

Through the Eyes of Retired Clergy: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Future for the Church of England

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ABSTRACT

Data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* indicated that retired clergy were feeling less comfortable with the Church's responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and more disaffected from the institutional Church. The subsequent project, *Through the eyes of retired clergy*, listened in greater depth to how retired clergy felt about the ways in which the Church had responded to the pandemic and to how they saw the future for the Church. In terms of the Church's response to the pandemic, retired clergy were not only realistic and affirming, but also engaged and critical. In terms of the future for the church, retired clergy were realistic and pessimistic. The general view was that the pandemic had accelerated the effect of trends evident before the pandemic. Some would argue that, while the pandemic could have reinforced the visibility of the Church in the local community, such opportunities were largely missed.

KEYWORDS

Church of England; COVID-19; retired clergy; mission and ministry; looking to the future; qualitative research

Introduction

Recent research has begun to draw attention to the distinctive profile and attitudes of retired clergy within the Church of England. Francis (2020) drew on data generated by the 2013 *Church Times Survey* (see Village, 2018) to provide an attitudinal profile from 784 retired clergy over the age of 59 who had remained significantly engaged with church life and who had wished to stay up to date with church news as readers of the *Church Times*. For example, around three quarters of religiously-engaged retired clergy felt that they were still growing in their faith: 77% in their sixties, 72% in their seventies, and 73% in their eighties or older. Around two in every five were engaged with churches where they felt there was hope for growth: 41% in their sixties, and 41% in their seventies thought that the membership of their churches would grow in the next 12 months, although the proportion dropped to 34% in their eighties or older.

Neal and Francis (2020) recognised the inadequacy of a quantitative study drawing on readers of the *Church Times* and proposed a qualitative study exploring in depth the

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experiences of 14 retired clergy, drawing on men and women retiring from stipendiary or self-supporting ministry, at various stages post-retirement. Each participant explored retirement from his or her own distinctive perspective, and then Bishop David Walker reflected on the emerging themes. The analysis offered by Walker (2020) identified three broad categories of issues: the transition into retirement; the nature of a settled ministry post-retirement; and what is distinctive about retirement for (many) clergy. From this analysis Walker drew two main conclusions. First, Walker argued that ‘many clergy in retirement are exercising fulfilling and important ministries, either to support the local parish church and its incumbent or to further the work of the wider church’ (pp. 186–187). Second, Walker drew the attention of ‘those in positions of responsibility in parishes and dioceses today’ to the fact that:

There remains an excellent, highly experienced, and motivated cohort of retired clergy among them, who have much to offer that both supports the maintenance of the Church in the present day and also promotes its calling to proclaim the faith ‘afresh’ in every generation. (Walker, 2020, p. 187)

On the basis of this study, Walker (2020) also drew attention to two areas in need of further research and reflection. The first area concerns research among pre-retirement clergy to gain fresh insights into how clergy may be better prepared for retirement. The second area concerns research among post-retirement clergy to gain better insight into how the diverse theologies of the priesthood supported within the Church of England may impact the perceptions and experiences of retirement differently.

The pandemic

The environment in which all clergy (stipendiary, self-supporting, and retired) lived their lives and lived out their vocation to ordained ministry was radically changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the first national lockdown was still in force, the *Coronavirus Church & You Survey* was launched on 8 May 2020 in collaboration with some Church of England dioceses and the *Church Times*. The aim was to begin to assess the responses of clergy and laity to the pandemic and to the enforced changes for the life of the Church (see, for example, Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021; Francis, Village, & Lewis, 2021, 2022; McKenna, 2021, 2022; Village & Francis, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

Drawing on data from the *Coronavirus Church & You Survey*, Francis and Village (2021) compared the responses of 231 ministry-active retired clergy with the responses of 748 stipendiary clergy. The responses of these two groups of clergy differed in a number of statistically significant ways. In terms of assessing institutional response to the crisis, retired clergy were less convinced that the Church of England had responded well to the crisis (33% compared with 42%). In terms of assessing the response of local churches, retired clergy were less convinced that churches in their area had responded well to the crisis (56% compared with 69%). In terms of assessing the policy to lock up churches, retired clergy were less convinced that closing churches to everybody was the right thing to do (36% compared with 61%). In terms of assessing online worship, retired clergy were less convinced that online worship is the way ahead for the next generation (11% compared with 20%). In terms of assessing virtual communication, retired clergy were less convinced that social media is a good evangelistic tool (34% compared with 51%). On the other hand, retired clergy were more hopeful that this experience

of being locked out of churches would result in valuing church more after the pandemic: 61% of retired clergy considered that people will appreciate better church as it normally is, compared with 52% of stipendiary clergy.

Research question

The difference between the attitudes of the retired clergy and stipendiary clergy raised a number of questions that the *Coronavirus Church & You Survey* had not been designed to address. For that reason, a follow-up survey was designed, *Through the eyes of retired clergy*. This survey followed the same approach as that employed by Neal and Francis (2020), this time specifically inviting retired clergy to reflect on their experience of the pandemic. In an earlier paper, McKenna, Neal, and Francis (2022) drew on responses to this survey to explore the personal impact of the pandemic on retired Anglican clergy. In this second paper, the aim is to explore in greater depth how retired clergy have perceived the way in which the Church responded to the pandemic, and how they now see the future for the Church after the pandemic.

Method

Procedure

Tony Neal, himself a retired priest living within the Diocese of Truro, wrote during September 2021 to 30 retired priests personally known to him, inviting them to participate in the project. Of the 30 invited, 24 Church of England clergy accepted the invitation to participate. The invitation read as follows.

As retired clergy we are inviting you to reflect with us on your experience of the pandemic. We are offering you a small number of questions to open the reflection. We hope that you will wish to address these questions in a systematic way, and then open the canvass for your wider view on things.

While the first five questions concerned their personal responses to the pandemic, the other two questions concerned impact on the wider Church.

- How do you feel about the way in which the Churches have responded to the pandemic?
- How do you see the future for the Church after the pandemic?

Participants

Of the 24 retired Church of England clergy who completed the questionnaire, 19 were male and 5 were female. The length of response varied with 7 of the retired clergy using 400 words or less, 10 using between 400 and 1000 words, and 7 using more than a 1000.

Analysis

The focus in the current paper is on reporting the reflections of retired clergy on two questions, concerning the response of the Churches to the pandemic, and the future

of the Church post-pandemic. The study employed content analysis, an iterative process of reading, re-reading, categorising, and grouping the raw data into themes, to structure the material received from each of the retired clergy, bringing it into a coherent whole. When reporting these voices each participant was assigned a unique number and was differentiated by sex (M/F) to preserve their anonymity. Since these responses were very rich, there is value in publishing them extensively, allowing their individual voices to be heard, following the approach taken by Neal and Francis (2020).

Results

The way in which the Churches responded to the pandemic

When writing about the way in which the Churches responded to the pandemic the majority (13 retired clergy) tended to take a balanced view, pointing out both the positive and negative actions taken by the Church. There was recognition of the unprecedented and unexpected challenges that the pandemic had produced and of the Church's attempts to engage with its community in new ways, but also some criticism of specific practices, for example, barring priests from their own church buildings.

On the whole, I think our churches responded quickly and enterprisingly to the challenges of the pandemic. There were some glaring mistakes at the beginning – such as forbidding clergy to even enter their own churches – but these were corrected in time. (8M)

On the whole it seems to me churches have responded the best way they were able. It has been a strange and turbulent time with ups and downs throughout, – but we have recognised great generosity, faithful care, immense self-sacrifice and compassion, one to another, and deep and committed faith in the deeds and prayers of so many people. (1F)

Some retired clergy drew attention to what they observed as differences between the response of local churches and the Church nationally, and between the response of local church leadership and local congregations. There was, however, no consensus on who had acted properly or improperly, with different positions articulated by individual clerics. Some were of the view that local churches had provided the best response, while others suggested that the wider church offer was more engaging.

At parish level, churches have generally responded magnificently. They have variously cared for their communities at practical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Through broadcast services they have reached people who have not entered our churches before. Networks have been set up to ensure that shopping, medicines, and worship materials are delivered. We are probably more in touch now with lonely and housebound people than we were before. At national level, the biggest mistake made was to close churches at a time when many people would have welcomed the opportunity to enter – perhaps, just to sit. (24F)

This has been so varied. At a Diocesan level there was plenty online. In our villages, for those in 'the club', who were happy to go via the vicarage to get the Zoom password there were services and the ability to see familiar faces, and that was valued. But it felt like the public face of the local church disappeared. 'Where is the church? Where is the vicar?' ... Maybe to have had visible clergy walking around, like a bobby on the beat, just to know that the official God-person was still amongst us, would have been a sign of stability ... In the wider church there have been wonderful, creative resources online

for those who are able access them. And many clergy and local church communities have worked tirelessly to respond to the circumstances. E.g. providing ‘shrine’ spaces outside churches, somewhere to come, find messages of hope and comfort on the outside of churches, leave ‘prayers’; using churchyards creatively; setting up large nativity scenes in the church yards. (10F)

One first-time incumbent of 5 village parishes ... was amazingly creative with streamed worship and, as soon as it was possible, with outside worship and streamed work with school children. The result is that PCC members complained to the bishop that s/he was spending more time with non-churchgoers than with the [small, conservative] congregation who simply wanted BCP services at their traditional times. Whereas the old ‘inside’ congregation has remained in single figures, the new ‘outside’ congregation is nearing 100 and quite happy to worship inside when the weather is inclement AND doing amazing things in the community – including having participated in an Advent Course exploring Christianity rather than Churchianity, and pressing for more training in prayer and understanding Jesus’ vision and teaching. Off their own bat they produced a book of some of the good things that have come out of the pandemic thanks to the encouragement of their new priest. (6M)

That the use of technology could provide both challenges and opportunities was also frequently highlighted by these retired clergy when reflecting in a balanced way on the Church’s response.

We seemed to learn quickly creative ways to use technology to reach not just our congregations but others we had not reached before. Locally we were blessed in our priest in charge who is very proficient in using technology well. Sadly, though it placed too great a burden on her and has meant we have not been able to sustain all the creative work we were doing. The ‘new normal’ we were planning for has not really taken shape. (9M)

One interesting thing is that we can now all get the service on our phones or computers (As a 71-year-old I am pretty OK with such things: Of course many 81 and 91 year-olds are not: the new technology has come a bit late for them.) I’ve just had a holiday in another part of the country which included two Sundays: Both Sundays I caught my usual service on my phone. (20M)

Those who had the facility of ‘streaming’ their liturgy were, I know, much appreciated by those who had the equipment and technical skills to access this. I presume the BBC and other broadcasters did their best as well to bring Sunday worship to those who would appreciate it. However, by not being able to attend church and have the consolation of word and sacrament not to mention the company of fellow Christians must have no doubt have been a grievous deprivation ... I feel this may have affected the practice of churchgoing at least in the short term but only time will tell. (14M)

Some clergy have done really well on Zoom. Others not so well. Staying at home has given parishioners the chance to shop around to see if there are more charismatic vicars than their own. I wonder if they will be content to return to their own churches when this is all over. (19F)

I found some very well presented, professional and inclusive Zoom worship but the Eucharist by zoom did not work for me. Streamed worship has been a valuable tool, but I have no idea whether people will return to church or whether it brought any to faith. (22M)

In addition to those retired clergy who tended to take a more balanced view on the response of the Churches, there were, in contrast, 9 retired clergy who provided responses that were highly critical of the Church at this time. Concern was expressed about the lack of clerical contact locally and the visibility of the Church nationally, the over-dependence on laity, poor leadership, the closure of church buildings, and the directive given to clergy over the age of 70 not to provide direct ministry.

I have heard too many stories of clergy not making contact with people. I cannot understand the drive towards *less* clerical involvement, (although there seems to be a sharp contrast between some clerics who are overworking and those who it seems do very little). By relying on an increased efforts from 'lay' people, many already overburdened, some of whom are elderly and finding the realities of daily life plenty enough to cope with, combined with relying on retired and ageing PTOs must surely be a 'creaking' stopgap measure with a limited future. Human nature being what it is, to attempt 'growing the Church', (using the phraseology) is likely to be problematic without recognisably qualified, motivated and trained people, (traditionally described as The Clergy) living and working within a reasonable distance. Leadership is needed in every walk of life; sadly I have received phone calls from two people where the current climate of untrained lay leadership is causing problems. (2M)

I think this has been largely unimaginative from a central C of E angle. The decision to close churches in apparent compliance with government guidelines was a major pastoral mistake and I applaud clergy and PCCs who held out against this directive. There seemed to be a distinct absence of commentary/narrative/theological reflection from the House of Bishops which gave the impression that the church had no voice and no gospel to proclaim at a moment of national need. I was gratified to see local parishes witnessing by rolling out initiatives on pastoral care in so many forms. (11M)

From what I understand there appears to have been little ecumenical or inter-faith collaboration at national level and if that is the case it is a sad reflection on the quality of the Church of England's leadership of the faith communities. The closure of the Churches was a disgrace, an abnegation of the C of E's distinctive ministry to the community, and a sinking into the worst form of congregationalism at a time when leadership and visible pastoral care was most needed. Though some on-line worship was, I understand, excellent I fear that quite a lot of what I dipped into was poor, ill prepared and didn't recognise either the opportunities or the limitations of the medium used. (13M)

I was incensed that churches were closed. Nor did there seem to be any leadership ... We were all left to get on with it. The Church also in my view should have been far more proactive in holding the Government to account. When footballers take the moral lead in this country, something is certainly wrong. Now the attack on the parish system (whatever they say) at this time of all times is nothing short of suicidal. We seem destined to become some kind of Protestant sect and not the Church of England as for centuries conceived. (17M)

It seems, on reflection, that the Church's reaction was one of panic, closing down all the churches and closing down on ministry and pastoral support, leaving congregations isolated. At the same time there was consideration for clergy who were vulnerable to have the freedom to care for themselves, and no pressure to provide services where technology was not available. I do feel that perhaps opportunities have been lost to provide pastoral support in other ways during the pandemic and that we have probably lost contact with a number of people who will not return. The limited pastoral care that the clergy and lay readers have been able to offer to the many people who have been bereaved during the

last eighteen months will have long term consequences. Lost opportunities, lost people – who knows what changes could have been made to people’s lives if clergy and the over 70’s had not been shut down. (21F)

Looking to the future of the Church after the pandemic

In contrast to the balanced approach to the first question, a lot of concern was expressed when writing about the future of the Church post-pandemic. There were just two solely positive perspectives, as illustrated by the following retired female cleric:

I think there may be a quite good future for many churches. I have seen new and younger people attracted to church perhaps through Zoom or through their own needs during the pandemic. I hope that the church has learnt something, through the love and support they may have found themselves giving to many suffering in diverse ways during the pandemic, and will continue their work among the hungry, the homeless and the destitute. These problems will not go away when Covid does. (1F)

Other views shared by these retired clergy highlighted pre-existing challenges for the Church that the pandemic had brought into greater visibility. Issues such as declining attendance, ageing congregations, growing fragility of small churches, fewer priests, and financial pressures were all highlighted.

In our own church we have seen a decline in attendance; some who used to attend are now too old or frail to do so, or still do not feel confident about being in church. Although last summer there were a great number of visitors in the area, fewer than usual came to church. I am sure that online services and other new initiatives will have to continue for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, novel uses for church buildings – such as food banks and vaccination centres – are to be welcomed as getting the Church and the community more together; there, I think, the future lies. (8M)

I am not sure that the pre-existing decline in numbers attending conventional church services will be interrupted and so post pandemic decline will continue as congregations returned to their cherished, former ways of church. But perhaps the wider church may prosper as new initiatives, and genuine confidence in a God who is greater than Covid, is experienced by people. (12M)

The pandemic has brought forward by twenty years the issues that the ... diocese must face courageously. The traditional parishes with the buildings cannot continue with diminishing elderly congregations and fewer priests. The local deanery needs to rationalise the quantity of building for example the congregations in both ... and ... cannot continue to sustain church buildings ... The endless efforts to raise funds to keep buildings open cannot continue ... A considerable amount of grace will be needed from the leadership of those churches that remain open to accommodate the churchmanship of others who join them. This sounds very pessimistic and the Holy Spirit may decide otherwise. (23M)

That the increasing reliance on technology might turn out to be a double-edged sword was frequently highlighted. While it might provide convenience, flexibility, and variety, and attract some worshippers who might otherwise not have engaged with the Church, the view was expressed that it could not compensate for in-person Christian fellowship. It also had the potential to exclude those churches and congregations who lacked access to the appropriate technology.

I expect that services will be a hybrid of services in church and relaying them online, or both, at the same time. This, of course, may not be possible for churches in poor urban areas and small rural parishes with very limited resources. Online services can also exclude anyone who does not have access to the internet, potentially increasing their marginalisation. (3M)

More use of technology is likely to come into play which will appeal to the younger generation, but my concern is for the pastoral issues; making sure there are ways to make personal contact with people, to build up relationships within the Christian community, to build up faith and to provide for the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of people. Sensible and wise use of technology is good but where dioceses are using it to save money and time by continuing to use Zoom for meetings and training I fear it will prove to be false economy. Nothing can replace the social interaction of meeting face to face that builds up relationships, the opportunity to share experiences and encourage people, both clergy and lay, in new ministry. (21F)

Having just given my own excuse for not attending church for two weeks running I do fear that other people may excuse themselves in just the same way, in fact be like the lady in my old parish who stopped coming to my church because she got more out of listening to *Songs of Praise* on the TV. All this is particularly relevant to the sort of ... Coastal parish I served as vicar in. It was always lovely to have holiday-makers join us on a Sunday, and I think they felt welcome once they came. But, if their home-churches are live-streaming their usual services aren't they going to stay in their holiday-accommodation and join in with their home-church rather than risk seeing what sort of welcome they do or don't get locally? (20M)

At ... we've resumed in-person worship, but still broadcast by Zoom ... but too many more just find it too convenient to stay at home and join in from there. Will they ever come back? I wonder. Congregations in some larger churches ... are reputedly down by up to 2/3rds of their pre-Covid size. Hearsay says the absentees now prefer slick presentations from large London churches. (18M)

Some retired clergy stated that it was a pivotal time for the Church. They raised questions about the relevance of the Church in society, and about the Church's structure and the deployment of staffing. They maintained that the Church would not be able to return to the way it functioned before the pandemic, recognising that there needed to be innovation going forward, and identifying changes that the Church needed to consider.

The pandemic has given a decided 'nudge' to dying congregations, especially to those who simply want 'their own service' and has faced many with the challenge that was just over the horizon: Renew or Die. It is presenting a challenge to re-think theology and inherited traditions re religion, the Church as the people of God rather than the clergy, the 'purpose' of the Church as the Body of Christ, continuing his ministry 'that the world may believe' and 'that all may be one' as in John 17, inspiring a new culture as Western society develops a new social paradigm. (6M)

Regarding the future of the Church of England itself with or without the present pandemic it is not difficult to see the pattern of change evolving due to the retirement of so many clergy leading to a weakening of the pastoral care of parishioners. And whilst there is a marked increase in the nurture of vocations the shape of the established church of England will be, to say the least, very different in the future. (14M)

We face a long road back. As stipendiary clergy numbers continue to decline, are we ready to put in the necessary work? If it were up to me (ha! ha!) I would put all central staff, apart from archdeacons and suffragans, back into parishes. But I can't see that happening. (18M)

The most critical of the reflections expressed by these retired clergy were focused on policy decisions taken by national leadership including the lock-up of churches, that an opportunity to be more visible and active in society had been missed, and the view that the church had changed and was no longer recognisable to them.

Justin's biggest mistake was to close ALL churches, and to conduct his Easter Communion from his kitchen. He has his own chapel at Lambeth! But he'd shot himself in the foot and couldn't use it! At incumbents' discretion churches should have remained open for private prayer. Surely, online worship could have been presented from inside churches. Just when the nation needed us most, we shut up shop. What a pity! Now we're struggling to get our congregations back. (18M)

For a very long time the profile of Christianity in our society has been shrinking. Among the Church of England's leadership there appears to be some who have a determination to turn away from the one feature that distinguishes it from all other denominations – the ministry to the nation and every community within it, because it is, 'by law established.' ... those in positions of influence and with access to the levers of power seem determined to seize the opportunity to change the very nature of the Church and they have operated on the basis that, 'one should never let a good crisis go to waste'. We live in free country and there are other denominations that have been built on the basis of congregationalism and some are very successful. The 'membership' model, however, is not that of the Church of England. The essential ingredient of professional ministry, available in each parish, in the ecclesiology of the C of E, appears to be anathema to our leaders. Instead, resources are being vired to all kinds of novel innovations. The expertise flowing from properly trained and qualified priests deployed in parishes is ignored. One could be forgiven for thinking that there are cuckoos at work in the Anglican nest! ... The result for the Church of England of its handling of this crisis has, in my view, been to further erode the already low esteem in which the Church is held in society. It has pushed itself even further to the side-lines of national life. To the nation it has been neither a source of hope in the face of so much tragedy nor a light when so much that was dark seemed to envelop everyone. In the parishes however, there have been some wonderful examples of steadfast ministry and innovative approaches to participation in liturgical celebrations. These have been much appreciated by regular members of congregations and by those outside them. (13M)

If the current trend for conceiving evangelism solely in terms of personal evangelisation and congregationalism persists, then the C of E will effectively disappear. The apparent abandonment of its hallmark ministry of responding to the needs of the entire community is in mortal danger. I barely recognise any remaining characteristics of the church into which I was ordained 45 years ago. Indeed, I don't believe I would have wished to test my vocation in a church that manifests its current priorities. (11M)

Despite these concerns, hope was expressed that solutions could be found, that lessons could be learnt from changes brought about by the pandemic, that perhaps new and innovative ways of worshipping would arise moving forward. What was clear was the view that the Church could not 'do nothing' nor that it could just continue as it had pre-pandemic. The Churches would have to work together to find a solution.

I see the future of the Church as an organisation that is much more realistic (although it will have to counter those who would have everything return to the old 'normal'). The clergy and others have learned much about the use of technology and social media. Innovation and a positive acceptance of change as being a continuous process. The Church may also have learned that buildings are not everything. The clergy hopefully will have learned to be more flexible. Dioceses will be more streamlined in administration. The Church of God

will go on, of that I am confident, and hopefully, learn from this experience in all possible ways. (7M)

Some church leaders have had the courage to finally abandon old, unsustainable patterns of worship and operation, and are working with their faith communities to find new ways of being faithful church. I am inspired by the vision and courage in one of the groups of parishes I am connected to. Our buildings as shared sacred space have wide possibilities. Are we ready to share them in mutual spiritual journeys with people of all faiths and none? This is a journey we are making in one church in a town near here. The environmental crisis is drawing us together in our common belonging to the Earth and this is becoming a primary focus for communities, which the Churches could/should host People seem to ache for community in which to express lament and find hope. Sharing silence is powerful and transformative. (10F)

There is a great opportunity to think carefully about how the good news of the Gospel is communicated. Many older people will not come back to church and perhaps for those who were able to use Zoom that will be enough if it continues. New habits have been formed as they surely have with the younger generation so more creative ways of drawing people of all ages into the Christian faith have to be worked out. We have lost contact with many of the groups that had to close down and have not as yet re-opened There is currently a fear of clergy numbers being reduced and churches closing down because of the local and national downturn in financial resources exacerbated by the pandemic. If the established groups of churches work together to support and encourage one another, I feel sure this situation can be reversed without the need to change the role of clergy into greater and wider management responsibilities. Greater use of lay people and their gifts is always to be encouraged but there are many places where these resources are very scarce. Perhaps we all need to look at the bigger picture and not think only of our own individual churches and immediate communities. Together we can achieve far more than we can do individually. (21F)

Conclusion

The present study drew on data generated by the survey *Through the eyes of retired clergy* to address two questions. The first question examined in depth how retired clergy perceived the way in which the Church responded to the pandemic. The data demonstrated that these retired clergy tended to take a balanced view. There was realistic recognition of the unprecedented and unexpected challenges that the pandemic had produced and proper awareness that the Church was operating in uncharted territory. There was an appreciation for the ways in which the Church had quickly identified and mastered new ways to engage with local communities and to maintain forms of worship, pastoral care, and community engagement. Specific reference was made to: broadcasting services, streamed worship and outside services, reaching people who never entered churches before; faithful pastoral care at practical, emotional and spiritual levels; being in touch with the lonely or housebound; and building local communities. On the other hand, there was specific (and sometimes sharp) criticism of some of the decisions that the Church had made and some of the actions that the Church had implemented. Specific reference was made to: closing churches, banning priests from entering their churches; the disappearance of the public face of the local church; the silence of the national Church on political issues; and inhibiting the ministry of those aged 70 and over.

The second question examined how retired clergy assessed the impact of the pandemic on the future of the Church. The data demonstrated that, in contrast to the balanced approach to the first question, only two participants identified positive impact. The majority of retired clergy saw the impact largely in negative ways. They highlighted pre-existing challenges for the Church that the pandemic had brought into greater visibility. Specific reference was made to: accelerating declining attendance; ageing members reluctant to risk coming back; growing fragility of small churches; facing financial pressures; working with fewer priests; dealing with problems caused by inadequately trained leadership; loss of distinctive Anglican identity and embracing a sectarian future; and online services presenting competition for local churches and evading opportunities for pastoral support and community building. At the same time, there was a note of resilience and a realistic acceptance of inevitable change including: using technology; giving up church buildings; operating with reduced numbers of clergy; developing lay leadership; streamlining dioceses; and shaping new vision that resonates with what matters to people today.

Overall, the survey *Through the eyes of retired clergy*, as reported in the present paper and in the companion paper by McKenna, Neal, and Francis (2022), has highlighted not only resilience, resourcefulness and wisdom residing within retired clergy, but also their general willingness to share their insights when asked. Encouraging such research may yet offer a new lease of life to retired clergy and to the Church that they served and that they continue to serve.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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