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**Fragile Church of England Rural Churches:**

**Listening to the Voice of the Laity in the Light of the Covid-19 pandemic**

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**ABSTRACT**

Data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, run in *Church Times* between May and July 2020, are used to test and to develop Lawson's hypothesis of the fragile rural Church of England. This paper seeks to discover the response of lay people in relation to the following marks of the fragile rural church: sustaining congregations; sustaining historic buildings; and sustaining finances. It moves on to examine how lay people perceived the impact of the pandemic on church growth or church decline, and the boon or bane of online worship. These data begin to explore what the fragile rural Church of England may look like in the future, recognising the need for further research as the consequence of the pandemic unfold.

**Keywords:** fragile church; rural church; rural laity; pandemic; online worship; congregations

**Introduction**

The concept 'fragile rural church' was first used by Lawson (2018), based on findings from three focus groups, each comprising three clergy with responsibility for between three and four churches in a single Church of England diocese. A second study by Lawson (2019) tested this concept by semi-structured interviews with nine clergy with responsibility for the

same number of churches in a different diocese. Initially five major marks of the fragile church were identified: financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources; inability to replace churchwardens (or fear of being unable too); too few volunteers to take on church responsibilities; no critical mass of children; and lack of clergy time and energy to start new things. Three minor marks of the fragile church were also identified: tiny congregations in single figures with a rising age profile; relentless nature of keeping churches going; and potential to alienate extended families. The thesis was further tested by Lawson (2020) carrying out semi-structured interviews with a further nine clergy in a different Church of England diocese, with responsibility for between four and 13 churches. The clergy interviewed readily recognised the marks of the fragile rural church, giving further credibility to the thesis, whilst recognising that it continued to be based on a small sample of qualitative research. The concept of the fragile rural church was commentated on and critiqued by Mynors (2019) and Wilson (2019), with Wilson particularly posing the question: was the fragile rural church recognised by the laity?

The fragile rural church hypothesis was established before the world-transforming and church-transforming events of the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Responding to the pandemic raised a number of questions for the Churches world-wide and stimulated a flurry of new research studies designed to monitor and to assess the impact of the pandemic as evidenced by Miller et al. (2020); O'Brien (2020); Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020); Edleman et al. (2021); Molteni et al. (2021); and Johnston et al. (2022). Within this context Village and Francis launched the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey run in association with the *Church Times* from May to June 2020 (see for example, Francis & Village, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Village & Francis, 2020). Quantitative data generated by this survey provided an opportunity for the thesis of the fragile rural church to be tested on a much larger scale.

First, this survey was able to test whether the concept of the fragile church was confined to rural Church of England clergy, or whether it was shared by clergy in other contexts. Data was provided by 745 Church of England clergy who identified as being engaged in full-time parochial ministry. Of these, 265 were located in rural parishes, 211 in town parishes, 182 in suburban parishes, and 87 in inner city parishes. From these data Francis et al. (2020) demonstrated that, whilst anxiety about the fragility of the church was in no way restricted to clergy serving in rural parishes, it was most prevalent amongst clergy in rural situations. Still the question remained: was the fragile rural church a pre-occupation of clergy, or was it recognised by the laity as well?

Second, data gathered from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey enabled Francis et al. (2021) to respond to Wilson's (2019) challenge, by discovering how widespread concern about the fragile church was amongst the laity. A total of 2,496 respondents to the survey were identified as lay people belonging to the Church of England who had received rather than given ministry during the pandemic. Of these, 903 were in rural parishes, 771 in town parishes, 598 in suburban parishes, and 222 in urban parishes. A further 2 respondents did not disclose their geographic location. Measured against the question of how the viability of rural church buildings would be impacted financially by the Covid-19 pandemic, 22% of lay respondents from rural areas feared that church buildings would no longer be viable following the pandemic. This fell to 16% in towns, 15% in the suburbs, and 8% in inner cities. Asked what they thought the impact of lay people stepping down from key roles following the pandemic might be, 23% of laity in rural areas felt this might be a problem. The number of laity concerned that key lay people might step down following the pandemic fell to 18% in the inner city, 17% in the suburbs, and 16% in towns. Thus, it was possible to say that, although the fragile rural church concept was not recognised as widely by rural lay people as by rural clergy, the concern was by no means minimal amongst rural laity. It was

further possible to conclude that, whilst the concept of the fragile church was not so prevalent amongst non-rural Church of England laity, it was, nonetheless, a concern beyond rural areas.

A further qualitative study was carried out by Lawson (2023) involving 17 clergy with responsibility for four or more churches drawn from two dioceses and 33 lay people from the same parishes as the clergy. This study resulted in the ‘marks of the fragile rural church’ being revised to 6 categories, namely: financial pressure and congregational anxiety about dwindling resources; an actual or feared inability to replace churchwardens and other church officers; the relentless nature of keeping going, that saps energy and thwarts new initiatives; the lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them; congregations of a dozen or less people with an increasing age profile; and the demands of maintaining historic buildings.

### **Research question**

Against this background the aim of the present study is to revisit the qualitative data generated by the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey to explore the extent to which those data could illuminate further the perceptions of lay members of the Church of England living in rural areas or worshipping in rural churches concerning the fragility of these churches. The potential within these qualitative data has been well illustrated by McKenna (2022, 2023) who analysed perceptions of rural Church of England lay people concerning both accessing online worship and the Church of England leadership response. The present study also builds on the way in which McKenna (2024) drew on data from the *Covid-19 and Church-21* survey to examine the perceptions of rural lay people within the Episcopal Church (USA) concerning the challenges and benefits of online worship

### **Method**

#### ***Procedure***

The present study draws its data from the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey (Village & Francis, 2020). This online survey was live between 8 May and 23 July 2020 and was designed to assess the responses of Anglican churchgoers (clergy and laity) in the UK to the Covid-19 crisis, addressing a range of discrete but interrelated issues, arising from the national lockdown, and from the Church's national lock-up of churches. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

### ***Instrument***

The *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey closed with the following open-ended invitation.

If you would like to write about your experiences in your own words, you can do so here, or include anything that we had not asked that you think we should have included.

### ***Participants***

Within the survey there were 1,460 lay people living in England who self-identified as associated with the Church of England and either living in rural areas or worshipping in rural churches. Of these 1,460 lay people, 501 (70% female and 30% male) responded to the invitation to write about their experience of the pandemic in their own words. Most of these participants were aged over 60; 82% of males and 79% of females. Within this group, a subset of 69 rural lay people (18 males, 50 females, and 1 of undisclosed sex), offered their views on the possible impact of the pandemic on the existing fragility and future survival of the church.

### ***Analysis***

The 69 responses from the rural lay people in England were thematically organised into five categories: sustaining congregations; sustaining historic buildings; sustaining finances; church growth or church decline; and boon or bane of online worship.

### ***Sustaining congregations***

Three participants specifically drew attention to the impact of the pandemic on the sustainability of already small and aging congregations. One man in his sixties observed that:

Many people aged 60+ have what seem to me to be slightly irrational fears about Covid 19. Breaking down those fears is going to be very challenging - and a greater threat to the viability of the parish structure in the foreseeable future than the virus itself.

A woman in her sixties showed concern about the implications of lack of 'in person' worship during Covid-19, expressing her sorrow that 'the only church presence is zoom services that can be accessed by a few'. Her concern was about the future of a small, elderly church which was in vacancy for the second time in six years. A third comment from a man in his sixties expressed concern about:

the future of small congregations in old, damp and cold buildings run by PCCs made up of over 70s, particularly if those PCCs want what they've always known and won't allow change to accommodate younger generations who might be thinking of coming to church.

These responses demonstrate that there is concern among lay people about the fragility of rural churches with small and ageing congregations beyond the context of Covid.

### ***Sustaining historic buildings***

Ten participants, all in their sixties or seventies, drew attention to the impact of the pandemic on the sustainability of historic church buildings. One man in particular reflected on the wider impact of the decision to keep churches locked during the pandemic among the wider rural community comprising people who valued the church but were not themselves regular churchgoers. He felt that:

People in rural villages who are not churchgoers often perceive the parish church as 'their' church and may well not appreciate being locked out of it, particularly when they may feel a need for private devotion or prayer.

Moreover, he was not hopeful about the longer-term effects of the migration from in-person worship to online services. He suggested that the inevitable consequence:

will be substantial numbers of church closures. It will be interesting to see how many of the new virtual Christians remain interested; and how many will be prepared to give their time and money to the church.

Other responses followed the same line of argument with a pessimistic view that the pandemic would have a negative effect on church buildings and *also* on the Church as a body of people. A man in his seventies felt that: ‘This situation has clearly shown that a lot of Church of England churches will not be needed in the future...’. He also suggested that ‘the Church of England will not need the current number of clergy’. A woman in her sixties was also concerned that once the pandemic came to an end ‘our church buildings will be more of an issue... both the upkeep of them and congregations returning’.

By way of contrast, a number of other voices took a more optimistic view and saw the pandemic as a catalyst for necessary change. One woman in her sixties said that: ‘As a church we have known for some time we need to act differently, we need to spend less time raising funds to support old buildings and [do] more to support the vulnerable in our communities’. Her hope was that the pandemic would help people to realise that. She also thought that ‘going forward we’ll have fewer resources to spend on clergy, bishops etc. We may have to reorganise ourselves’. Another woman in her sixties, recognised that: ‘The future of small unsustainable rural churches remains in doubt’. She thought that during the pandemic ‘many former regular churchgoers [will] have discovered they can live without going to the church building every Sunday’. This was not, however, something negative for this respondent. Rather she hoped that it would prove a catalyst for ‘the Gospel teachings can be re-established at last’.

A different note of optimism was voiced by a woman in her seventies who hoped that the pandemic might lead to a renewed reverence for the ‘sacred space’ offered by rural

churches. She found herself 'quite distressed by the neglect of the idea of sacred space in the shutting of our churches' and felt that it 'has been a trend always in operation in the C of E'. However, she hoped that the pandemic might 'teach our churches to pay a little more attention to the importance of the 'sacred space', to honour the tradition of worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness', something that she felt had been 'abandoned in many places'.

Another optimistic response was voiced by a woman who felt that it was important to keep church buildings, but recognised that the way in which they are used may need to be re-considered:

Our churches (buildings) need to stay and be used. There needs to be ongoing discussion regarding the use of our churches as to how we'll worship in them in the future. Congregations all around the world use buildings for worship. We are often too eager to be destructive, so let us learn from our previous mistakes and consider the future generations, ourselves and the beauty and benefits of these buildings which we might otherwise very easily ruin in this wonderful world of ours.

Another woman, in her sixties, expressed her love for church buildings, but suggested there may be too many of them: 'I love the buildings but it is just not necessary to have a church in every parish. Sell them off and centralise'. A man in his seventies did not go as far as this, recognising that 'Churches need a local home', but felt that 'historic buildings should not be [the church's] responsibly', feeling that '... our ancient church buildings are a real financial problem diverting our money from more important missionary uses'. Taking a different perspective, a man in his seventies wrote of the importance of church buildings as meeting places which express faith. He thought that: 'People may not lose faith if the local church closes but others will not be able to use the local church to find faith particularly through special services'.

These responses make it clear that the upkeep of historic buildings is a concern, if not a burden, to lay people. It is also clear that such buildings are valued. For some lay people,

despite the intrinsic beauty and value of historic churches, they are not felt to be essential to worship, and there was a hope that the pandemic might prove a catalyst to use churches in different ways. However, running alongside this is an understanding by lay people that historic buildings are, in some sense, important, even intrinsic, to the on-going mission of the Church.

### ***Sustaining finances***

Five participants, four women and one man, drew attention to impact of the pandemic, particularly as a consequence of church closures, on the sustainability of finance. Four of these five participants held specific responsibilities within their local churches: three were treasurers and the fourth was a churchwarden as well as having roles at deanery and diocesan level. All were concerned about the impact of church closures on finance during the pandemic. As a woman in her sixties put it: 'our church members don't see their giving as sacrificial or regular if not entering the building!'. Another woman, in her fifties expressed her deep concern that reserves were being used to pay parish share while no money was coming in. She said simply: 'Our church could go bust'. Another woman, a treasurer, in her seventies wrote: 'I am concerned about how the local Church building will be kept going and how we will continue to pay anything towards our Parish Share',

A source of frustration expressed in three of the five responses was an apparent lack of concern, understanding and support from dioceses and the national church. This was combined with a deep concern that lack of income and an inability to pay parish share would lead to accelerated closure of small, rural churches. A woman in her sixties expressed her frustration when she wrote: 'I am appalled by the lack of guidance and empathy from the Diocese, especially when rural parishes such as ours are struggling to cope financially while the churches are closed'. Another woman, in her fifties, appeared equally frustrated when she wrote: 'No allowance [has been] given from diocese. If you pay rent, you can request a

payment break. Got a mortgage you can request a payment break but can't have a break from paying parish share'. Finally, a man in his sixties, who described himself as a 'practical treasurer', expressed both his frustration and his deep concern when he made the following response:

I'm deeply concerned that C of E excessive costs [versus] the reducing congregation will cause closures. Covid-19 will make the decline faster as we are losing income fast. Paying the full Parish Share? We have no hope.

Despite his obvious frustration, the same participant recognised the benefits of 'virtual church', but also the challenges in terms of finance: 'The new digital age is great but provides no income'.

It is clear from the references to a fear of accelerated church closure and reducing reserves that respondents were aware of the fragility of the financial situation in relation to small rural churches before Covid-19 forced the closure of churches. It is also clear that there was frustration about an apparent lack of both support and understanding from the central church, which was focused both on dioceses and on the national church. Just one participant, a man in his sixties, suggested a possible solution to the financial challenges which were exacerbated by the pandemic when he responded: 'so how is our diocese to survive? Central funding, maybe?'

### ***Church growth or church decline***

Lawson (2023) identified one of the marks of the fragile rural church as; 'congregations of a dozen or less people with an increasing age profile'. In the context of the narrative responses to the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey, the question arose: was the closing of churches in response to a national lockdown a catalyst which could lead to change and renewal, or was it a disaster, making the church invisible at a time of national crisis and hastening its decline?

So far, we have heard participants expressing fears that people might find they did not need to

attend church weekly. We have also glimpsed an understanding that the ‘new digital age is great’. Far from further reducing small congregations, might the enforced closure of churches provide potential for growth? Nine people made a response which could be categorised as ‘church growth’. All of these were women. A number of these responses were positive about the pandemic lockdown being a catalyst for change. Typical of these responses were those of a woman in her seventies who wrote: ‘I am very hopeful about the future. It is difficult to know how things will turn out, but I believe this is a pivotal time’. While another respondent in her sixties said: ‘The Covid-19 challenge for the church has been just what was needed to take it out of its comfort zone’. A woman in her eighties said simply: ‘The current crisis could be used to think again about the role of the church in general life and hopefully relate Christianity as the answer to world problems’.

Particularly noticeable in this group of responses was an awareness of the possibilities which online worship presented. A woman in her sixties responded:

Churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike have rallied to help everyone get access to the services and meetings. Attendance has increased – neighbours are far happier to ‘try’ church in their own home – less threatening than crossing the church threshold! Lockdown has opened up new ways of worship and social interaction, which will continue to be valuable for reaching the housebound when churches are open for services again.

And a woman in her seventies enthused:

I have been able to access a range of worship from different denominations world-wide, as well as to access my local church online services... . There is a great feeling that the Spirit is at work just now and there are few that I have spoken with who desire the world ‘as it was’. The Church needs to respond to this, I believe, and to grasp the nettle!

There was a recognition that church buildings are important, but this was in the context of recognising that buildings need to be used differently. One woman in her sixties

said: 'I think that this has given churches the opportunity to re-think church, but I think that we value our church buildings. How we use them in the future may change, for the better I suspect'. The need for change, both in terms of structure and in terms of patterns of worship was recognised and positively embraced. A woman in her seventies wrote:

I am very supportive of a 'root and branch' look at the way the C of E runs. The closure of our churches and the break of routine has provided an ideal opportunity to do this. Maybe decisions can be taken about the future which would not have been conceivable even three months ago. I am hugely in favour of 'exploring options'.

A woman in her sixties was realistic about the need for change and excited about the prospect of change:

The future of small, financially stretched, rural parishes such as ours is very uncertain, but I think that it was increasingly unsustainable anyway. Maybe the pandemic will precipitate us into change that would have been unacceptable before. I find that prospect quite exciting. God has [a] track record in bringing his people to their knees in order to bring about growth.

The need for change in worship patterns was recognised, as this comment from a woman in her sixties shows:

I feel that God has taken charge again and I am so thankful we have to listen more and be more prayerful more relevant, bold with our faith. Less of the same old each week and meet people in ways that meet their need.

However, this positive approach was accompanied by a very real concern that once the lockdown was over, there would be a return to 'normal' and the enthusiasm for new patterns would wane. A woman in her forties responded:

I believe the church has a responsibility to reach out and support their local community, not just those who usually attend a worship service. My deepest concern is that when things 'return to normal' we will go back to 'dull' 'formal' Anglican

worship. I see this time as an opportunity for God to revive His church i.e., the people, His body here on earth.

It is clear from these responses that when the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey was carried out during the first lockdown, there was a sense of hope and excitement that God was doing something new and there was possibility of new developments. Now that that period is receding and ‘normal’ life has been re-established, more research is needed to discover what has become of those hopes and possibilities.

What is also clear is that, running alongside the hope of new possibilities, was a concern that there would be a return to the old familiar ways. There were also great concerns that, by closing churches, far from growing, the Church might become invisible and irrelevant. This juxtaposition of growth and invisibility makes it difficult to consider church growth in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic without also considering the possibility of the church becoming invisible and irrelevant when the doors were closed. Seven rural lay people made responses relating to the (in)visible church: five men and two women. The responses in this section were particularly negative towards the hierarchy of the Church. This was voiced especially forcefully in a response from a man in his seventies who responded:

I am very disappointed with the way that the C of E has behaved as an instrument of government instead of asserting its role... The opportunity should have been taken to take space within national newspapers to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. That this has not been done is a disgrace. The C of E does not deserve to survive and probably won't.

Other respondents were concerned about the effect of locking the doors of the church. A woman in her seventies said: ‘I don't see a future for a Church that locks itself away and cowers in fear’. Whilst a man in his seventies responded:

The Church has been to all intents and purposes invisible. The Church – locally, regionally, and nationally – will suffer the ‘Out of sight - Out of mind - Out of the window’ syndrome.

Some aspects of lockdown were appreciated by those who made responses about the (in)visibility of the church but still feared that the church was invisible. For example, a man in his eighties saw 'lockdown as wonderful opportunity for church to exhibit caring nature and for national growth' while also believing that the 'C of E clergy stance (particularly but not exclusively closure of churches) at every level will accelerate decline'. Reflecting on the place of online worship, a man in his seventies 'greatly appreciated online services but from another Benefice' while also feeling neglected and concerned because 'we don't have a priest in charge and feel neglected. I am concerned about our village church and the future'.

This response to the closing of churches during the pandemic suggest that the lay people who responded to this questionnaire were not only aware, but also concerned, even fearful of the future of the church, particularly those which were already small and fragile.

### ***Boon or bane of online worship***

Fifteen people made written responses relating to online worship and the need to adapt to changing congregations; three men and 12 women. The provision of online worship for the period of the pandemic was largely welcomed. A woman in her forties wrote:

I think that the virtual services that I have attended have been brilliant, I have been able to attend church more during lockdown as other activities that often clash are not taking place. There is also the opportunity to watch the recordings of the services which again means more access.

One woman in her seventies said: 'Virtual services have been excellent in these strange times' with another woman in her seventies reporting that:

The variety of online worship offered and the opportunity to listen to inspirational addresses from St Pauls Cathedral has been spiritually enriching. It's enabled me to feel a member of the world-wide Christian church.

Another woman in her sixties was positive about online church because it has raised awareness of those already isolated from physical worship:

I think the lockdown has made us more aware of people who have been isolated from church already due to age or illness. We plan to continue the new ways of keeping in touch as things get back to 'normal'.

The response to online worship was not entirely positive, with a man in his eighties reporting that he felt abandoned: 'Being of the generation least likely to fully accept digital ministry, a sense of having been abandoned is ever present'. A woman in her sixties found that: 'I start to or intend to follow a service and then am distracted with home/farm life which I would not know about in the peaceful surroundings of a Church building'.

Other participants recognised that they were conflicted, largely because they had a personal preference for in-person worship, whilst recognising the benefit of online worship for a season and as a means of reaching those unable, or unwilling, to worship in person. For example, a woman in her forties said:

I understand the need for safety at present and it is a positive outcome that some of our congregation are more able to worship online. This format would therefore be beneficial to those if it could remain available. However, I personally hope that the churches will reopen soon for those, like myself, prefer to worship traditionally.

Likewise, a woman in her fifties wrote:

Online church has been a revelation in offering solidarity in uncertain times, obtainable support and joy. However, my church is central to the story of my life, and it makes me anxious to consider it may close.

The youngest participant to make an extended written comment, a woman in her thirties, seemed angry, expressing fear that online worship would be used as a reason to close church buildings. She wrote that:

a lot of questions asked about how important buildings were, and if more people are going to use online services. If that's what the C of E thinks, they are missing the point. The buildings ARE important, because we need to gather as people and as Christians. So DO NOT think you can replace that with virtual services. You can't get rid of the buildings on the pretext of 'finally moving into the online community' or

whatever. Do not take away our ability to gather. It's the whole point of being a Church.

Looking to the future, there was a strong preference for a return to in-person worship, but also a recognition that continuing online, virtual provision for worship would be valuable and necessary. For example, a man in his seventies said:

In the future normal services will return and be essential but virtual services will be necessary to approach the Z generation...We must use lockdown as an opportunity to broaden our faith, try different things and reach a new audience.

In similar vein a woman in her seventies wrote:

It has been a joy to see many more people coming into contact with the Christian Faith though the responses of all the churches both by way of practical action and the opening up and appreciation of worship to the wider community. Being something of a traditionalist I hope I may have come to appreciate outreach via modern technology especially as it has helped the wider community to come into contact with a faith.

From these laity, responses to online worship were mixed. Most participants recognised that online worship was necessary, even valuable for a season, and some recognised that there would be an ongoing need and purpose for virtual worship online. Alongside this was a strong desire for a return to in-person worship as soon as possible, recognising the need for appropriate precautions to keep those attending safe. The voice of those fearful that online worship would be used as a reason to close churches was small but was significant and vociferous in expression.

Perhaps the last word on the debate about the future of worship should go to the woman in her sixties who observed:

I think that there are great opportunities coming out of the current situation. Whether we will take them remains to be seen. And it is unlikely to be one size fits all.

## **Conclusion**

Listening to the voices of rural Church of England lay people in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, has shown that lay people are aware of the fragile rural church, recognising particularly the burden of maintaining ancient buildings and the challenges of small and aging congregations meeting the parish share. Perhaps, most significantly, listening to the voices of rural lay people has shown a willingness to explore new ways of offering worship, in particular in the virtual online world, and to explore new ways of using church buildings in order for younger generations to come into contact with the Christian faith.

Further research is necessary to explore how much change has actually taken place in order to open up the Christian faith to new people in the time since the pandemic ended.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Ethical approval**

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

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