of church buildings into three headings: seeing, feeling, and visiting. Seeing points to churches experienced as 'theological texts' that encapsulate in their architecture core beliefs about the nature of God and purposes of worship. Feeling points to the way in which churches evoke powerful emotions that 'touch the heart and soul as well as inform the mind'.¹⁶ Visiting points to the way in which churches engage with the local community and those beyond core worshippers by offering sacred spaces, that could also include a range of other ecclesial structures such as vicarages, vicarage gardens, churchyards, graveyards, and church schools.

Whyte concludes that these ways of linking material buildings and faith mean that even those who radically reorder buildings often do so because they believe that the building is a mirror that reflects, and maybe even defines, the faith of the worshipping community. Such sentiment is still prevalent today, as anyone involved in reordering a church will know. Reordering may be done to allow the church building to become more useable by the community it serves, even if this seems to violate particular 'sacred spaces'.¹⁷ The emotions and conflict that can arise in such cases highlight that buildings can have importance to faith

¹⁴ C. Marsh, 'Sacred space in England, 1560-1640: The view from the pew', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53, no. 2 (2002), pp. 286-311.

¹⁵ Whyte, p.168, our italics.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 69

¹⁷ C. George, 'Shared use of church buildings or is nothing sacred?'. *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 6, no. 31 (2002), pp. 306-17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X00004701>.

in different ways: some related to a symbolic appreciation of sacred space, some to a more functional role of using a building as a means of outreach. John Inge makes this point in when he applies his sacramental theology of place to the significance of buildings in terms of them being a sign of Christian presence in a community.¹⁸

This brief outline of some work on English church buildings suggests that attitudes may vary among churchgoers, who could hold different views about aspects such as the place of buildings in their self-identity as Christians, the role of buildings as a means of enabling the expression of faith, and the significance of buildings as a Christian witness to the wider community. These might be some of the ideas that would need to be captured when trying to assess attitudes towards churches during the lockdown.

1.3 Conceptualizing and measuring ‘attitude toward church buildings’

Given the complexity theologies of place and the history of church buildings in England, a thorough conceptualization of attitudes in this area would be a considerable task. It seems likely that attitudes will be multi-dimensional and nuanced among some people. Any survey instrument that was able to capture that complexity would need to be lengthy and developed in dialogue with a range of opinion. It is not the intention of this paper to do that task, but rather to examine broad attitudes among a large sample of churchgoers. The suddenness of the Covid-19 lockdown presented an opportunity that needed to be taken quickly, with a short instrument that would sit alongside a much larger survey. We have conceptualised ‘attitude toward church buildings’ into a single dimension that embraces beliefs about the relevance of church buildings generally, their importance for Christian identity, their place in faith expression, and their importance as a witness to faith. Although any given person might see these dimensions as independent (for example, seeing buildings as a key witness for the community, but not relevant for their personal faith identity), it is likely that these constructs

¹⁸ J. Inge, 'The significance of buildings in terms of a Christian presence in the community.' *Rural Theology* 14, no. 2 (2016), pp. 146-57.

are correlated for most people, such that someone who feels buildings are generally important would explain that as being partly about Christian identity, partly about expressing faith, and partly about being a witness to the community. While there may be other important aspects of such an attitude, we wanted to test the idea that an instrument based on these aspects could be used as proxy measure that might reveal differences among faith traditions and other groups in the survey.

1.4 Predictors of attitude toward church buildings

Church tradition

Our main interest was to examine how attitude varied among traditions within the Church of England. The two main wings of the Church of England are the Anglo-Catholic and the Evangelical, both of which came to prominence in the nineteenth century, and which continue to dominate the debates about the future of Anglicanism generally. Anglican evangelicalism arose out of the revivals of the eighteenth century, especially those associated with George Whitefield and the Wesleys.¹⁹ The evangelical wing of the Church of England arose out of the general eighteenth- and nineteenth-century resurgence in evangelicalism, but is also associated with key figures such as Charles Simeon, from Cambridge, and those of the Clapham Sect.²⁰ Supporters sought to move the Church of England nearer to its Reformed roots. The Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England arose from a small group of Oxford clerics, notably John Keble, John Henry Newman, and Edward Pusey, who began publishing a series of tracts in 1833. The Oxford Movement originated as a reaction to the growing liberalism and Utilitarian politics of the time, and its founders looked to the past for their religious inspiration.²¹ Although they were not the sole inheritors of the High

¹⁹ K. Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989).

²⁰ G. R. Balleine, *A history of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London: Church Bookroom Press, 1908).

²¹ K. Hylson-Smith, *High Churchmanship in the Church of England from the sixteenth century to the late twentieth century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993). P. B. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Churchmanship of the previous century, their emphasis on church order, sacraments, and dogmatics harked back to the Church of England's Roman Catholic roots.

Although these two parties within the Church of England have each left their mark, neither can necessarily claim to hold the majority. Alongside congregations with a distinctive catholic or evangelical tradition are a large number who might be described as 'middle of the road' or 'traditional' Anglican churches. Although sometimes identified as a separate 'Broad Church' movement within the Church of England,²² churches in this category are linked mainly by not belonging to either of the two wings. Broad churches in this sense represent congregations that embrace a range of practices and theological stances drawn from the two main parties, from earlier traditions, and from more recent influences. Broad-Church Anglicans, almost by definition, are likely to encompass a range of views, so it can be difficult to predict what particular individuals may believe. Nonetheless, such Anglicans are probably in the majority, and any description of attitudes within the Church of England must allow for these sorts of worshippers.²³

In ecclesiological terms, we might expect Anglican Evangelicals to have similar attitudes towards buildings as people from Free Churches, such as Methodists and Baptists. By the same token, Anglo-Catholics may have attitudes that are more closely aligned with Roman Catholics than to other members of their denomination. Our survey included people from both Roman Catholic and Free Churches, so we were able to test this idea, and also see where Broad-Church Anglicans fit into this picture.

Age

When it comes to reordering churches, a common perception may be that it tends to be older people who are most resistant to change. Whether this is true or not has not been studied empirically to our knowledge, but if it is generally the case it might suggest that older people

²² T. E. Jones, *The Broad Church: A biography of a movement* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2003).

²³ A. Village, *The Church of England in the first decade of the 21st century: The Church Times surveys* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

see buildings as more important to their faith than younger people. This may make them less willing to change buildings because of the effect it may have on their faith or how they think others will perceive the church. If resistance to reordering among older people is simply resistance to any change, then they may not have been more affected by temporary closure of churches than younger people. On the other hand, if reactions to reordering represent a specific attitude towards church buildings, these may emerge during lockdown when churches were closed temporarily. We examine the relationship of age to attitude toward buildings, both generally across the sample and within each of the faith traditions.

Clergy and laity

We included ordained status as one of our predictor variables, partly to control for variations in the proportion of clergy in different faith traditions or age groups in our sample, but also to see if attitudes varied between clergy and lay people. Re-ordering projects are often instigated by clergy, who sometimes find it difficult to persuade their congregations to support such change. All other things being equal, do clergy generally have a different attitude toward church buildings than do laity?

Men and women

Gender was also included as a predictor to control for variations in the sex ratio among faith traditions, age groups and clergy and laity. Results from other parts of the survey suggested men may have reacted differently than women to the lockdown,²⁴ and we wondered if this might partly be related to differing attitudes towards church buildings.

²⁴ A. Village and L. J. Francis, *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey: Preliminary Results*. (<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/CC&Y-survey-initial-report.pdf>: 2020).

2 Method

2.1 Procedure

During April 2020, an online survey was developed using the Qualtrics platform. The survey was intended primarily for Anglicans, but items were worded so that they could be answered by people from other denominations as well. A link to the survey was initially distributed through the *Church Times*, a number of participating Church of England dioceses, and various other denominational routes from 8 May 2020. The survey was closed on 23 July 2020, by which time there were over 7,000 responses, of which 4,828 were from people living in England and were sufficiently complete to be used in this analysis. Of these, 4,402 were from Anglicans, 112 from Roman Catholics, 146 from Methodists, and 168 from Baptists. A version of the main survey was produced specifically for Roman Catholic churches in the UK, and this was distributed through a link in *The Tablet* and by requests to promote it directly sent to bishops, clergy, religious orders, and Catholic networks. This version of the survey was launched on 19 May and closed on 26 July, by which time there were 1,648 responses from people living in England that were sufficiently complete to be used in this survey. The items used in this analysis were common to both surveys, so data were combined to give a total sample of 6,476. This was a convenience sample, and we had no accurate way of knowing how far it was representative of these denominations as a whole, so caution must be exercised in generalizing these results too far.

2.2 Sample profiles

Responses from the two surveys were combined and respondents assigned to one of three faith traditions: Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Free Church (Methodists and Baptists). Anglicans were further categorised using a standard 7-point scale which allowed them to self-identity on a continuum from Anglo-Catholic to Evangelical.²⁵ This scale has been widely

²⁵ K. Randall, *Evangelicals Etcetera: Conflict and Conviction in the Church of England's Parties* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

used in the Church of England,²⁶ 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). Of the 6,476 in the sample, 20% were Anglo-Catholic, 35% Broad-Church Anglican, 13% Anglican Evangelical, 27% Roman Catholic, and 5% Free Church. The sex and age ratios varied slightly among these traditions (Table 1): Anglo-Catholics had the highest proportion of men (51%) and Broad-Church Anglicans the lowest (34%), while Anglo-Catholics and Broad-Church Anglicans had an older age profile, and Roman Catholics a younger age profile, than the sample as a whole. Overall, 24% of the sample were clergy, but this was highest among Anglo-Catholics (38%) and lowest among the Roman Catholics (6%).

- insert table 1 about here –

2.3 *Measures*

The questionnaire included six Likert-type items, each with a three-point response scale (Agree (=3); Not Certain (=2); Disagree (=1)), that were statements related to the importance of church buildings for the Church generally or for the participants faith specifically (Table 2). Factor analysis (principal components extraction and varimax rotation) identified a single factor, suggesting there was a unidimensional underlying attitude toward buildings. Internal consistency reliability as measured by alpha²⁷ was .77, a level that is generally thought to indicate adequate reliability.²⁸ The scores were used to create the Scale of Attitude toward Church Buildings (SACB), with a high score indicating someone who attached strong

²⁶ A. Village, 'English Anglicanism: Construct Validity of a Scale of Anglo-Catholic Versus Evangelical Self-Identification.' In *Religious identity and national heritage: Empirical-theological perspectives*, edited by Francis-Vincent Anthony and Hans-Georg Ziebertz, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 93-122. Village, 2018.

²⁷ L. J. Cronbach, 'Coefficient Alpha and the internal structure of tests.' *Psychometrika* 16, no. 3 (1951), pp. 297-334. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02310555>.

²⁸ R. F. DeVellis, *Scale development: Theory and applications* 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2003).

significance to the importance of church buildings for faith. The questionnaire also asked for sex, age (to the nearest decade), and ordination status (clergy or lay).

- insert table 2 about here –

2.4 Analysis

The first stage was a univariate analysis that compared SACB scores among the five faith traditions, among age categories, between ordained and lay people, and between men and women. The second stage was to employ multiple regression to test the effects of each predictor variable after controlling for others in the model. This analysis also tested the interactions of age, sex, and ordination status with faith tradition in order to determine if the differences apparent in the first stage of analysis were consistent in different faith traditions. Multiple regressions used the Generalised Linear Models (GENLIN) procedure in SPSS 26;²⁹ parameter estimates were used to illustrate graphically significant interaction effects, based on parameters calculated from the linear model.

3 Results

There were significant differences in SACB scores among faith traditions, age groups, the sexes, and clergy and laity (Table 3). The importance of church buildings was more strongly expressed by men than by women, by those under 50 than by those over 50, and by lay people than by clergy. The differences in scores were modest, but the large sample size resulted in statistical significance: there may not have been a pronounced difference in attitude, but there was evidence that differences among these groups may not have been simply a matter of chance. Differences among faith groups were slightly more pronounced, and in directions that reflected historical and theological traditions. Thus, Roman- and Anglo-

²⁹ 'IBM SPSS Advanced Statistics 26' 2020, accessed 12 November, 2020, ftp://public.dhe.ibm.com/software/analytics/spss/documentation/statistics/26.0/en/client/Manuals/IBM_SPSS_Advanced_Statistics.pdf.

Catholics scored the highest, Free Church and Anglican Evangelicals the lowest, and Broad-Church Anglicans in between the other traditions.

- insert table 3 about here –

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated that three main and two interaction effects were statistically significant (Table 4). Sex remained a significant predictor of SACB scores after controlling for other variables. In addition, there was a significant interaction with faith tradition (Figure 1). This graph is based on the regression model and isolates the difference in scores between men and women in each of the faith traditions using the average score for men as a baseline. In all traditions, women, on average, had lower SACB scores than men, but this difference was most pronounced among Anglo-Catholics and least pronounced among those from Free Churches.

- insert table 4 and figure 1 about here –

The other statistically significant interaction was between age and faith tradition (Figure 2). Here, for clarity, the interaction with age includes the average difference among the five traditions. Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics had both similarly high scores generally, but also both showed a significant decline with age. Free Church and Anglican Evangelicals had similarly low scores generally, and both showed little change with age- if anything a slight increase. Broad-Church Anglicans lay in between these groups as we have seen, and the age effect was similar to Evangelical Anglicans. In two traditions the trend was a decline with age, and in three a slight increase, so the overall ('main') effect of age was no longer significant: when the interaction is allowed for in the model the main age effect was no longer statistically significant.

- insert figure 2 about here –

4 Discussion

The analysis of the responses of 6,476 churchgoers from England has demonstrated that, across diverse Christian traditions during the Covid-19 lockdown, it was possible to identify an ‘attitude towards church buildings’ that combined key ideas about the importance of churches for individual faith expression and for the wider Christian community. In general, these two components were related, so people who felt churches were important for their religious identity or faith expression also saw church buildings as a key witness to the community. They also tended to think that the inability of people to gather in churches would cause a loss of faith, and they disagreed that the closure of churches revealed their redundancy or relative unimportance to the Christian community.

The Scale of Attitude toward Church Buildings (SACB) allowed attitude towards church building to be assessed among Roman Catholic, Anglican (Anglo-Catholic, Broad-Church Anglican, and Anglican Evangelical), and Free-Church laity and clergy. Four main findings showed how attitudes to buildings varied across the sample:

First, the key finding of this study was the difference in attitude toward buildings among different faith traditions. The more positive attitude toward church buildings among Roman- and Anglo-Catholics is not unexpected, and surely points to some common faith dispositions, rooted in the Catholic tradition. Similarly, the less positive attitude among Anglican Evangelicals and Free Church members is what we would predict from the history and theological traditions that emerged from the Reformation. The ‘middle’ scores of Broad-Church Anglicans would seem to show numerically what has always been understood as the ‘via media’.³⁰ Within the Church of England it seems that as well as differences among traditions in a wide range of doctrinal beliefs and moral attitudes³¹ there are also differences

³⁰ Walker, Peter. *Rediscovering the Middle Way*, (London: Mowbray, 1988).

³¹ L. J. Francis, M. Robbins, and J. Astley, *Fragmented faith? Exposing the fault-lines in the Church of England*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005). Village, 2018.

in perceptions about the importance of buildings. This study has shown clearly that these attitudes still align broadly along the Catholic-Reformed continuum such that Anglo-Catholics are closer to Roman Catholics, and Anglican Evangelicals are closer to the Free Church. Despite this apparent confirmation of the obvious, it should be noted that the disparity is not absolute, and it was by no means the case that all Evangelicals were anti- and all Anglo-Catholics pro-building. This echoes the writings of Whyte,³² who argued that the Victorian trend to ‘instrumentalise’ church buildings was one that has left lasting marks well beyond the Catholic tradition.

Second, attitudes to buildings varied with age. In the overall sample, younger people (under the age of 50) tended to have the most positive attitude, whereas those in their 50s and 60s had slightly less positive attitudes on average. The sample sizes for the younger age groups were smaller than for those in middle age, so there may be some uncertainty about the exact nature of the age effect. There was certainly little evidence across this large sample to support what might be a widely held misconception, that it is older people who are most wedded to their church buildings. Whether this is an effect of age *per se* is unclear, particularly because it differed among faith traditions: declining with age among Roman- and Anglo-Catholics but increasing, or remaining unchanged, among Evangelicals and Free Church members. It could be that as Catholics age they learn to be less tied to the outward physical manifestations of faith, while age may help Reformed worshippers to be less scathing of those who find faith is more than just assertions of belief. It might, on the other hand, point to generational differences: in the Church of England there is evidence of a wider gap between younger cohorts than between older ones in a range of issues related to doctrine and moral issues.³³

³² Whyte, 2017.

³³ Village, 2018. A. Village, and L. J. Francis, 'An Anatomy of Change: Profiling Cohort-Difference in Beliefs and Attitudes among Anglicans in England.' *Journal of Anglican Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010), pp. 59-81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355309990027>.

Third, lay people tended to have a more positive attitude toward the importance of church buildings than did clergy. This was a small but consistent effect across faith traditions. It might be that faith activity for lay people is often about being in church, whereas clergy in the course of their ministry will be working across a range of places. For them, church buildings are not always the main place where faith is manifest. This is a simplification, and many lay people will be active outside churches, which would explain why the trend was less than one point on the building scale on average. This trend varied slightly among faith traditions (it was most obvious among Anglicans), but the variation was marginal and not statistically significant.

Fourth, men tended to have a more positive attitude toward the importance of church buildings than did women. As with the ordained difference, this was a relatively small effect, and it emerged only as an average trend in a large sample. Nonetheless, the fact that it was evident in all five traditions suggests it has a real basis. It might relate to differences in underlying personality or faith expression between the sexes, but further analysis would be necessary to explore this in detail. Men might be more open to factors related to the physical presence of churches (be they sacramental or material), whereas women might be more open to faith as expressed through other means such as interpersonal relationships. Future research could explore this in more detail to confirm or refute this finding and to understand it more fully if it seems to be a general phenomenon. Among Anglicans, the sex difference was greatest in Anglo-Catholics, least among Evangelicals, and intermediate in Broad-church participants, which might suggest it is something associated with Catholic rather than Reformed faith.

5 Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in England in 2020 offered an unusual opportunity to explore attitudes towards church buildings among a large sample (6,476) of

churchgoers in England. For the Church of England, the complete loss of access to churches for worship for several months undoubtedly brought to the fore questions about the place of buildings within the life of the Church and Anglican faith more generally. By sampling across the Church of England, Roman Catholics, and Free Churches, we have shown that attitudes among Anglicans in England do still tend to align with the wider Catholic-Reformed attitudes that have broad and deep roots in English Christendom. Faith tradition was not the only explanation of why attitudes varied, and differences between men and women, clergy and laity, and old and young cut across these various faith traditions. There are clearly other social and perhaps psychological forces at play that continue to depose some Christians towards a deeper reliance or appreciation of sacred buildings than others.

There is a rich tradition of theological and ecclesiological writing on the place of sacred places in the Christian traditions, not least in relation to English churches. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the issue of buildings and their future for the Church of England to the fore in recent months. This research helps to show how opinion might be shaped within and beyond the Anglican tradition and may hopefully help decision makers in the future.

Table 1

Sample profiles

		Anglo-Catholic	Broad-Church Anglican	Anglican Evangelical	Roman Catholic	Free Church	All
<i>N</i> =		1285	2291	826	1760	314	6476
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Sex	Female	49	66	59	63	63	61
	Male	51	34	41	37	37	39
Age group	<50	25	20	25	28	24	24
	50-69	46	52	53	48	53	50
	70+	29	28	23	24	23	26
Ordained status	Lay	62	74	72	94	74	77
	Clergy	38	26	28	6	26	23

Table 2

Items in the Scale of Attitude towards Church Buildings (SACB) scale

	%	%	%	
	Disagree	Not certain	Agree	CITC
The local church building is crucial for my identity as a Christian [Minister]	36	31	33	.63
I need the church building to fully express my faith/vocation	39	25	36	.65
Church buildings are central to our witness in the community	11	21	69	.49
The lockdown has shown that church buildings are an unnecessary burden*	73	21	6	.47
Many people will lose faith without church buildings in which to gather for worship	42	32	26	.41
Forced closure of churches has focused us on proper priorities*	29	36	36	.44

Note. * these items were reverse coded to create the scale. CITC= Corrected Item-Total

Correlation.

Table 3

Mean SACB scores by sex, age, ordination status and faith tradition

		<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
Faith Tradition	Anglo-Catholic	1285	14.07	2.95	245.30***
	Broad-Church Anglican	2291	12.48	3.04	
	Anglican Evangelical	826	11.06	2.90	
	Roman Catholic	1760	14.05	2.75	
	Free Church	314	11.02	2.83	
Age group	<50	1549	13.33	3.24	20.63***
	50-69	3242	12.73	3.19	
	70+	1685	13.09	2.87	
Ordained status	Laity	4975	13.21	3.07	126.97***
	Clergy	1501	12.18	3.20	
Sex	Female	3946	12.66	3.04	100.26***
	Male	2530	13.45	3.20	

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Multiple regression of SACB scores

	Wald χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> <
Faith tradition	206.97	4	.001
Age	1.10	1	.295
Ordained status	54.53	1	.001
Sex	51.84	1	.001
Faith tradition x Age	49.76	4	.001
Ordained x Faith tradition	8.73	4	.068
Sex x Faith tradition	31.02	4	.001

Figure 1

Interaction of sex and faith tradition on SACB scores

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

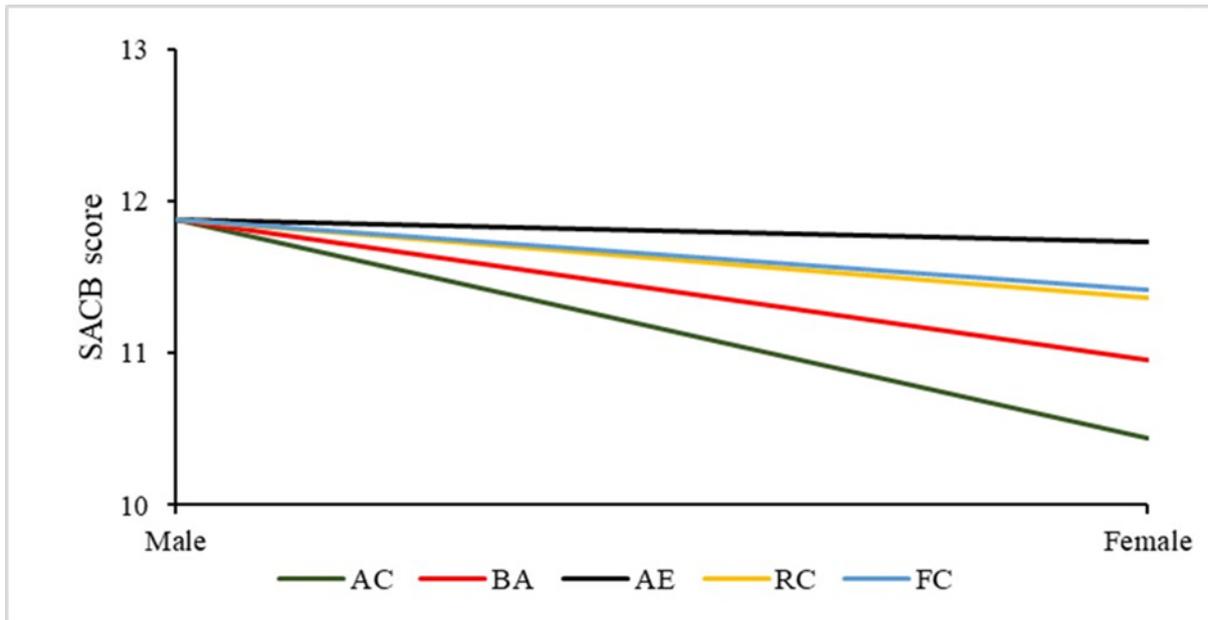


Figure 2

Interaction of age and faith tradition on SACB scores

Note. For explanation, see Figure 1.

