

Something Other than a Building

A Report on Churches on the Island of Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic



Dr Gladys Ganiel,
Queen's University Belfast
January 2021



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST



Churches
in Ireland
Connecting
in Christ

**'Something Other than a Building':
A Report on Churches on the Island of Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

**By Gladys Ganiel, Queen's University Belfast
G.Ganiel@qub.ac.uk**

**Published by the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting
January 2021**

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the interviewees who gave so generously of their time. The School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University provided funding for transcription of interviews. Therese Cullen transcribed the interviews. Brian O'Neill provided the cover design.

Contents

Introduction	4
Key Findings	6
Significant New Findings.....	6
Pastoral Care.....	7
Religion Online.....	7
Social Services, the Wider Community and Inter-Church Relationships.....	8
Stress and Ministry	9
Something Other than a Building	10
About the Interviews	11
Pastoral Care	12
Conducting Funerals.....	12
Changes in Pastoral Care	14
Religion Online.....	18
Variety of approaches.....	19
Approaches to Eucharist/Communion	21
Audience Reach	23
Denominational differences	24
Volunteers	26
Digital Divides	27
The Future of Ministry Online	29
Social Services, the Wider Community and Inter-Church Relationships	32
National Level Inter-Church Relationships	33
Local Level Inter-Church Relationships.....	34
Stress and Ministry	36
Experiences of Stress.....	36
Re-opening Church Buildings.....	38
Drive-in Services	39
Experiences of Support.....	40
Finances	41
Something Other than a Building.....	44
Is God working through the Pandemic?	44
Understandings of Church: Something Other than a Building	47
Where do we Go from Here?.....	50
Recommendations.....	50
Appendix	52
Joint Statements by Inter-Church Bodies	52
Guidance Documents for Returning to Worship	53

Introduction

During much of the Covid-19 pandemic, church buildings across the island have been closed for worship due to government restrictions on public gatherings. When churches have been open, strict social distancing protocols have limited the numbers who can attend in person. A Presbyterian minister in Northern Ireland reflected that this unusual situation has raised awareness that ‘church is *something other than a building*.’

This report takes its name from this minister’s remarks, as they illustrate one of the main insights from a set of 32 in-depth interviews with clergy from across the island: perceptions of what church is and what it does may be starting to shift in response to the pandemic. The pandemic has necessitated moving aspects of religious practice online, contributed to an emphasis on community service to meet pressing needs, and mobilised volunteers to assist with new tasks like online ministry and stewarding socially distanced services. As Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh John McDowell put it, there is a certain ‘fog’ about the future but ‘it would be very peculiar if we all went through this and nothing changed.’

The interviews for this report complement an earlier survey of faith leaders on the island, the results of which were published in a May 2020 report, ‘People Still Need Us’. The interviews were designed to follow up on key findings from the survey and to probe for new insights, providing deeper and more nuanced perspectives on how churches are navigating the pandemic. This report is best read in conjunction with the earlier research.¹

The interviews covered some similar ground to the survey, with questions designed to gain fuller understanding of changes in pastoral care, moving religion online, social services and the wider community, and stress and ministry. Some of the key findings deepen our understanding of the survey results.

Other key findings from the interviews are new, including a range of perspectives on how God may be working during the pandemic; and understandings of what it means to ‘be church’. Taken together, these findings provide evidence for a shift in emphasis among clergy to the idea that church is *something other than a building*.

Of course, this is not an entirely new perspective: most clergy who articulated it already held this view prior to the pandemic. Some had been trying to communicate this idea to their parishioners or congregants for years. But for them, the pandemic was an opportunity for this idea to spread more widely. It was a chance for churches to change: to become characterised by deeply engaged laity, serving with enthusiasm outside the ‘four walls’ of their church buildings, including in online spaces. The surveys and interviews also revealed an increase in lay volunteerism during the pandemic, which could accelerate this trend. At the same time, challenges such as furloughed staff and decreased financial resources were working against activism outside the walls of church buildings.

¹ Gladys Ganiel, *People Still Need Us: A Report on a Survey of Faith Leaders on the Island of Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Belfast: Irish Council of Churches, May 2020, <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/resources/People-Still-Need-Us-May-2020.pdf>.

In addition, there was evidence of what could be a historic shift in national level inter-church relations. Inter-church cooperation at this level has been more frequent and united during the pandemic than at perhaps any other time, with unprecedented levels of collaboration around pandemic-related issues such as closing and re-opening church buildings; as well as issues like Brexit and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. Given the island's religiously-divided past, such cooperation – if sustained – could provide churches with a solid platform from which to contribute to societal debate in the years ahead.

But these conclusions and the findings that follow should be interpreted cautiously. They are based on a small sample size of 32 interviewees, among whom moderate and ecumenically-inclined voices are likely to be over-represented. This is due to the research's association with the ICC/IICM. Clergy who are aware of (and in some cases involved in) and hold these organisations' work in high regard were perhaps more likely to complete the survey and agree to an interview. Dissenting voices – such as more conservative Catholics or Protestant evangelicals – are likely to be under-represented, though not entirely absent.

Key Findings

I begin by presenting the most significant new findings. I present the remainder of the findings thematically. These themes also were explored in the May 2020 survey. Some thematic sections start with a short summary of key findings from the survey, which contextualise the new findings that follow.

Significant New Findings

The pandemic has accelerated a shift in emphasis towards the idea that church is 'something other than a building'. This shift seems to be related to the popularity of online services, churches' responses to the pandemic through practical action in their communities, and increases in lay activism in providing pastoral care and technical expertise.

Some clergy reported that their parishioners and congregants believed the pandemic was God's judgement, but this was a minority view among clergy. Clergy generally encouraged people to think along the lines that God was coming alongside people in love during the pandemic, often through the kind and selfless actions of others.

National-level, inter-church cooperation has been more frequent and united during the pandemic than at perhaps any other time in Irish church history.

At local level, already-existing inter-church/ecumenical relationships were usually maintained, albeit often at a reduced intensity as churches focused on pressing tasks such as moving services online and then, in the summer, reopening buildings.

For some clergy, reopening church buildings was one of the most stressful experiences of the pandemic, as they grappled with balancing health and safety against people's spiritual needs. The popular drive-in services organised by some rural Protestant churches also presented organisational challenges, but were generally viewed positively as innovative opportunities for worship.

Financial strains were varied and uneven across denominations and geographical locations. Although everyone interviewed said there had been declines (or delays) in financial giving, in some cases this was partially off set by increased online donations, savings or assets. Immigrant-majority congregations and rural Protestant congregations (especially in the Republic) seemed especially vulnerable to financial strain, with concerns about losing their church buildings.

Pastoral Care

The survey found that the most stressful experiences for clergy during the pandemic have been around pastoral care, including comforting those bereaved by Covid-19, comforting those bereaved of other causes, conducting funerals, and ‘feeling guilty that I am not doing enough to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic’. The interviews shed further light on these challenges.

A Catholic priest described **conducting funerals** during the pandemic as ‘**the hardest thing I’ve done as a priest, by far**’; while a Methodist lamented the clinical nature of the restrictions meant, ‘**I’ve buried a dog with more emotion.**’ Others described creative responses to the challenges such as people standing outside their homes as small funeral corteges passed; and livestreaming funeral services. Some described pressure to ‘police’ behaviour at funerals if social distancing measures were not followed. Others were concerned that the unusual funeral arrangements were contributing to an accumulation of unprocessed grief that would worsen as time wore on.

With most face-to-face contact prohibited, **there were significant changes in how pastoral care was provided.** Clergy described connecting with people through writing letters and the telephone, and while taking walks.

There also was **evidence of an increase in volunteers assisting with pastoral care.** This was most obvious among Protestant traditions, many of which already had systems of what some traditions call ‘elders’ in place to provide support. At the same time, clergy from all traditions reported feeling pressure (either from themselves or members of their parishes/congregations) that they were not providing enough pastoral care.

Religion Online

The survey found that the percentage of faith communities providing online worship opportunities had increased from 56% to 87%, and that 70% of faith leaders intended to retain at least some aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings were lifted.

Interviews provided more information about **the richness and variety of approaches to online ministry that have developed during the pandemic,** including the different formats and applications used for worship services, and the development of additional types of prayer services and other online meetings.

Interviews confirmed **the importance of the local:** although some denominations and dioceses provided centralised online services, people liked to see their own clergy and members of the faith community.

Interviews found that clergy learned from **consulting with each other and watching each other’s online services.** For some clergy, this was a **source of stress,** as they and/or their parishes/congregations did not have the technical expertise to match services produced by others.

Interviews revealed **different approaches to holding Eucharist/communion services online**. Both the Catholic and Church of Ireland traditions placed a renewed emphasis on the idea of 'spiritual communion'. Some Protestant traditions facilitated at-home communion services, where people watching online used their own bread and wine to participate in communion in their homes. Amidst debate and disagreement about what is appropriate, **the move to online services has prompted reflection on the meaning and practice of Eucharist/communion**.

Interviews confirmed that online services have had a **wider than anticipated audience reach**. Although most clergy were skeptical that this could be explained by a robust revival of interest in religion in terms of attracting people who were not regular churchgoers, some interpreted it as an **intensification of faith among those who were already relatively committed**.

Interviews shed light on **how denominations have managed moves online differently**. On the survey and in interviews, **Methodists were the most consistent in reporting they received timely and helpful support** from their denomination, by volunteers and from other paid staff. Interviews explored Methodists' organised and systematic approach to moving online, **directed from their denominational headquarters and assisted through the office of District Superintendents**. District Superintendents, who have oversight roles akin to bishops in other denominations, served as conduits of advice and support.

Interviews confirmed that **moving online contributed to an increase in volunteering among lay people with technical expertise**. This happened across denominations.

Interviews raised issues about **digital divides**, with clergy reporting some people (those in rural areas, the elderly, and those in immigrant congregations) struggling to use digital platforms or secure reliable internet access. Some clergy reported that the elderly had proved more proficient in online participation than they had anticipated.

Interviews affirmed the **support for continuing online ministries once lockdowns cease**. Clergy saw online ministries as valuable for shut-ins, and as tools for evangelism, building community, and encouraging prayer. There were some **cautious or dissenting voices**, including a Catholic priest who insisted that online connections are 'not community'.

Social Services, the Wider Community and Inter-Church Relationships

The survey found that among the four largest denominations, 74% of churches were providing social services to the wider community during the pandemic. Among those providing services, 42% said their services had increased, 33 percent had stayed the same, and just 25% had decreased their services.

Interviews revealed **differences in service provision among parishes/congregations**: small rural parishes did not have the same resources as large urban congregations, so what churches offered met the scale of their resources. In cases where churches had decreased

their services, this was often because they relied on in-person meetings to carry out this work, and this had been prohibited during lockdown.

Interviews provided evidence that **national-level, inter-church cooperation has been more frequent and united during the pandemic than at perhaps any other time in Irish church history**. National-level bodies such as the Church Leaders Group, the Irish Inter-church Meeting, and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting have been exceptionally active issuing statements on pandemic-related issues as well as Brexit and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland; and meeting political officials about these matters. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland also undertook a new initiative, convening a Four Nations Church Leaders' Forum which consists of representatives from Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales; and includes Evangelical Alliance. This met three times, initially to address challenges related to the pandemic, later expanding its remit to include shared challenges arising from Brexit.

At local level, already-existing inter-church/ecumenical relationships were usually maintained, albeit often at a **reduced intensity** as churches focused on pressing tasks such as moving services online and then, in the summer, reopening buildings.

Stress and Ministry

The survey found that 46% of faith leaders said their ministry had been more stressful than usual, while 33% said the stress had been 'about the same', and 21% said it had been less stressful.

Interviews revealed that for some clergy, **reopening church buildings was one of the most stressful experiences of the pandemic**, as they grappled with balancing health and safety against people's spiritual needs. The popular **drive-in services** organised by some rural Protestant churches also presented organisational challenges, but were generally viewed positively as **innovative opportunities** for worship.

Interviews found that **clergy's experiences of support have been uneven**. Methodists reported the highest levels of support from their denomination, which has been facilitated in part through the District Superintendent's role. Some clergy created their own informal networks of support with colleagues or laity.

Interviews confirmed that **financial strains were varied and uneven**. Although everyone interviewed said there had been declines (or delays) in financial giving, in some cases this was partially off set by increased online donations, savings or assets. Immigrant-majority congregations and rural Protestant congregations (especially in the Republic) seemed especially vulnerable to financial strain, with concerns about losing their church buildings.

Something Other than a Building

Interviews found that clergy **believed God was working during the pandemic**, but not always in ways they fully understood. Some reported that their parishioners and congregants believed the pandemic was **God's judgement**; this was a minority view among clergy. Clergy generally tried to steer people away from this perspective and encouraged them to think along the lines that **God was coming alongside people in love during the pandemic**, often through the kind and selfless actions of others.

Clergy reported **a greater awareness among themselves and those in their parishes/congregations that church is 'something other than a building'**. For them, this meant greater awareness that people should live out their faith 'outside the four walls' of the church, serving others and the common good. It also meant a more engaged and involved laity.

Most clergy that expressed these views had believed that the churches needed to change to become 'something other than a building' prior to the pandemic. For them, the pandemic seemed to be an opportunity for this lesson to be learned more widely – and possibly a **catalyst for accelerating this type of change within the churches.**

About the Interviews

Most interviewees were accessed via the survey itself. Although the survey was anonymous, faith leaders were given the option to include their contact details if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Of the 439 respondents, 196 (45%) indicated willingness. Interviewees were selected to access a range of experiences across different denominations, geographical areas, approaches to online ministry, and service in the wider community. The original survey was distributed among faith leaders from outside the Christian tradition. With only three respondents the decision was made to focus on Christian clergy in the interviews.²

Twenty-five survey respondents were interviewed between June and December 2020, including seven Catholics, six Church of Ireland ministers, four Presbyterians, three Methodists, and five 'others' (non-denominational, Moravian, Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Society of Friends/Quakers). Of these, 15 were male and 10 female, with 14 from the Republic and 11 from Northern Ireland. Women and clergy from Northern Ireland were over-represented based on their numbers in ministry and in the population of the island, respectively. This reflects the responses to the survey, in which women and clergy from Northern Ireland were more likely to respond. Interviewees were granted anonymity, although some opted to waive it. In this report, the decision has been made to anonymise all respondents. They are identified by denomination and location (the Republic or Northern Ireland). Due to the small numbers of Presbyterians and Methodists in the Republic, these are identified as Protestant to ensure anonymity.

To gain a broader view of the range of experiences within denominations, faith leaders who were serving outside parish or congregational ministry, such as Catholic bishops or leaders in similar positions in Protestant denominations, were interviewed. The Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Meeting (ICC/IICM) facilitated this by identifying seven leaders in these posts, including three Catholic bishops, with the remainder in similar positions in the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Of these, Archbishop McDowell and Rev Heather Morris, Secretary of the Methodist Church, waived anonymity.

² At the same time, we acknowledge the experiences of peoples of other faiths, as encapsulated in a Buddhist's 'write-in' response to one of the survey questions: 'There are not only Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. There are Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, etc, living in Ireland, north and south. That reality needs to be catered for. This time of crisis has highlighted many of the shortcomings of living and dying as a non-Christian in Ireland.'

Pastoral Care

During the pandemic, faith leaders have been designated by governments north and south as ‘key workers’ in recognition of their pastoral care roles in ministering to the sick and dying, conducting funerals, comforting the bereaved, and supporting people through other challenges. The survey found that the most stressful experiences for clergy during the pandemic have been around pastoral care. The top four most stressful experiences were comforting those bereaved by Covid-19, comforting those bereaved of other causes, conducting funerals, and ‘feeling guilty that I am not doing enough to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic’. In interviews, clergy described those experiences in greater detail and provided perspectives on what funerals and changes in pastoral care have been like during the pandemic.

Conducting Funerals

Government restrictions for conducting funerals have varied throughout the pandemic, depending on how strict the lockdown measures are at any given time. In the early days of the pandemic, some undertakers took bodies to graveyards before clergy were notified of the death, such as the fear around how funerals could be safely conducted. Socially distanced funerals with limited numbers have been permitted, either outdoors or in church buildings. A Catholic bishop in the Republic said:

One priest told me that he got a call that someone had died at half seven in the morning from COVID-19 and he was burying him that afternoon at half past four. It was all very rushed and I can imagine the effect that is having on those who were bereaved. And even though he preached at the graveside and did as much of the service as he possibly could do at the graveside, they’ll probably in a year or two look back and say: ‘The priest didn’t do much for us and the church wasn’t there for us when we needed them. Why did we have to rush things so much?’

For a Catholic priest in Northern Ireland, funerals during the pandemic have been ‘the hardest thing I’ve done as a priest, by far’. He described a funeral under the most stringent of lockdown restrictions:

There’s something about the ritual of families gathering, prayer, the incense, the holy water: a lot of ritual and symbolism about honouring the life and commending the life to God. ... That was all taken away, almost in one fell swoop. ... Having that small prayer service, and the funeral itself: there’s no carrying of the coffin, and when ... you arrived at the cemetery the undertakers bring the remains of the family’s loved one. And the undertakers and the gravediggers – it’s different in different places – but in XXX they were wearing full hazmat suits. It was like something out of a film. ... And the family watched their loved one get put into the ground 10 feet away. ... I was reminded in those moments that there’s often no words that you can say to a family in those moments. ... When you lose a loved one it’s hard enough, but then it’s even harder to have very short five-minute prayers, and then you’re gone, and that’s it.

Similarly, a Methodist in Northern Ireland lamented how changes to funerals had heightened people's grief:

As ministers it's our role to journey with the bereaved. And that is difficult because our contact is limited. A hand on the shoulder used to say so much. [The funerals were] clinical, and we have to understand that this will add to the complexity of someone's bereavement. ... I've buried a dog with more emotion because people just had to do what the law said and that was it.

I had one gentleman who couldn't be with his brother at the time of death, ... who had always been there in life for him. ... Whenever you have an 80-year-old man crying because he couldn't say goodbye to his brother, there's just some things that shouldn't be happening. And then I have had some comments obviously because of Mr Storey.³

At the same time, Church of Ireland priest⁴ in Northern Ireland explained how she felt her church made the best of the situation:

I think the Church of Ireland, or this diocese, did a pretty good job in providing us with a shortened funeral liturgy. So, I can say with confidence, 'Well, this service is taking place outdoors, this is a shorter service, it's not in the church building, but ... it is a proper Christian burial.' I've heard people say, 'Oh it's terrible that people can't even get a funeral these days.' Certainly, where our tradition is concerned, that's not the case. They get a proper dignified Christian burial.

In contrast, a Catholic priest in the Republic described how he felt 'useless' that such a large part of his ministry had been restricted:

It was a privilege to be present in people's homes and hear the story of a life. Now to be on the periphery, to be useless, that was difficult.

Clergy also talked about the challenges of communicating the funeral restrictions to grieving relatives. A Catholic priest in Northern Ireland described families as understanding of the situation:

The difficulty for me was a man was dying and having to bring him the sacraments was very painful for me. I had to wear gloves and I had to use a cotton bud to anoint the man, and I just felt dreadful that I was selling this family short and not respecting their painful grief at his passing. ... And I found that when I would say, 'I'm sorry that this terrible time has meant that your father cannot receive what he deserves' – that sort of language – they would step in to prevent, to absorb, my anxiety.

³ A reference to the funeral of republican Bobby Storey in West Belfast in June 2020, which drew large crowds and controversy, due to its apparent breach of pandemic restrictions.

⁴ Clergy in the Church of Ireland are more commonly referred to as ministers. However, some Church of Ireland clergy referred to themselves as priests during their interviews. In those cases, the language of priest has been retained.

While a Catholic priest in the Republic noted that for some people the restrictions were hard to understand, especially early in the pandemic:

A lot of the people that I meet with at funerals mightn't be regular churchgoers. ... Early on in the restrictions, some of them couldn't comprehend why. Why are we not allowed to have the church full? You know Mammy deserves that. ... Some people are angry about it. Now, some people are understanding and say, 'that's just the way it is', and I think it's probably a little bit easier now because we are now a few months into this.

A Church of Ireland minister serving in the Republic also encountered difficulties:

Funerals are challenging, especially here in the country, because everybody's expected to go. ... It's been a real difficulty to try and curtail that. It was actually easier when we were in the graveyard, because it's less risky. But now we are in the church building – I'm almost dreading one in the building, because they'll all expect to go. And yet, we're limited to 50. ... And the graveyards were pretty much full, and you were trying to keep people apart. You end up being a religious policeman, which is the last thing you want to be.

In other areas, people responded creatively to being unable to attend funerals or graveside services. People standing on their doorsteps as the hearse travelled to the graveyard became a common sight across the island, for Christians of most denominations. A Catholic priest in the Republic described making the best of it with the aid of online technology, while expressing concerns that much grief will remain unprocessed:

Normally what we would have when you've got a funeral you would engage with the family in person, you would be at their home. You have a time of prayer there. You would have the removal into the church. You have the funeral Mass, and then the committal itself. ... What we did instead was we had to engage online. We would have had obviously the smaller masses and people struggled with that. So, for example, I was doing a Mass and it was for a lady and she was a grandmother. Of course, her kids could come into the church but her grandchildren couldn't, so they were all in the car watching the Mass online outside. ... I think it's going to be a lot of processing to be done.

Changes in Pastoral Care

During the pandemic, pastoral care has extended beyond the bereaved to those trying to cope with the challenges of lockdown life. With most face-to-face contact prohibited by government restrictions, clergy resorted to other means to provide pastoral care. They described writing letters and emails, telephoning, connecting via online applications, and chatting to people (from a distance) while on walks or outside their homes. The methods used varied according to clergy's personal inclinations and the resources of their members. In some rural areas, internet connections were patchy so low-tech options like hand-written letters and telephoning were employed. Others noted that elderly members lacked the skills to access the internet, although some reported that even their oldest members had mastered new technologies over the course of the lockdowns.

A Church of Ireland priest in the Republic described her letter-writing ministry:

I came up with this idea of an illustrated letter which goes out every single week, by post because we're a country area here and quite a lot of people don't have computers and are not comfortable with their phones except to use them for telephone conversation. ... We have to post letters every week, but the rest we send out an email on a Saturday morning. The response to that has been grand really, they love them. ... It was never a sermon, they're not sermons, they're reflections on what might be going on for any of us and how to cope.

A minister from an 'other' denomination in Northern Ireland also discovered the power of letter-writing:

I wrote a letter [to a bereaved congregant], and I have found that people appreciate letters almost more than anything. It's something that they can hold onto. ... I wrote her a letter and she loved it; she came down to the manse to thank me for it. We spent three-quarters of an hour sat outside just talking about it. So, I was really touched by the way that meant so much to her. Lots of post has gone out, so I think that's perhaps an underrated part of ministry.

While a Methodist minister in Northern Ireland talked about her telephone conversations:

I laugh to myself that we are going back to the good old days where we have landline phones. Some of my folk only have a landline. It was telephoning them and hearing them and listening and letting them know that whilst the church doors may be closed, that's not the Church of God! The Church of God is not confined to four walls. So, this was in some ways an opportunity for the church to take God out of the building and into the community.

A priest in Northern Ireland decided to regularly walk through his parish, which opened up opportunities for pastoral care and connection:

When the regulations became clearer that you could go out for a walk, my curate and I went out for a walk once a week up and down the streets so that we would be seen. And the response was astonishing - beeping their horns and waving. ... I was really surprised. ... I really, genuinely thought no one would notice, but at least it's my lockdown walk. So, they noticed and they commented and the response has been very surprising. It has really affected my attitude towards pastoral priesthood in a very positive way.

While a Church of Ireland minister in the Republic distributed printed copies of sermons while walking his dog:

[My mentor suggested] when you're taking the dog out for a walk, take your sermons with you; if you see people, give your sermons out. Now I have to say that I've ... not really come across a lot of Church of Ireland folk, but a lot of Roman Catholic, possibly lapsed Roman Catholic, who are very responsive to receiving my sermons. ... During the last [less restrictive] lockdown I would knock on the door [of parishioners], say how are you, have a prayer, offer my sermon, and move on. I would do that on a weekly basis.

The survey also found that there had been an increase in volunteerism across denominations, with laypeople assisting with pastoral care and with technological aspects of moving services online. Among interviewees, clergy from Protestant traditions were much more likely to report assistance from laity in providing pastoral care, although both Protestants and Catholics received technical support. As a Catholic priest in the Republic put it: 'We have a number of people who are involved in little things, but as far as pastoral care goes, I'm the primary caregiver.'

Some traditions, like Presbyterianism, have elders who already provided pastoral care within their congregations. A Presbyterian minister in Northern Ireland described how his elders assisted him:

Each district [associated with our congregation] has an elder and a committee representative attached to them. ... It was a real Godsend to us in the middle of all of this. So, they really made sure that if they or if an elder was shielding and did not want to go out, the elder did the phone calls and the committee person the deliveries, or vice versa. They then fed back to me if there was any pastoral issue that I needed to respond to. They stepped up to the plate and beyond really. ... Then there were some other folks who weren't committee or our elders who volunteered to be phone friends.

Parishes in the Redeemed Christian Church of God also employed a system where members of the congregation assisted ministers with pastoral care:

We in our mission call them ministers but in some place they call them elders. Some ministers are assigned to [parishioners]. There are some who are always trying to reach out to people on the phone and some are doing so by text. At best we try to monitor the people within the congregation that we know, and if nobody gets in contact with them ... then it behoves us to kind of follow up and find out what's going on. So, yeah there are few ministers or elders who are supporting me in that aspect.

Similarly, a minister in an 'other' tradition in Northern Ireland explained how her church's pastoral care system swung into action:

Usually, our pastoral care is looking after those who are sick and are not able to come into church for a while. But because [everyone was] basically going through a crisis we decided that every church member was going to receive pastoral care. So, we had a meeting of all our church membership and divided people up amongst the pastoral care team, so at least one person was spoken to on a weekly or fortnightly basis. ... I think pastoral care really ramped up ... and we had extra people coming to volunteer to help with that as well, so early on we felt that people were stepping up.

At the same time, some ministers reported that some congregants expected more of them. As a Presbyterian in Northern Ireland said:

There's some people unless the minister appears and stays for an hour and drinks tea, that is not a visit. It doesn't count. You can phone them, you can email them, you can invite them to

church to sit in the garden, but if you don't go to them and sit in the front room and drink tea with them, it's not a proper visit. That view is maybe dying out a bit, but it's still there.

Another Presbyterian in Northern Ireland had similar experiences:

I just had to accept I can't fulfil my job the way I used to. ... I just had to accept it when people have said, you didn't phone me enough over lockdown, and you didn't do this, and you didn't do that. I've actually just said to some people, I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say. I wasn't able to do what I would normally do. I am sorry I wasn't able to visit you face to face. So that's been really hard: that people's expectations of me stayed the same whereas I had to lower my expectations of myself.

Religion Online

Some of the most striking findings from the survey were that the percentage of faith communities providing online worship opportunities had increased from 56% to 87%, and that 70% of faith leaders intended to retain at least some aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings were lifted.

Interviewees spoke at length about their experiences of moving religion online. There were a variety of approaches taken across denominations and in parishes/congregations within denominations. These included livestreaming from church buildings, or recording video segments of services from clergy's homes and putting them together with readings and music recorded in the homes of members of the parish/congregation. Some clergy recorded sermons or 'thoughts for the day' in outdoor locations. Churches used a range of platforms including ChurchservicesTV, Facebook Live, Zoom, and YouTube. Churches also fostered connections via WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups or pages, Instagram, and more.

Churches moved to these digital platforms with speed – many within the first week or two of lockdown. They recognised the urgency of the situation and wanted to remain visible in their communities. In some cases, churches built on existing digital ministries, in others they started entirely from scratch. In interviews, clergy provided more detail on the approaches they took, giving a fuller picture of the variety of online services that have developed during the pandemic. These include not only traditional Sunday morning services but also regular times of prayer, 'thought for the day' style reflections, children's talks, and more. Clergy learned from consulting with each other and watching each other's online services. For some this was a source of stress, as they felt pressure if other churches' online services were perceived as of higher quality. The move online also prompted questions about Eucharist and communion services, with churches taking different approaches on whether or how it might be offered virtually.

The survey also found that much larger numbers than would have been expected were accessing online services, a trend that most interviewees confirmed. Although most remained skeptical that this could be explained by a robust revival of interest in religion in terms of attracting people who were not regular churchgoers, some interpreted it as an intensification of faith among those who were already relatively committed.

Among the four largest denominations, there also were differences in the levels of support for moving religion online from denominational staff and from volunteers in local churches, with Methodists the most consistent in reporting they received timely and helpful support. Church of Ireland ministers (40%) were the most likely to be solely responsible for online provision, while Methodists were the most likely to be assisted by volunteers and other paid staff.

Insights also emerged around digital divides, with clergy reporting some people (those in rural areas, the elderly, and those in immigrant congregations) struggling to use digital platforms or secure reliable internet access.

Variety of approaches

For many faith leaders, their first reaction to the announcement of the lockdown in March was to immediately move online. A Quaker explained her rationale:

My husband and I were familiar with Zoom and as soon as we knew that we were not going to be able to meet in person, we essentially didn't even think about it. We said we can't not have meeting on Sunday. So, we set it up via Zoom, thinking that's certainly better than nothing.

A typical Quaker meeting consists of people sitting in silence for long periods, punctuated by an occasional testimony from attendees who feel moved by the spirit to speak. She described what that is like on Zoom:

Some meetings prefer not to [mute their microphones] because they feel that it makes it artificially silent. At the same time, even if everybody is muted, you have noises going around in your own environment. ... Some people feel like it is still possible to achieve quite a deep spiritual level through Zoom, knowing that people are there seeing them trying to attain their inner stillness. While others just feel like it's very hard to make a connection with the others who are participating. ... I've certainly come out of Zoom meetings feeling quite spiritually enriched. Some of the spoken contributions have been quite profound.

Some clergy were initially skeptical that people would be attracted to online services. A Catholic priest in Northern Ireland explained:

I thought right, we're locked up, we're a little bit frightened, we can't have public Mass, we're invisible. What can I do to go beyond invisibility? ... And I thought the only thing we can do is to try and celebrate Mass on Facebook, because we were not wired for streaming. So, I had a conversation with my curate, he was a lot more sceptical. He said, but nobody's gonna watch. I said, we cannot allow ourselves to be in a position where we abandoned our people. He said, but we're not abandoning people. I said, I know, but it might be perceived as such. So, we started ... using Facebook live streaming.

A priest in a Religious Order in the Republic explained how his community added to its already existing webcam services:

All of a sudden Covid happened and we were the only church in [the area] with a webcam. ... Our figures went exponential. It was just crazy, 3,000-4,000 people a day staying for an hour on average. And then you were getting telephone calls locally, people just saying how much they appreciated it, but also messages from all around the world. As the world closed down, I think it became a little bit of a pastime for people.

... The fear, the anxiety, people's normal pastimes and the normal routine of their life were taken away. And all of a sudden all of these streaming Masses broke up the day for them and it became a new routine for them. At the beginning we had the Angelus on at 12 o'clock, so people used to tune into the Angelus. ... We put on devotions as well, which we don't normally have here, at 5 o'clock. ... In normal times we wouldn't have devotions, and yet it

was really digging deep into the treasury of that sort of prayer. ... People really appreciated it.

Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh John McDowell characterised his clergy's use of online ministries as 'taking to it like a duck to water':

The things that seemed to me to work best were the very traditional things. ... The one service that was made for, at least the opening month of the pandemic, was Compline – which is the Office which has a very strong emphasis on God's protection through the night. And you had people who'd never heard it using it because it was almost tailored made for the situation they found themselves in.

At the same time, a Church of Ireland priest in the Republic described efforts to bring the liturgy to life in what she initially perceived as a sterile online environment:

My main aim in liturgy ... is to facilitate encounter with the presence of the living God, this living God who isn't very far away from us, who weaves in and through the whole of history, and weaves in and through the whole of the universe. ... I've already noticed the difference between a YouTube service which is traditional with us reading it because we don't know it all by heart and our more informal service ... which seems to have more life and heart to it.

She also thought it was important to encourage more interaction, so tried a Zoom coffee time after the service:

The Zoom meeting which we had yesterday added a lovely dimension of being the gathered community. I didn't have to imagine and guess who they were underneath their masks; I could see their faces. Because it's traditional [for us] to have tea and coffee afterwards ... even though we were all in our own homes, we could have our tea and coffee at the end of the service and just chat. We began to rebuild the Church of Ireland while we were doing that yesterday.

Clergy also quickly realised that people yearned to see people from their local churches, not just unfamiliar faces on RTÉ services or services produced centrally by their bishops or denominations. As a minister from one of the 'other' churches said:

I wanted people in the congregation to see other people in the congregation. That was a really big thing. We were sending it out first on WhatsApp, so people were picking it up in segments on WhatsApp. It meant such a lot to them to see members of the congregation reading the Bible, leading the prayers, in their home. That has leant to a very close sense of this is our church doing something special for us. If I'd said, oh [watch a different service] they would have gone, oh yes. But I think they would have been a bit frayed at the edges, like we're not really being looked after.

A Presbyterian in Northern Ireland described how he tried to make the most of webcams that had been installed in the church shortly before the pandemic. Instead of filming in his home, as some ministers did, he recorded from different locations around the church building:

We adopted a fairly traditional approach, that you would be able to see your own church and that I would wear a collar and suit. ... I wanted to make it an act of worship rather than a thought for the day. That was quite intentional. But it took me awhile then to work out how to speak to the cameras [which were in three locations around the building]. ... So, then I started watching other services, which is terrible for the soul, but gives you ideas. I realised I could use different parts of the church since the cameras reach everywhere.

At the same time, some clergy deliberately chose not to go online. A Presbyterian in Northern Ireland explained his rationale:

My initial thought was: what about the people who don't have Internet? And people who don't have the kind of knowledge of technology that a lot of others have? So I wanted to produce paper resources for them, and make sure that we've a team of volunteers willing to deliver those. ... My second thought was we already have a whole plethora of options online that people can listen to that are better presented, more professionally setup services than anything that we could have done in a rush. ... The third reason was more theological and in a sense that no matter how well produced the services online are, it's not church. While I wanted people to feel still connected with their church family and still involved ... I didn't want them to get too comfortable sitting in their pajamas at church on Sunday morning. It could make the transition back to church all the harder.

His thoughts were echoed by a Catholic priest in the Republic whose parish did offer online services, despite his reservations:

I still have reservations about kind of language that even Catholic Bishops are using: 'the Mass has gone online.' Actually, sorry bishop, Mass has gone; but we're presenting it online. It's not the same thing and we do ourselves and everybody a disservice by just kind of glibly, saying Mass has gone online. Because it's not Mass, any more than looking at somebody eating their dinner online is nourishment. It's a very, very poor and pale substitute. ... When it came up in conversation with colleagues, I used to say the best thing that Facebook streaming can do is keep the hunger alive so that people don't start to forget.

Approaches to Eucharist/Communion

In write-in questions on the survey, a few clergy raised questions about how Eucharist or communion services could be provided if people were not permitted to gather physically. Interviewees expanded on how such questions were raised and addressed within their own traditions. Both the Catholic and Church of Ireland traditions placed a renewed emphasis on the idea of 'spiritual communion', as explained in a video and short article by Bishop Donal McKeown, posted on the Diocese of Derry website on 28 March 2020.⁵

At the same time, clergy reported that people found it difficult that they could not receive the sacraments physically and in-person. A Catholic Religious in the Republic explained:

Not being able to receive Holy Communion was very, very painful. And people would still talk about it. Of course, it brings up questions of should we or shouldn't have we? ... There's also

⁵ <https://www.derrydiocese.org/news/the-act-of-spiritual-communion>

a very right wing conservative element of the church that says it's all a ploy by Satan, that some people were listening to. So we just tried to convince them or to alleviate their scruples a little bit around that. ... Obviously we were still celebrating the Eucharist, albeit with an empty church, but at least we're in community, so we still had that communal aspect of it.

A Catholic bishop offered these reflections on the questions that had been raised:

Now we have to remember for about 1000 years of our tradition, while people went regularly to Mass they rarely received communion. So, one of the great breakthroughs the past 100 years has been the more regular reception of the Eucharist. But this has got to a point where some people just take it completely for granted. ... Covid has opened up a question for us around that; and points we need to reflect further on: what exactly is our participation at Mass? Is it just an event we watch as a spectator? Or how are we involved in it? And what does it mean to say we come together as a community? I think the Covid crisis has alerted us to the fact that coming together as a community has a value in itself. ... And the point, of course, is that the Christian journey is of its nature, a collective communitarian journey, we don't go to God on our own. But that's something perhaps we need to reflect on, because part of our falling into the individualistic culture, which we all fall into, is actually a perception of our participation in the Eucharist in individualistic terms.

He went on to quote Bishop Mario Grech of Malta:

[Grech] said, the risk is that in the past we have brought people to the sacraments instead of bringing them through the sacraments to Christian life.⁶ I think there's something in that for us in terms of Covid: that we are being invited to rediscover the mission of the Church as outward.

In the Church of Ireland, the bishops wrote a paper on spiritual communion and distributed it among their clergy. A priest in Northern Ireland said she appreciated the 'quiet background support' of the bishops in giving clergy freedom in how they approached Eucharist:

In Anglican theology there is the belief in the real presence of Christ in some form in the Eucharist. So, therefore you have that theological question of, if we celebrate a Holy Communion service online do at-home worshippers participate in the body and blood of Christ through faith as the priest or celebrant receives the gifts or elements? So, that's a tricky one. It sort of pushed us back to potentially becoming more Roman Catholic or Old Catholic in our theology and that created little ripples of division as well. ... But in my mind I'm able to put that aside. I've taken advantage of the fact that we're not being told you have to celebrate Holy Communion online...but you can, so I have done. I did so more in the early days as I have felt somewhat theologically conflicted about it all along. And yet, I feel I need to keep on celebrating Communion online in spite of the ambiguities, because there's comfort for our people in the liturgy and I think, well, God's not limited by this.

⁶ The interview can be found here: <https://catholicoutlook.org/bishop-mario-grech-an-interview-with-the-new-secretary-of-the-synod-of-bishops/>.

A Protestant in the Republic also felt it was important to continue communion services online. Unlike worship services, communion services were live only. They were not recorded and made available after the fact, 'so it was if people were standing just outside the front door of the church, if you like'. People were invited to use their own bread and wine at home. When church buildings re-opened, he also conducted communion services, to which people brought their own bread and wine. A Church of Ireland minister in the Republic said that his tradition did not encourage people to use their own bread and wine in their homes; rather, he drank the wine and his wife ate the bread: 'I always just said she was receiving the bread on behalf of all our parishioners.'

Audience Reach

The survey and some previous interview comments have alluded to the unexpectedly high numbers accessing online services. Various interviewees tried their best to interpret the numbers, acknowledging that high numbers of 'views' can be deceptive because people may not be engaging in depth or staying on for a full service. Some reported a type of online church tourism, where they were aware of visitors from other parishes/congregations in Ireland or from around the world who accessed services, sometimes multiple services on the same day. As a Methodist in Northern Ireland explained:

We have churches with 100 people on a Sunday [pre-pandemic], and for much of the spring/summer, how many people were viewing their Facebook service within 24 hours? In some cases, it was 1000, week after week, and particularly at one place it was 3000-4000 and still is in the thousands. [I think] that is very largely other Christians dropping in and seeing what we're doing and appreciating it. I think it's very optimistic to say there are many, many hundreds of people who aren't of Christian faith who are actively following what churches are doing. I think people are effectively looking through windows, peeking around the door. That is certainly happening. I wish it were different, but there's no clear evidence that there's hundreds of people looking to join the church.

A Presbyterian in Northern Ireland had a similar interpretation:

It's obviously easier to go online, you can still be in your pajamas and have your cup of coffee. People were searching to see what's going on online, then suddenly on a Sunday morning there was an absolute avalanche of stuff and it kept them in touch with something. There's another interesting question: were people on the fringe so far on the fringe? Maybe they weren't as far away from the church as we thought.

In contrast, a Catholic priest in the Republic expressed bewilderment at the popularity of online Mass:

It's a phenomenon which I can't grasp. ... I saw that there's more of, I won't say hunger there, that's too deep. But there certainly was a sense in which they wanted to keep in touch with something familiar that might make a little sense of what was going on. Almost thrown at the feet of God in some way and saying, help me, hug me, hold me if no one else can. ... I'm told up to 1000 used to come in on this thing for us, you see. Really? What are they

doing? Some of the music was beautiful, I'll say that too. Some of the powerpoints I showed were excellent. Maybe we have to appeal to all the senses when trying celebrate someone, this God of ours.

The same priest related a story of meeting a woman on the street who told him she enjoyed the new online Mass, even though she never went to Mass before the pandemic:

She said, I love Mass on Facebook. Then she said, I never go to Mass. Online Mass really reached her heart in some way. Well, that's fine. ... Any blooming way whatsoever, that we can in some sense link life with God, seems to me worthwhile. I think we're being challenged now to wake up our minds and our imaginations to something different, because the numbers coming to church now are very small. So, it's an opportunity in many ways.

In sum, it is difficult to offer explanations for the high numbers of people accessing online services. But most interviewees felt that it could be accounted for by an intensification of faith among the already committed, such as those who may have attended services pre-pandemic but now tuned in for extra services more frequently during the week; 'tourism' among the already committed, who were curious about what other churches were doing; and an opportunity for people on the 'fringes' or who have 'lapsed' to see what services are like now without having to take the more difficult step of attending in-person.

Denominational differences

The survey revealed that there were differences between denominations in terms of the level of advice and support that was offered for providing online services. At 93%, Methodists had by far received the most advice or guidance, followed by Church of Ireland (75%), Presbyterian (44%), Catholic Diocesan (31%), and Catholic Religious (12%).⁷ In part, this reflects the fact that more Catholic than Protestant churches offered online services (usually livestreaming) prior to the pandemic, so it could be concluded that Catholics would not have required as much direction. For example, online provision increased from 62% to 82% for Catholic Diocesan; from 24% to 88% for Church of Ireland; from 25% to 90% for Methodist; and from 48% to 98% for Presbyterian. At the same time, denominations and dioceses often produced a 'central' Sunday service that could be commended to all their congregations or parishes, such as the Presbyterian Moderator's weekly Sunday service or Catholic parishioners being encouraged to access Masses in cathedrals or monasteries that were already equipped with webcams.

But it is very clear from the interviews that Methodists took a very organised and systematic approach to moving online, directed from their denominational headquarters and assisted through the office of District Superintendents. District Superintendents, who have oversight roles akin to bishops in other denominations, served as conduits of advice and support, offering pastoral care and sharing information among ministers in their districts. The current

⁷ The figure for 'other' was 38% but given the range of different traditions within this category, this figure does not reveal much.

District Superintendent role was only introduced in July 2019⁸, and as one Methodist put it: 'it turns out that we have a structure that works for a time of crisis.'

It also is likely that communications were facilitated by the Methodist Church's relatively small size: it is the smallest of the four largest denominations on the island, with around 110 clergy in congregational ministry. Heather Morris, Secretary of the Methodist Church (an office that can be compared to a CEO), explained that the denomination offered digital training and encouraged ministers to share the load:

We offered a seminar in how to livestream and sent out information. We work in circuits, with three or four or five or six churches grouped together. Our initial push was that everybody doesn't have to do an online service. If there's a circuit service, then why not put energy into that and release others to do pastoral care, for example? Some circuits did that and did it magnificently. There's been a payoff then in terms of ongoing relationships. Others were keener to do their own services. I understand that as well. You want to be with familiar people.

Morris's assessment was confirmed by ministers. One from Northern Ireland said:

These webinars, they've been so helpful, because we're learning from one another, listening to other people's stories. You see we have people joining from all over the place. I think it has been a good time.

While another reported:

Where the support did come for us was from the District Superintendent. ... Our District Superintendent organised cluster meetings of about six ministers at a time. And he'd ask us how we're getting on, and we'd share amongst the six of us, and that was helpful. There were lots of webinars organised as well, especially coming up to unlocking. ... They were actually nearly more spiritual than practical. ... That spiritual aspect on the idea of what will we do different? And what are the mission opportunities? Which is welcome, which is good, that the church is using that language rather than just how do we get back to normal? So yeah, I did feel supported.

Following an initial campaign called 'These Three Remain', which sought to provide an immediate response to the lockdown, by September 2020 the Presbyterian Church had established its 'Refined' programme, described as 'the digital programme hub for supporting and developing congregational life and witness during the ongoing challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic period.'⁹ This grew out of its 'These Three Remain' initiative, which featured a weekly podcast which included discussion on adapting to digital ministry. However, not all the Presbyterian ministers I spoke with mentioned or were aware of these initiatives. Some reported tapping into resources and training provided by the Evangelical Alliance. Others said they shared ideas informally with other ministers in their presbytery

⁸ Prior to 2019 there were posts called District Superintendents, but they had very limited authority. These posts were held by local church ministers who spent only about 10% of their time in this role.

⁹ <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/thesehreeremain>

(regional groupings of congregations). A Presbyterian in Northern Ireland commented on the diversity of approaches this produced, as well as even a sense of competition:

Some people were trying to make a service; some people were trying to do Facebook; some people were sending out an audio; and then there is so much video. You find that even on the ground one church looks at a neighbouring church and is saying to the minister, 'well if our neighbour is doing it that way, why can't you do this?' Which then would have actually put more pressure back on the local ministers. Maybe, it's not their fault that they can't do this, that the church doesn't have the infrastructure that's able to do that or the people technically to help them. ... This is the big downside of this video stuff, the competition.

In Catholic and Church of Ireland dioceses, the responsibility for providing support fell back on the bishops and associated staff. Some bishops helped share ideas about developing online ministries among their clergy through regular phone calls and emails. Others provided online ministries that parishes could tap into to supplement their local online provision. For example, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh John McDowell provided a weekly 10-minute bible study video.¹⁰ A Catholic bishop described the efforts in his cathedral like this:

We also worked on the basis that unlike some of the Christian traditions, we have a strong emphasis on the sacramental. So, we were able to put a whole range [of options online like] stations of the cross, or Divine Mercy Chaplet, or the rosary, or the Angelus – all of those things online. ... So there was an attempt at the centre to do all we could and encourage parishes to do whatever they felt was most useful locally for themselves.

Volunteers

The survey found that volunteers have been vital for moving religion online across all denominations, although there are some variations. Church of Ireland clergy are the most likely to remain solely responsible for online worship and outreach (40%), followed by Presbyterian (30%) and Catholic Diocesan and Methodist (21% each). Methodists are the most likely to have received assistance from some combination of volunteers and paid staff (66%), followed by Presbyterians (59%), Church of Ireland (43%) and Catholic Diocesan (38%). While lay volunteerism remains lowest in the Catholic tradition, interviews revealed that lay Catholics were more likely to volunteer for technical or practical tasks such as assisting with online technology or serving as stewards for social distancing when churches re-opened, rather than assisting clergy in providing pastoral care. For a Catholic priest in Northern Ireland, volunteer support was vital:

One of the things with our parish is unlike a lot of parishes, we didn't have a webcam. ... And thanks be to God ... [parishioners are] getting away from the idea that the priest is going to do everything. One gentleman stepped forward and just said, listen, we can make our Sunday liturgies really, really, good and really interactive and really give a good product. I never thought I'd call church product. But so, we were able to have celebrations like for the Easter Vigil for example, where we were able to get people from the parish to record readings from their homes, and then put them into the liturgy at the appropriate times. And

¹⁰ <http://armagh.anglican.org/News/ArchbishopJohnBibleStudies.html>

we were able to have interactive celebrations of First Holy Communion and Confirmation and the different sacraments.

As a Catholic bishop put it:

Different talents came out, and I think all parishes discovered you don't have to set the system up yourself. There are enough people in your parish who'll be happy to set the system up for you.

Another Catholic bishop said:

We'll see a rise in the number of people who will be involved in this aspect of church life. I mean it's a position that you could have on your pastoral council in the future, your IT expert would be just as necessary as anything else.

A Church of Ireland priest in the Republic described how a parishioners' expertise took the burden off her:

We were very fortunate in having a parishioner who builds websites for his living. Eventually after me starting out doing my first videos earlier this year, gradually he took over things and does heaven knows what to make them more attractive. Which just leaves me to write the actual services.

A Methodist in Northern Ireland had a similar experience:

Up until the end of June, all of the technology side of things was left to myself. That's the thing in rural churches. I recruited my daughter in the background to help. There were some Sunday mornings as I was trying to post I was phoning her to say this won't go, panic!. ... And then a young guy who isn't normally at church on a Sunday morning, he said to me, I'll come and work with you. Happy days, he's been there every week since. ... So it's a great weight off my shoulders, 'cause I'm not a techie person.

Digital Divides

While there was considerable enthusiasm about online ministries, all interviewees yearned for a return to unrestricted face-to-face ministry, when it is safe to do so. Some also expressed concerns about uneven access to the internet, and how this had hindered or could hinder their ministries during the pandemic. Clergy reported that some people in rural areas, the elderly, and those in immigrant congregations struggled to use digital platforms or secure reliable internet access.

A Protestant minister in the Republic described her experience:

It's very rural. A lot of the core members of the church are older and they suspect Facebook of being the great demonic force of the world. So, they wouldn't be on it. Even if they are online for emails, they wouldn't go on Facebook for anything. So, I don't know that any of them listened [to my posts on Facebook].

Similarly, a Methodist in Northern Ireland described how her rural area meant she could not rely on online ministries to reach many of her congregants:

All of my churches would be small and rural. I knew I didn't have technology at my fingertips. My congregations didn't automatically logon to Zoom or Facebook via a smartphone. So I wasn't sure how I would be able to minister to people who were not in the latest technological world. I could see other churches saying, we're going to do everything. The minister is going to church this Sunday and there's going to be the recording crew. I was thinking, really? My churches don't have microphones. So, I had immediately to think of what way can I communicate the word of God to those now confined at home?

Others expressed concerns about the elderly's lack of internet skills, but also reported that many of them rather quickly caught on to the online world. A Protestant in the Republic said:

The biggest issue was the elderly people who didn't have technology and literally no way to watch it, unless we cut the DVD. Even then I made a DVD for one lady and she couldn't get her DVD player to work and I couldn't go in to fix it because the house is off limits.

A Methodist in Northern Ireland described assisting elderly members with installing applications on their devices, once lockdown restrictions eased:

We have older members who can't go to Facebook. So, those are the ones that have really made us feel like we have left them out. I took some letters sometimes for them, or dropped some order service sheets with hymns. I told them just to read on their own, but really phone calling them has kept them going. ... [Later we went to] houses at the doorstep and installed Zoom on their phones. They were so happy, now they can join in. ... They have the phones... but they need a little bit of empowerment.

Another Methodist in Northern Ireland noted how quickly older people had adapted:

In some cases our ministers have assumed that elderly shut in people couldn't do this well. And I kept saying talk to them, ask them, can they? Because it turns out once the first lockdown was eased, their granddaughter gave them an iPad or whatever it is and said, press that, press that, press that. There you go! They're now talking to their family all around the world. They now can do this. So, we've done a big societal leap forward, as often happens during times of crisis. So, I think some colleagues have been underestimating the capacity of some of their elderly folks to actually get involved.

I interviewed two pastors from the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a denomination of Nigerian origin whose members are primarily immigrants or second-generation. They also reported issues with digital access. During an interview with one pastor, we lost our internet connection just as he was explaining to me how this had been a difficulty – aptly demonstrating his point. After we reconnected, he said:

Online [the service is] so short, and even then people were complaining that their data was running out. ... That's one of the problems of the online meeting [dropping connections]. We experience all these things and we say, I can't hear you, I'm disconnected. You've witnessed it here too.

His colleague also reported:

Definitely there are people who watch, and they don't have anything to do with the internet. So, for such people we have to kind of work around again, how to be in touch with them by phone, and by text messages. And what we do is audio recordings, and send that on with WhatsApp, and maybe Facebook for some of them. ... There are some who have issues too about really getting around to connect, even when they have the internet. So we do our best to educate them and eventually speak to some of the children that are in school, who are able to assist them, so that all they need to do is press one or two buttons and they're ready to connect and go.

The Future of Ministry Online

One of the findings from the survey was that 70% of faith leaders intended to retain at least some aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings were lifted (21% said they did not know, and 9% said no). Mostly, the support for retaining online ministries was affirmed in the interviews. Some interviews took place after public worship had resumed. Even churches that had re-opened their buildings were continuing with online aspects due to concerns for the elderly and vulnerable. Some spoke of retaining online ministries when all lockdowns cease, seeing them as valuable for shut-ins, and as tools for evangelism, building community, and encouraging prayer.

A Church of Ireland minister in Northern Ireland described her thinking this way:

I think for the ones who don't want to go back to church, just yet, we will keep it just to keep connected. ... The video thing, we have laughed at how I've had some days over a thousand people watching the video on Facebook. We joked about how it's good because they can pause me and come back to me later or fast forward the bits they don't like. So, I think I'll still try and do some of that too because I know there are individuals who are shielding who won't be back in church for quite a wee while. ... I don't know how long we will keep doing it, or whether there will be some that we will do forever.

A Church of Ireland minister in the Republic initially thought that he would end online ministries once lockdowns ceased, but has changed his mind:

The longer the lockdown's gone on, the more I've felt that we need to do it going forwards. ... We're making far more connections with people than we would if we were solely inhouse. The message of the Gospel a few weeks ago was scattering the seed: about soil, bad soil, rocky soil, etc., etc. I just think increasingly I'd be mad to throw away an opportunity where you're reaching people. Is it perfect? No. I go to [Zoom] prayer meetings with other ministers and they're unsettled about people washing the dishes and people telling them this. Ok, it's not ideal, but people are connecting, people are listening, people are worshiping in some

format. We're constantly saying we want to reach more people: we're reaching more people in some format. Let's go with it.

In Northern Ireland, A Catholic priest has also become convinced of the need to continue online ministries:

Now nothing, in my opinion, beats face-to-face and connecting with people. But the reality is there's people out there for whatever reason might struggle with church interaction or going to a church. But actually the proof is in the pudding. This is a way we're meeting people we wouldn't meet otherwise. And so it's something that we with our parish council going forward are going to have a big discussion around: how we do that and how we meet that need? ... There absolutely has to be sustainability in it and getting a team around us. My experience has been that one of our jobs as priests is to empower people around you. So my hope and my prayer would be that a team would see the value in this ministry and would take that on under the leadership of the parish going forward.

Another priest in Northern Ireland reported how the Facebook Live Mass quickly built not only an audience, but an online community:

... My first reaction was surprise at how quickly an audience built up. The second thing was the nature of the audience online, that they were commenting [on Facebook's comment facility during the Mass]; and little praying hands were rising up. I was surprised at how quickly a community built up: 'Hello Mary, Hello Jim, good to see you.' ... We check the comments every evening in case there were negative comments or comments with a request for prayer. ... About two weeks ago when we opened up the church for private prayer a lady came in with a cake for us and she said, I am X from another [parish], and she said, 'I follow your Mass online and I just want to say thank you.'

Some clergy, while encouraged by the move online, worried that the churches were still playing catch-up. A priest in the Republic said:

If we put up a YouTube channel or go on Facebook, we think we're fantastic. And I'm thinking, [for the younger generations] that's for them 10 years old. [I was reading recently that] the number one person on TikTok is a teenage girl who went from zero to 60,000,000 followers in a year. ... The New York Times is the newspaper in the States, and it has four million. ... So how do we reach out to this group who basically for them to sit down and actually pick up a newspaper would be like picking up a clay tablet? ... There has to be a paradigm shift. ... We need to be really thinking creatively around that. One of the dioceses here in the south is looking now to employ a digital content manager. And I thought, that's pretty impressive.

At the same time, another priest in the Republic was anxious that the rush to digital ministry had been unreflective and could cause damage:

In some ways it's almost self-evident that we should be using these technologies a bit more. But in another sense ... we probably need to drop them as soon as we're able. ... A couple were telling a friend of mine [that they love my] online Mass: they just get a takeaway and a

bottle of wine and sit there on the Saturday evening and it's great. It's kind of a different experience. I mean God bless them, it's wonderful. But then it's on to the Match of the Day or whatever. It's not quite the same experience. And also I have had the impression for many years that we're becoming an increasingly lonely society. And you don't overcome loneliness just by being on your device. ... I don't mean to sound patronising, but people need a little nudge to see that point, because we can get carried away with the heat of the moment. Oh, it's all fine because we have all these technologies. ... But we need to be thinking more deeply about the underlying realities. So, the technological means, they are marvellous and wonderful, but they're not community.

Social Services, the Wider Community and Inter-Church Relationships

The survey asked questions about social services and the wider community, and inter-church cooperation. It found that among the four largest denominations, 74% of churches were providing social services to the wider community during the pandemic. Among those providing services, 42% said their services had increased, 33 percent had stayed the same, and just 25% had decreased their services. The groups most likely to receive support from the churches were 'the elderly in your area', 'food bank in your area', and 'other vulnerable groups in your area', a finding that underscores churches' roles in their local communities.

In interviews, clergy spoke about their churches' service projects, which varied considerably. There were obvious differences among parishes/congregations: small rural parishes do not have the same resources as large urban congregations, so what churches offer inevitably meets the scale of their resources. Some small churches encouraged members to become involved in other community groups as a way to express their faith. Some reported an increase in volunteers to assist with efforts such as delivering food to the elderly and vulnerable, or supporting food banks. Churches also cooperated with parishes/congregations from other denominations and with secular groups. In cases where churches had decreased their services, this was often because they relied on in-person meetings to carry out this work, and this had been prohibited during lockdown.

We also asked specifically about inter-church cooperation in the interviews. One of the key findings was that at a national level, inter-church cooperation was frequent and united – perhaps more so than at any other time in Irish church history. The Church Leaders Group was highly active and presented united positions when church buildings were shut by government restrictions and on the re-opening of church buildings. The Church Leaders group is facilitated by a joint secretariat that is provided by the Clerk of the Presbyterian Church and the General Secretary of the Methodist Church, and consists of the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, and the President of the ICC. At some points during the pandemic this group was meeting at intervals of two weeks or even several days, as circumstances dictated. Previously this group met on a quarterly basis. Beyond challenges raised by the pandemic, they addressed other issues such as British Government proposals on dealing with the past and Brexit. The Committee of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting also issued statements on a number of issues.¹¹

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland also undertook a new initiative, convening a Four Nations Church Leaders' Forum which consists of representatives from Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales; and includes the Evangelical Alliance. It met twice to respond to the pandemic and issue a joint statement. It also has convened to discuss Brexit.

At local level, already-existing inter-church/ecumenical relationships were usually maintained, albeit often at a reduced intensity as churches focused on pressing tasks such as moving services online and then, in the summer, reopening buildings.

¹¹ For a list of joint statements, see the appendix.

Due to protecting anonymity and confidentiality, this report does not provide details from the interviews on how particular parishes/congregations have served the wider community. Projects and programmes can be quite specific and thus easily identifiable. Rather, the focus is on inter-church relationships, especially the finding about the unprecedented levels of cooperation at national level.

National Level Inter-Church Relationships

Some interviewees were knowledgeable about inter-church relationships at national level. Their impressions of what those relationships have been like during the pandemic are the basis for this section, which provides evidence for increased cooperation among churches at this level.

During the first lockdown, churches in the Republic were open for private prayer, but were not open at all in Northern Ireland. The Church Leaders spoke about reopening churches for private prayer in Northern Ireland, choosing the then-Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, Rev William Henry, to speak publicly on the issue. Private prayer in church buildings is not prominent in the Presbyterian tradition, so Henry's spokesperson role was meant to communicate an especially strong sense of unity. Rev Heather Morris, General Secretary of the Methodist Church, expanded on how frequent, open communication among the Church Leaders Group had deepened internal relationships and, she believed, facilitated better communication within Methodism:

If another denomination was making another decision [about a pandemic-related issue], we knew about that. For example, with singing in church, at one stage different churches were doing different things. But we all knew what the others were doing. When questions came back, we were able to say we're acting in this different way, but this is why. Then the church leaders met far more frequently online ... and just grappled with issues. ... These have been real relationships ... both in terms of mutual support and in terms of what was being said publicly.

Similarly, an official from a denomination on a sub-group that advises the Church Leaders Group praised the quality of relationships:

Generally, I was struck by just how harmonious inter-church work was, both in negotiating with the executive and the civil service in terms of reopening churches and in terms of this legacy debate. We had so much in common. And I think all of that has prepared us for rich conversations about the past, not politically motivated or not points scoring conversations. People are actually saying things like, 'that's a wonderful idea,' and using scriptural images, the imagination of scripture, rather than just the legislative approach.

Some Church Leaders Group statements were covered in the media, but it is difficult to gauge their reach and influence, especially among grassroots Christians who are very much focused on their local parish or congregation. But the Group also met with Government officials at various points on issues including church buildings reopening, legacy issues around dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland protocol of the Brexit

agreement, and how governments structure financial assistance to charities (which can often exclude faith-based groups). Again, it is difficult to know how much these meetings have influenced government policy, but in some ways it is significant that the meetings happened at all.

Another official on a sub-group praised ICC/IICM's facilitation efforts, but reflected that traditions outside the 'main four' might have been given more attention:

Looking back on it, there are smaller churches in Ireland and maybe we need to be more attentive to the smaller – or newer – churches. ... [They can have] quite a strong presence, and we need to be more attentive. I think some of them found it a bit more bewildering that they haven't the access [to policymakers and information that the larger churches do]. Maybe ... we could have helped each other more.

Local Level Inter-Church Relationships

There were mixed opinions on how local level inter-church relationships had been impacted by the pandemic, with some reporting a pause in activities and others a continuation of work. This is a more urgent issue in Northern Ireland and the border counties, where churches have been involved in peacebuilding efforts. Denominational officials with broader knowledge of what is happening in their parishes/congregations, provided different views on local inter-church relationships. Rev Morris (Methodist) cited some examples of when inter-church cooperation had continued:

Folks that had a heart for those things have imaginatively looked for ways to continue. They haven't drawn back. We've seen really good ecumenical cooperation on the ground around particular projects.

Church of Ireland Archbishop McDowell acknowledged that local inter-church work had become more difficult:

I wouldn't quite say it was impossible at local level, but it was much more difficult to do it. Certainly at the outset, everyone was finding it hard to master their own digital [ministry] ... I don't think it has damaged relationships in any way. For instance, as people have been reopening, particularly in towns, what I've been saying to clergy is, 'speak to your local Presbyterian/Catholic minister and see what they are doing and see if you can open at roughly the same time.'

Similarly, a Catholic bishop said that inter-church work had 'fallen by the wayside' during the pandemic, but did not anticipate that it would have negative long-term effects on cooperation. Another Catholic bishop reported that ecumenical activity had continued in his diocese as normal, in the sense of regular contact and prayer moments together.

Clergy at local level also provided mixed assessment. A minister in an 'other' denomination in Northern Ireland reported that inter-church cooperation had increased dramatically as several denominations worked together in a food bank. A Methodist in Northern Ireland

reported that some ecumenical groups in her area had continued meeting and working virtually, while others had not.

What does seem clear is that most local inter-church activity during the pandemic has been practical and focused on meeting challenges posed by it, rather than preoccupied with other issues that inter-church groups have addressed historically, like dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. It is possible that this relative neglect of peacebuilding during lockdowns may accelerate a perceived pre-pandemic decline in faith-based peacebuilding activism. Along those lines, a Catholic priest in Northern Ireland recognised the positive contributions of churches working together on social issues and challenges raised by the pandemic. But he urged churches to push beyond this:

We really must reflect on our responsibilities to be something more than providers of alternate social services. We have to imagine a better way and ask, what would Jesus do? And I don't know the answer to that. But I feel what's emerged from this for me is the ache of people for community. ... We as churches have to reflect on the wounds of our society and try to do what we think Jesus would do if he were here in Northern Ireland. ... But what that looks like practically, I don't know.

Similarly, a Church of Ireland priest in the Republic lamented the lack of inter-church cooperation in her area, and framed the pandemic as an opportunity to overcome denominational boundaries:

It seems to me that the pandemic is inviting us to remove boundaries, to remap and remove barriers. They're not necessary, they are faintly ridiculous. I believe God must cry about them.

Stress and Ministry

The survey found that 46% of faith leaders said their ministry had been more stressful than usual, while 33% said the stress had been 'about the same', and 21% said it had been less stressful. Methodists (58%) were most likely to say their ministry had been more stressful than usual, while Catholic Religious (34%) were most likely to say their ministry had been less stressful than usual.

Even so, 62% of faith leaders said they were coping with stress 'about the same', with 26% better than usual and just 12% worse than usual. Although Methodists were the most likely to say their ministries had been more stressful (58% above), they were also the second most likely to say they had coped with stress better than usual at 32%, just behind Catholic Religious (33%).

In interviews, clergy elaborated on the stresses they had faced. In addition to the causes of stress identified in the survey, interviews explored stresses around re-opening church buildings and around their faith communities' declining financial resources. For most clergy, balancing the health and safety issues related to re-opening with their faith communities' spiritual needs has been one of the most stressful experiences of the pandemic.

At the same time, clergy's experiences of support have been uneven. Methodists reported the highest levels of support from their denomination, which has been facilitated in part through the District Superintendent's role (see above, pp. 24-25). In other denominations, levels of support varied across Catholic and Church of Ireland dioceses, and the Presbyterian Church's presbyteries. Some clergy created their own informal networks of support with colleagues or laity. One priest even got a dog.

The levels of financial strain were also uneven. Although everyone interviewed said there had been declines (or delays) in financial giving, in some cases this was partially off set by increased online donations, savings or assets. Though the small sample size of interviewees from 'other' traditions makes it impossible to generalise, it also seems that immigrant-majority congregations may be especially vulnerable to financial strain, alongside rural Protestant congregations, especially in the Republic.

Experiences of Stress

This section draws on the interviews to provide more in-depth perspectives on experiences of stress identified in the survey. Because all interviews were conducted at least one month, and in some cases almost six months, after the survey, some clergy's experiences of stress had changed: some felt more stressed as the pandemic wore on, while others had established better routines and support systems that were helping them cope. Others reported cancelling or delaying holidays because of pressure of increased demands. A Church of Ireland minister in Northern Ireland said:

I have had more headaches in this last three months than I've had in ten years. I've never taken as many paracetamol all in my life. ... I've had nights where I've just been awake the whole night and not slept at all. ... A lot of clergy want to be people who can cope to

allow their congregation to cope. I did put on Facebook one day, that I'd been crying all day, I'm not gonna talk to you. And I had one man text me and say, just read your Facebook. I'm having one of those days, too. I also had a couple colleagues say, are you right to post this. And I wrote, yes because I'm human too.

A Methodist in Northern Ireland explained how she felt as the months of producing online services wore on:

I was so exhausted. Every week I'm busy preaching on my iPad: talking to it, not to people. You feel tense in a way. Every time I finished a service, I would eat and sleep the whole afternoon on Sunday.

While it is impossible to generalise from such a small sample size, it seemed that clergy who had been in their parish or congregation for a longer period felt less stressed in their ministries, while those new to their posts felt extra stress to prove themselves. A Presbyterian minister who regularly shared experiences with colleagues in his presbytery had this observation:

The huge advantage was that I'm [more than 20] years here. ... I think stress levels are almost in direct proportion to the time spent in the place. You know people and you know ... what to talk to them about when you ring. Whereas if you're new, it's more difficult.

A Methodist who was relatively new in her post shared this reflection:

Did we as pastors get hung up on doing? Maybe because that's what was expected of us, maybe because we wanted to prove ourselves, for whatever reason. Why didn't we take time to just be? ... I was one of those doers not because I wanted to be, but because I was forced to be.

A minority of interviewees reported that they remained relatively unstressed. For a Quaker, this was because she felt confident that she already had the skills to identify and do what was required in terms of moving services online:

It has not been extremely stressful for me because I feel like I've been able to recognise what needed to be done and just step up and go about trying to do what I felt was important to do. For me, what would have been very stressful would be not seeing clearly what I felt needed to be done, and having to put a lot of energy into discerning what needs to be done.

While a pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God insisted:

Oh, no, no, no, I am not stressed! ... As a Christian, it's also about prayer. God will keep you so you don't lose your faith. ... Every day you go out, it's a life of faith. So, it depends on God increasing your faith. ... To say that ... there is no fear: it's a lie. But you have to take it just one day at a time too. Sorry, I'm sounding like a pastor!

For others, like this Catholic priest in Northern Ireland, lockdown has been less stressful:

Strangely, I see lockdown as a sabbatical. ... After the initial shock, when I recovered a new equilibrium, which was not about work, work, work, work, work, achieve, achieve, itch, itch, why am I not working?, I have found it to have been a gift to me. Because it gives me space to think about what I'm doing what I'm called to do. This has led to me thinking thoughts that I haven't gotten here for nearly two decades because I've been too busy doing stuff.

Re-opening Church Buildings

In advance of church buildings re-opening for public worship, the four largest denominations provided guidance documents for their parishes/congregations to follow.¹² There could be no one-size-fits-all approach even within denominations, due to varying building sizes and availability of volunteers in different locations. That meant that as soon as restrictions allowed, not every church building in every denomination opened on the same Sunday. Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh John McDowell explained that the largest denominations crafted their protocols in consultation with each other:

I think they were good documents that we all produced. And the other thing which I did locally was said, this isn't a race. We don't have to open on the 29th or the 5th of July. Open first of all when you're confident people will be safe and comfortable; and open when you have enough people around you, because you're going to need a lot of volunteers to do this.

And a Catholic bishop explained how there had been variations in opening within his diocese:

Most of the parishes have opened. A few of them have not. A few [parishes] ... got people in medicine and nursing together, and one parish said everyone said, 'don't you dare open the church.' You know, because maybe they were coming from the perspective of how can we ensure this church is as clean as an operating theatre? And yet, ... [most have said] 'we have to minimise risks, but there are risks in not opening up as well'.

A minister in an 'other' denomination explained the confusion that followed the Northern Ireland Executive's announcement that church buildings could re-open:

We got a WhatsApp message from one of our members who wanted to know if church was going to be open again this Sunday, because they heard Stormont's announcement. ... I had to sit down and do a WhatsApp [to everyone] that we weren't going to be opening church until we had all the clearance from [our denomination]. .. So, there is a real, real hunger out there. ... I think that's going to be really difficult, doing it safely and meeting the requirements, I'm guessing most of all with insurance companies. ... But people feel if they can go to IKEA, why can't they go to church?

While faith communities were eager to get back into their church buildings, the effort involved for this to happen safely was considerable – and stressful. Clergy and laity who assisted or led the process in each church had to work out how to sanitise and clean the building, arrange seating, and steward people in and out of the building. Some

¹² For a list of guidance documents, see the appendix.

parishes/congregations set up online or telephone booking systems to ensure that people did not have to be turned away. In an interview prior to re-opening, a Methodist in Northern Ireland lamented that she suspected re-opening would be disappointing for people:

I know from talks I've already had about reopening our churches, they want everything to be like it was in February. I am struggling to get them to realise it's not going to be.

Similarly, a Presbyterian in Northern Ireland said:

Especially planning returning to church, I was damned if I did and damned if I don't. If I choose one day, it's too late for some; if I choose another day, it's too early for some. So, I think it's just leadership. There's a point at which you make a decision, and some people will be pleased with it, and some people will be unhappy, and they will express those feelings in different ways.

A Catholic priest in the Republic recognised that the sanitised, socially-distanced experience of Mass could be unsettling for people:

I think there are certain things we can do [to improve the experience]. For instance, don't use crime scene tape in your church, Father, it doesn't look the best. ... OK, we have to do it. ... But let's do it in as respectful a way as possible, respectful of what we do and respectful of our people as well. Let's still have these oases for them, that would be more badly needed than ever.

At the same time, some clergy were encouraged by the enthusiasm of volunteers who assisted with re-opening. A Catholic priest in the Republic reported that a new group of volunteers came forward for this purpose – and also approved a significant financial expenditure to install a new webcam so livestreaming would be available for those who chose not to attend. And a pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God explained what his parish did:

What we did was to spend money to sanitise the church. A few days before the reopening of the church a few of us came together with face masks and cleaned up everywhere. ... So, as you're coming into the church you see auto-dispensers to sanitise your hand and in two or three strategic points of the church. Also we provided facemasks, the church bought them, so even if you don't have any as you're coming to the church, wear your facemask.

Drive-in Services

Before church buildings re-opened, some churches held drive-in services during the summer months. They were most popular among Protestants in rural areas and provincial towns in Northern Ireland. They were generally conducted on the flatbed of a lorry, which was positioned in a church carpark, farmers market, or other large, open site. The Methodist Church's service at Castle Archdale caravan park, Co Fermanagh, was so in-demand that cars queued on Saturday evenings to reserve spaces for Sunday morning. Some drive-in Christmas services also took place.

Like re-opening buildings, holding a drive-in service required high levels of organisation and volunteerism. So, such endeavours also proved stressful. A Methodist reported some initial reluctance among his colleagues: 'It's a bonkers idea, it's absolutely bonkers. Because it's bound to rain. I mean, you turn up in your car in the drizzle and someone is on the back of a lorry, you know. It's a bonkers idea'; while a Church of Ireland priest described it as initially 'a bit like [an episode of] Father Ted.' Another Methodist, who was reluctant to try a drive-in service, was amazed at the positive response in her area. She now describes it as 'like John Wesley's days ... when he used to preach outside and evangelise on his horse. John Wesley's days have been revived.'

Others pointed out that drive-in services had been opportunities for inter-church cooperation among Protestant congregations, some noting that the format did not appeal to Catholic churches. The Methodist Church promoted drive-in services with some enthusiasm, and often took the organisational lead in local areas. As one Methodist reported:

In some places we were getting bigger numbers at the drive-ins, well certainly than our churches could with social distancing. But we were getting at some of the drive-ins bigger numbers than we would get on normal [pre-pandemic] Sunday. So, it turned out to be missionally quite an interesting thing for us to do because it was to some extent reaching out into the wider community. We were aware there was a global pandemic, so let's not be surprised people are thinking about what's life all about. ... It turns out driving to a drive-in in your car, not having to speak to anyone at all, you're anonymous: missionally it works. So, it just became a useful thing for us to do.

Experiences of Support

As previously explained, Methodists were most likely to report receiving support from their denomination and their colleagues, in many cases facilitated through District Superintendents. The picture was more mixed for other denominations. As a Catholic priest in the Republic explained:

I'm very lucky that I do have good friends. ... There's a peer group I'm part of. So I've put things in place for myself. If I was to have a criticism of the church in general at the moment, the diocese particularly: they don't have fixed things in place to support people. You basically put things in place yourself. If you don't look after yourself, then there's no one there to say, 'oh well, you really need to look at this, so you need to do that'.

At the same time, a Catholic priest in Northern Ireland said:

I don't think the structure of the diocese does give support. But that's not necessarily an absence. I think it's related to the fact that we are quite independent as priests. But if you ask [the diocese], I think you get what you want.

A Presbyterian in Northern Ireland described drawing on colleagues in his presbytery for support, although that he was felt disconcerted by those who were not experiencing the same levels of stress:

Presbytery has been good because the elders and the ministers of presbytery have really supported one another. So, while you feel maybe that you're struggling, you know that your neighbour is struggling as well and you're not struggling on your own. But I didn't feel that I was any less busier or less stressed than I was before. In fact, more so. I felt busier and more stressed. Some colleagues were echoing that, but some other colleagues were also saying, 'oh, it's great what I do in the garden and I've read 15 books and I've done this.' And you think, what?

Another Presbyterian in Northern Ireland expressed frustration that the denomination did not provide more support, especially around moving services online:

There was nothing coming from PCI. There was absolute silence there. I tried to contact them to see if somebody could give me some advice, but it wasn't forthcoming. So I did kind of feel I was fumbling around in the dark a bit. We didn't have anybody in our congregation who was in that kind of media, so that was a really stressful time.

Finances

Finances have been a source of anxiety for almost all churches. With church buildings shut, traditional methods for collecting offerings like passing the collection plate were off-limits. As a Catholic priest in the Republic said: 'I say in joking to my colleagues – just remember, you can't pass the collection basket on Facebook!' A Catholic priest in Northern Ireland said that not only had their collection plate offering 'just stopped', but 'Catholic churches run on candles', so significant sums from the lighting of candles also had been lost. Only one person I interviewed – a Presbyterian minister in an affluent part of Northern Ireland – reported that their finances had not reduced during the pandemic. This was because many in the congregation already gave by standing order before the pandemic, and others quickly switched to this method once they could no longer meet in person.

Most clergy felt that it was not right to appeal for donations, especially in the early days of lockdown, because they were aware that many people were facing difficult financial circumstances themselves. But as the months wore on, most clergy had encouraged online giving at least once or provided opportunities for people to deposit their donations in other ways.

Some clergy reported that members of their parishes/congregations actively sought to continue giving even when they hadn't been asked, dropping envelopes of money through their doors. A Catholic priest in Northern Ireland described it this way:

The incredible generosity of people began to come through. People began to contact us and say, the parish is doing all this stuff, it can't run on thin air. We can continue to make our contributions. Our initial response was listen, people are under pressure, your number one priority right now is family and making sure that you're looked after. I thought that was

important for us to say that ... But then people began to put envelopes in the door, people were asking how they could make donations online. So, we put up ways in which people could make donations. That's developed more and more. We're making nowhere near what we would have been receiving on a weekly basis. But money's coming in that's able to pay the bills, so to speak.

The decline in financial support from people in the pews affects not just salaries for clergy and other staff; it also impacts on how much churches can invest in their social services for the wider community, in donations to charities, in maintenance of church buildings, and for those that have them, upkeep of grounds and graveyards.

The interviews revealed that the financial impact of the pandemic has varied, both between and within denominations. While we cannot generalize based on just 32 interviews, it seems that churches in urban areas, especially from Protestant traditions, have come closer to pre-pandemic levels of giving because more members have embraced online giving. A Catholic bishop reported that in his diocese, parishes that 'have maintained a high level of visibility' online and through other activities have received more financial support from parishioners. At the same time, small, rural parishes/congregations that relied on fundraising activities or the rental of church halls to supplement their collection plate offerings have seen that source of income disappear entirely.

Among some clergy, there was anxiety: they may be just getting by now, but the longer lockdowns continue, the worse their churches' financial situations may become. Those I spoke with in leadership positions within denominations noted that in some denominations, clergy had taken pay cuts. In some denominations and parishes/congregations, support staff working in various areas of ministry had been furloughed. It remains possible that some smaller parishes/congregations might not survive in their pre-pandemic form. In some Catholic dioceses, the priest's salary is entirely dependent on collection plate offerings. A priest in the Republic in this situation described it this way:

I've had no income since we've gone online for Mass. Some people have been very supportive and they've put money in an envelope and popped it through my [letter] box, but it's a fraction of what would normally have come my way. ... But again, as I reminded some of my colleagues, at least we have a roof over our head. And unless we do something awful silly altogether, we will remain to have that roof over our head and we won't be thrown out. More than likely there will be food on the table. So listen, we're not doing too bad.

A Church of Ireland minister with several parishes in a rural area said that 'financially it had been a nightmare', especially since his parishes have depended on fundraisers. While he anticipates that all his church buildings will remain open in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, he believes there may be longer-term consequences, especially given the continued decline in the Church of Ireland population in the area:

It's probably easier if you're in a big church, which is in no danger of closing in your lifetime. ... But if you look at your church, and see that you're the last generation holding it together ... it's not easy to let go. ... If you're the last generation, you become very much fixated on the building, and the graveyard. Will it still be there for me to be buried in?

Immigrant-majority congregations also have faced difficulties. Both pastors I spoke with from the Redeemed Christian Church of God rented premises for church meetings. One reported that when he wrote to the landlord to ask for a 50% reduction in rent during the lockdown, the landlord replied and gave the church a three-month rent holiday. The other shared his worries that his parish would lose its meeting place:

Don't go there. Don't go there. We don't have any support anywhere from any government, it's just by the little donation contributions that we continue. ... We don't know if we will still be able to maintain our place of worship because of the flow of cash that we will receive. Because this thing has also affected some people that they lost their job. And the care of the family comes first. ... We are struggling, and that has grave consequences. Looking towards the end of the year, what are we going to do in the new year if we aren't able to pull through this year?

Something Other than a Building

This section presents findings about how clergy are talking about the pandemic. It considers clergy's perspectives on how God may be working through the pandemic and how understandings of church are shifting to *'something other than a building,'* the phrase from which this report takes its title.

Is God working through the Pandemic?

In interviews, clergy were asked if they personally thought God was working through the pandemic. We also explored whether they had conversations with people about God working through the pandemic, or had preached about it. Unsurprisingly, this was a topic they had explored. As a Methodist in Northern Ireland put it: 'It would be a bit strange not to talk about such things.'

A minority of clergy reported that parishioners or congregants had floated the idea that the pandemic was God's judgement for sin. Specific sins mentioned included the relaxation of laws on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights and allowing pubs to open on Good Friday. These ideas were present both north and south of the border, and among both Catholics and Protestants. No minister that I spoke with agreed with this perspective, although a Presbyterian in Northern Ireland said he 'wouldn't be totally unopen' to the idea of God's judgement, and a pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God said the pandemic could be a sign of the 'end times':

God is teaching us a message, but not many are learning from it. Everybody is just taking one day at a time. But we should learning and thinking what God is telling us. Don't be ignorant concerning that day, it will come like a thief in the night.

Other clergy encouraged people to think about the pandemic in different ways. As a Catholic priest in the Republic said:

I've been trying to steer people away from that. That's not how I understand how God works. So, most of the conversations have been around how this is a really strange time and you wouldn't know what's happening, but somehow it's all in God's hands. ... I've been trying to encourage people as well. Say, let's be grateful for what we have, let's think of people who are struggling or suffering at the moment, and if there's any way we can reach out and help them.

Another Catholic priest in the Republic described a homily in which he said that people who called the pandemic a 'chastisement from God' were 'arrogant' to think that they knew the mind of God:

I got some complaints about how arrogant I was to call them arrogant! ... But I think for most people with a balanced faith, you take what comes and goes in your life. I had a conversation this morning with a gentleman, and said, you know the God of Jesus Christ is not a puppet master, but that's how we speak about him and how many people think about

him. ... So for me where I'd be trying to steer people is that God holds us all through the ups and the downs.

A Methodist in Northern Ireland described people with 'strong voices' in her congregation who believe 'God sent the pandemic to punish us and to bring us back to him'. While she disagreed with this view, she thought the pandemic could bring some people to God:

I don't believe that God created the pandemic. I do believe that God takes everything that's going on in our world and can use that and work it to the glory of the Kingdom. ... People who would never have God in their head, would never have prayed a sentence are suddenly, you know, googling the word prayer. Suddenly people are searching for meaning. If I die tomorrow of Covid, what has been the meaning of my life? ... Without Covid would these people have thought about God?

In contrast, a Presbyterian in Northern Ireland described how some people were asking those questions about meaning, but not to the extent he expected:

Some people would say that they found that this was a way of God telling the word to slow down and to take stock and to realise what was important. I certainly don't have any problems believing that would be the case. And then there are other folk who feel very clearly that this is some kind of a judgment or discipline. I wouldn't be totally unopen to that possibility either. So, in either of those cases there is a sense that God was using this situation. ... I ordered [copies of the] John Lennox book, 'Where is God in the Coronavirus World?' And I really expected them to go like hotcakes. They eventually went once I continued to encourage people to take a copy. But people in the circles that I moved were not asking that question, which surprised me. It was more along the lines that they felt that God was working through this situation positively or negatively, or a mixture of both.

While a minister from an 'other' tradition in Northern Ireland described how her congregation addressed such questions:

It wasn't just Coronavirus, there were other crazy things happening in the world from the start. So anxiety was building in the whole of our society, and we recognised it in our church as well. Why are these things are happening? It was covered in one of our talks: Is God in control? Where is God in all this? That was actually really helpful. We had a discussion afterwards, then prayer. We encouraged people not to bottle how they are feeling, but to express and be honest. Like King David, he would have been so honest. He was angry, and he expressed what he was feeling in his life. It's healthy spiritually not to bury your doubts, but to express them, and not to bury your fears, but deal with them. And if we feel that people needed more professional help we recommend and refer people to counselling.

Similarly, a Church of Ireland minister in the Republic described how conversations about people's 'fears' led to deeper conversations about God and faith:

What they talk about is fear and they worry as to what's happening next. ... And then that leads to talking about faith, and what is God calling us to do? God calls us to be a people of faith, not of fear. It's like with Peter: Jesus calls Peter over the water and says come. Initially

Peter is walking on the water and his faith enabled him to do that. But when he starts looking around him, he starts to sink. I'm saying to folks look, we need to be like Peter when he's responding to Jesus. ... What's starting to happen in conversations with people is that we're starting to get beneath the surface. If there's trust for that to be able to happen, it's like the layers of the onion, it's starting to really get to the core, as to what are we really feeling?

Similarly, a Protestant minister in Northern Ireland was heartened by how new evangelistic opportunities had opened up online through the pandemic, which she interpreted as God's work:

God's plan over all of creation started from before the foundation of the earth, when he predestined always to have a church and a people. That's his grand purpose, and there's nothing that can happen on earth or in our lives that will derail the purposes of God. I just think that is really significant to say in today's world. ... I'm sure that his spirit has been at work. He has cast the nets out: all that was online was a casting out of nets to people. The evangelistic aspect of that is just really important.

Other clergy spoke about how God might be working through the pandemic to nudge the churches towards change. A Catholic bishop said:

God is saying something to us in the midst of this: it may be more trust, it may be remove things that are getting in the way. But it's always pointing forward, rather than going back to the past. It's a new way of being church and that's a good place to be, rather than 'oh more bloody work.' ... Relatedly, we've discovered who the real heroes in society are: people who were generous, not those who were self-indulgent. It's the people who are prepared to lay their lives on the line for others, who really are the ones who inspire. I hope that many of our young people can say, 'I'm going to do something wonderful with my life, rather than it's all about me.' I hope we can inspire them because I think too many of them are dying for want of a better reason of living, because they're being told all you can expect is a booze-up at the weekend. You know, that's the best life can get. So, I hope it will inspire people to dream about a different way of being church and society.

A priest in Northern Ireland had similar sentiments:

I really have a strong sense that God is saying that we need to be ready when we come out of this, and we will come out of it. That it's going to be a new world and a new church. And what that means, I'm not quite sure. Either those people who came along to church and culturally have got out of the routine won't be back and we'll have a smaller kind of church; or people will be sprinting back to the pews and we'll have a whole audience of people with a variety of pastoral situations and we have to respond to that. ... Jesus never promised any of us an easy life. ... He's still God, and he still comes into the mess.

While a Church of Ireland priest in Northern Ireland sensed the pandemic could be sparking a renewal of faith:

I have communicated with my parishioners at various times that God is not outside of this, God is with us in it. So, we look to him, and take time and wait. There was a slight sense of relief as well that we could pause and not just do what's expected of us, but really rethink what are the absolute essentials. How do we really do word, sacrament, prayer and pastoral care in a completely different environment? ... One of our callings as ministers is to help people grow in intentional discipleship. ... So, possibly through this really strange and exceptional time a growth in discipleship is coming about.

Understandings of Church: Something Other than a Building ...

The idea that God is working through the pandemic flows naturally into clergy's reflections on how understandings of church are changing during the pandemic. Clergy from across denominations spoke about a greater focus on living out faith outside the four walls of church buildings. For some, particularly from the Methodist and Church of Ireland traditions, this meant letting go of a preoccupation with keeping church buildings open in areas where the churchgoing population had declined precipitously.

Especially among Catholic priests, but also in some Protestant traditions, there was an emphasis on seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to move away from overly-clerical models of church, encouraging greater participation among lay people. Clergy from all denominations mentioned the importance of Christians living out their faith by serving others in the wider society.

Some clergy had been trying to communicate these or similar understandings of what 'church' is and should be prior to the pandemic. But responding to the pandemic has created a context where, by and large, Christians *must* live out their faith outside church buildings – if they are to live it at all. Many clergy interpreted this as an opportunity to create a more vibrant, living church for the future.

The Presbyterian whose comment that church is '*something other than a building*' gives this report its name has been trying to communicate this understanding of church for some time:

I don't know if this is a trend in other congregations, but I've been doing a lot the past few years trying to teach about how the church isn't the building, it's the people. I think the pandemic has been a real wake up call to the reality of that. I would have said our faith isn't confined within these four walls for one hour and one day, but it actually needs to be out there if it's going to be real. ... And lockdown has made people realise, ok, the church isn't the building. So I would hope something comes out of that for churches.

While a Methodist in Northern Ireland described how her congregations also came to this realisation when its buildings were closed:

At the time people are complaining, why are we not going to church if people are all over in the supermarkets? ... Remember when Trump was saying, why isn't the church an essential place? ... So, there was that question, but again, people said maybe God is telling us something. We took that verse, Isaiah 26:20, that you go down, lock yourself in your rooms

and pray. Then they were saying ok, God wants us to pray more, stick together more as family. ... So, there was that aspect and then some were thinking maybe that God wanted us to slow down. ... And most of us were saying churches are not closed because we have a church: it is the buildings that are closed.

Similarly, a Church of Ireland minister in the Republic said he had been trying to shift the focus from church buildings for years:

If there are any good things coming out of this, it's moved us beyond our buildings and beyond our walls. We've gotten used to not locking ourselves in our buildings, we had to be outside. One of the things I'd love to do going forward is get input from community groups first for prayer points, and then for practical points that we can respond to. A) it would engage younger people, but B) primarily it's actively living real faith, rather than just going to a church building and going through the prayers. ... It's not ever going to be easy or comfortable. But we would have never closed or changed our churches were it not for Covid. So, there's a lot of stuff in the church that isn't great, and some can be changed, and some can't; but in the midst of this, what can we learn and do better or differently?

A Church of Ireland priest in the Republic described the pandemic as being 'locked out of your church buildings and in a sense forced to become church in the real world, which is where we really ought to be church anyway.' She continued:

I'm one of those dreamers who sincerely hope that we won't go back to the old normal, but hopefully we can together create some kind of new normal that's beautiful and important and relevant and hopeful and better. I would apply that to the Church of God as well. Please don't let us go back to the old normal. Please God let us go back to something new.

A pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, while still longing for the day when his parish could meet regularly in person, put it this way:

I was telling them this is why they must come to church: It's taken from Hebrews 10 verse 21, verse 19-25. Number one it is talking about when you come together you are encouraged, you encourage one another, we don't lose faith. ... [The pandemic and lockdown] may be a sign of the end of the age. But still, I was telling them that the beauty of the building is the people. I was telling them: I'm not looking for a church full of people, I want people full of church. So, when you have people full of church you don't have to coerce people to pray, you don't have to coerce them to fast, because they believe that this is their duty.

Among Catholic priests, the emphasis on moving towards a less clerical church was prominent. A priest in the Republic said:

I don't want to create opportunities out of a crisis, but our way of acting now has to be different. Our way of being priests, our way of living faith, our way of sharing faith, our way of reaching out, has to change. Our way of liturgy has to change, our way of worship has to change. In many ways it's been dragged away from us as ministers; the responsibilities have been thrown onto everyone in living their own lives. And what's this God is about? They have

to find away, and I think that's good. I mean the nanny state that the church was, and is maybe, and the clerical caste ... [with a] passive mob ... is a nonsense. So, the sooner the collapse the better!

A Catholic bishop made a similar point, adding that the pandemic could be an opportunity to nurture the family, or the 'domestic church':

What we need to reflect more deeply on is that the family life itself is church. This is something that's probably not quite fully grasped by any of us sufficiently now. We tend to think church as just the 'holy things', inverted commas: the prayers, the Mass rituals. But like a family that is trying to get on together, that's trying to love one another, that's making up every time they have an argument, that's watching out for the sick child. That's really working to make sure the vulnerable one among them is supported and sustained. ... [That's] keeping an eye out for the poor, welcoming strangers, that's all church. ... We need to name that as church and actually lift it up as church.

Another Catholic bishop described how he had encouraged priests in his diocese to see the pandemic as an opportunity to 'get parish teams together', not just to reopen buildings but to involve laity more actively in other areas of church life. For a Catholic priest in Northern Ireland, the pandemic had brought some of these lessons into sharp relief:

This is something I've been passionate about for long time and it was heightened at this time: we need to develop a broader understanding of who we are, that church isn't just what happens on a Sunday or in the four walls of the church building. And for us to exist in this time of preparation we needed to broaden our idea that we're family, we're community, we're there for each other. And how can we support each other? Obviously, in a practical level for those who are elderly who weren't able to leave their homes; but also spiritually.

Where do we Go from Here?

The interviews on which this report is based have provided fuller perspectives on the earlier survey findings and revealed new insights. It is hoped that this research can inform and improve the churches' practices, not only during the pandemic, but in the years to come.

In that regard, clergy's emphasis on church as *something other than a building* should provide a basis for sustained reflection and informed action. The pandemic has brought grief and stress to the churches and wider society. But the pandemic also presents opportunities for the churches to take their faith outside their four walls. There is some evidence that the churches are grasping this opportunity, moving into digital spaces with energy and enthusiasm and broadening their base of lay volunteers. This has been assisted by an apparent intensification of faith among laity, who are praying and accessing online services in unexpectedly high numbers.

At the same time, clergy have faced unprecedented levels of stress, particularly around pandemic-related funeral restrictions, providing pastoral care in lockdown conditions, and re-opening church buildings. Financial strains also could prove a limiting factor, as donations have decreased, support staff have been furloughed, and some churches face the very real prospect of no longer being able to afford their buildings. While the faith of some laity seems to have intensified, some clergy fear that others have gotten out of the habit and will never return to regular religious practice.

There is also evidence that national level inter-church relationships are at a historic high, with cooperation among the four largest Christian denominations, especially via the Church Leaders Group, more frequent, harmonious, and united than any other period of Irish church history. The frequency of contact has been driven by the pandemic, as church leaders worked together to respond to government restrictions on public gatherings (amongst other issues), aided by technologies that made meeting online more efficient than meeting in person. In that light, it could be argued that the pandemic is presenting an opportunity for Irish churches to transcend their divided and often sectarian pasts. And on a secularizing island where religious identities are losing their salience, churches may be more likely to contribute to societal debates if they do so from a position of unity.

But although statements by the island's ecumenical groups and bodies have received some media coverage, it is impossible to say to what extent the churches' united stances have informed public consciousness or trickled down to grassroots Christians. During the Troubles, the church leaders made numerous pro-peace statements, but their impact was limited. Secularisation also could mean that churches' voices are not taken as seriously as they once were in societal debates.

Some recommendations flow from these and other findings in the report:

Recommendations

1. Clergy continue to face very high levels of stress, and although many are coping well, more might be done to provide support. Systematic approaches to support, such as

the Methodist Church's District Superintendents, or some regional presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church, have been especially effective at providing moral and in some cases technical support. All churches should consider how they can create or improve their support systems.

2. More laity have volunteered in their parishes/congregations during the pandemic, with tasks including pastoral care, technical expertise for online services, and stewarding socially distanced services. Churches should consider how they can empower and support these volunteers, especially those who have volunteered for the first time. This could range from practical and emotional support, to more consciously articulating lay-centred conceptions of church, such as the 'priesthood of all believers'.
3. Although all clergy long for a return face to face gatherings post-pandemic, online ministries continue to exceed expectations in terms of numbers accessing them and positive feedback. Churches should consider how they can begin to close digital divides within their own faith communities and utilise online ministries after the pandemic.
4. While national level inter-church relationships seem to be thriving, there is evidence that they may have stalled at the grassroots. Such relationships may need to be intentionally rebuilt (or created anew) in the days and years ahead. This is especially important in the context of potentially divisive issues like Brexit and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. Churches should seek to provide safe spaces for constructive debate on these issues at local levels.
5. The island's numerically smaller Christian traditions, including immigrant majority churches, may have been somewhat overlooked during the pandemic, especially by policy makers whose engagement has been with the largest denominations. Many of the smaller denominations are associated with the Irish Council of Churches and have received briefings and information about issues considered by the island's ecumenical bodies; and guidance on responding to government regulations. The island's four largest Christian traditions should consider if there are other ways they can continue to reach out and support these smaller denominations during the pandemic; while at the same time exploring to what extent the experiences of smaller denominations can be brought to bear on engagement with government in other areas.

Appendix

Joint Statements by Inter-Church Bodies

Church Leaders' New Year Message, 1st Jan

2021: <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/January-2021/Church-leaders-2021-New-Year-Message.aspx>

Support for BBC Christmas Appeal on Loneliness, 7 Dec

2020: <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/news/10249/church-leaders-group-supports-bbc>

Remembrance Day, 7 Nov 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5442/remembrance-church-leaders-reflect-in>

Brexit (IICM Open Letter), 14 Oct 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5438/open-letter-to-political-and>

Brexit (Church Leaders), 6 Oct 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5437/brexit-act-with-urgency-and>

Climate Justice (IICC), 29 Sept 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5436/restoring-hope-through-climate-justice>

Mental Health Awareness (IICC), 21 May 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5429/kindness-has-been-the-unfailing>

Response to NI Executive pathway, 18 May 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5428/covid19-recovery-pathway-church-leaders>

Joint statement on church reopening, 4 May 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5424/joint-statement-church-leaders-discuss>

Appreciation for Frontline workers, 20 April 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5421/church-leaders-express-appreciation-for>

Joint statement from Four Nations Forum, 6 April

2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5416/british-and-irish-church-leaders>

Call to Prayer, 27 March 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5415/church-leaders-encourage-the-community>

Support for the bereaved, 24 March 2020: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5412/covid19-church-leaders-respond-to>

Guidance Documents for Returning to Worship

Statement of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference on the publication of the Framework Document for a Return to the Public Celebration of Mass and the Sacraments, <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2020/06/09/statement-of-the-irish-catholic-bishops-conference-on-the-publication-of-the-framework-document-for-a-return-to-the-public-celebration-of-mass-and-the-sacraments/>

Church of Ireland Return to In-Church Worship Protocols for ROI and NI, <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Resources/ParishResources/COVID19/ReturntoChurchProtocols.pdf>

'Stay SAFE at Church,' the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Leadership/Stay-safe-at-church.aspx>

The Methodist Church in Ireland, Key Information, <https://www.irishmethodist.org/covid-19>

In addition, the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Committee curates a webpage with guidance for its member churches, <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5414/coronavirus-covid19-information-for-churches#Resources>