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Gladys Ganiel

Faith Leaders' response to the Pandemic – a survey



THE COVID -19 pandemic has challenged all of us, bringing in its wake fear, bereavement, and unprecedented restrictions on everyday life. In the midst of all this, Christians are still called to witness to 'the hope that is in us.' Results of an online survey of faith leaders on the island during the pandemic indicate that among Christians, hope is very much alive.

I designed the survey in collaboration with the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Meeting (ICC/IICM). It was distributed via email to more than 2,000 faith leaders between 6 and 22 May 2020, facilitated by ICC/IICM's member denominations. We received 439 usable responses, from every county on the island.

A report on the survey has been published, titled "People Still Need Us".¹ Those were the words of a Catholic priest, answering a 'write-in' question about what lessons faith communities should learn from the pandemic. This phrase captures the most significant findings of the survey: faith leaders and communities are not only providing pastoral support and social services, they are doing so alongside signs of surprisingly high levels of online religious practice and increased prayer.

In what follows, I describe the survey, then outline findings about religion online: increased prayer and a possible renewal of faith; and serving others. Results from all denominations are presented, with emphasis on the Church of Ireland. I conclude with reflections on how churches might continue to spread hope in these times.

The survey

The survey included multiple choice and write-in questions and took about 35 minutes to complete. There were questions about pastoral care, conducting funerals, religion online, serving the wider

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: ICC/IICM, May 2020. Available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/resources/People-Still-Need-Us-May-2020.pdf>.

community, and stress and ministry.² The invitation to complete the survey was coordinated by ICC/IICM, with most faith leaders emailed by their bishop, denominational headquarters, or their Religious Order/Congregation. It also was distributed among religions other than Christianity through the Dublin City Inter-Faith Forum, the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum and the Community Faiths Forum (Northern Ireland). Finally, we identified more than 350 publicly available email addresses for faith leaders not affiliated with ICC/IICM and asked them to complete the survey.³

Within the Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church, bishops/dioceses distributed the survey. In the Church of Ireland, 10 of 12 dioceses took part (328 clergy, response rate 24 %). In the Catholic Church, 11 of 26 dioceses participated (885 priests, response rate 11%). We do not have an accurate count of how many Religious received the invitation. The central offices of the Presbyterian Church (357 ministers, response rate 18%), and Methodist Church (109 ministers, response rate 37 per cent) also distributed the survey. Given the uneven distribution and variation in response rates, results should be considered indicative rather than representative. We can draw more confident conclusions about results for the Methodists and the Church of Ireland, given their higher response rates.

Given that 78% of the population in the Republic and 45% in Northern Ireland identify as Catholic, Protestants are over-represented among respondents. Related to this, 55% of respondents were from the Republic and 45% from Northern Ireland, indicating over-representation north of the border, given the North's smaller population. Finally, 21% of respondents were women, indicating that female faith leaders – a tiny minority – were disproportionately likely to respond.

Religion Online

Responding to the threat posed by the pandemic, the Irish and UK governments imposed restrictions on public gatherings, meaning faith communities could no longer meet for worship. Seemingly

*87%
of faith
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are providing
online worship
opportunities*

2 For findings for all questions, see Ibid.

3 For further details about methods, see Ibid, pp. 7-8.

overnight, the practice of faith moved online or capitalised on older technologies, like the telephone or the humble, hand-written letter.

Prior to the pandemic, 56% of faith communities provided some form of online worship, led by Catholic Religious (79%), Catholic Diocesan (62%), Other (58%), Presbyterian (48%), Methodist (25%), and Church of Ireland (24%). Live-streaming was the most common form.

But now, 87% of faith communities are providing online worship opportunities, led by Presbyterian (98%), Other (93%), Methodist (90%), Church of Ireland (88%), Catholic Diocesan (82%), and Catholic Religious (65%).⁴ Catholics are more likely to provide opportunities once a day or several times per day, while Protestants are more likely to provide once a week or several times per week, reflecting these traditions' off-line patterns of worship before the pandemic. Within the Church of Ireland, 45% provide opportunities once a week, 37% several times per week, 12% provide no online services, 4% several times per day, and 3% once a day. In addition, 71% of faith communities have provided other opportunities for online fellowship, using platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook, for activities like prayer meetings, Bible studies, children's and youth groups, book clubs, and more.

Across denominations, the most common response to a question about who was responsible for online worship/outreach before the pandemic was 'no one', with 31% overall choosing this option, led by the Church of Ireland (39%). Church of Ireland clergy were also the most likely to be solely responsible for online worship/outreach before the pandemic (22%), compared to 12% overall. But now, just 7% of faith communities have 'no one' responsible for online worship/outreach; the figure has dropped to 6% in the Church of Ireland. Church of Ireland clergy have assumed more responsibility for online work compared to clergy in other denominations: 40% said they only are responsible, compared to an overall average of 22%. Presbyterians were the next highest, with 30% saying they only were responsible. Among all faith communities, some online work has been taken up by volunteers: overall, 35% reported that a combination of clergy and volunteers were responsible for online worship/outreach, led by Methodists (45%), Presbyterians (40%), Other (43%), Church of Ireland (31%), Catholic Diocesan (28%), and Catholic Religious (21%).

We also asked faith leaders if they had received guidance about providing online services or resources, and from what sources.

4 The apparent decrease in provision by Catholic Religious does not necessarily mean they decreased their services. Religious were more likely to write-in 'other' options of online provision before the pandemic, which may have affected the data.

There were variations, with 93% of Methodists reporting they had received advice or guidance from their denomination, followed by Church of Ireland (75%), Presbyterian (44%), Other (38%), Catholic Diocesan (31%) and Catholic Religious (12%). This may reflect the fact that more Protestant than Catholic faith communities did not offer online worship opportunities before the pandemic, so required more guidance.

Finally, 70% of faith leaders agreed they would retain at least some online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings are lifted, with 21% saying they did not know and 9% saying they would not retain any. For the Church of Ireland, these figures were the same as the overall numbers. So we can safely say that for the vast majority of churches, having moved faith online, it will continue to stay there in some way, even as people return to church buildings.

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Prayer and a renewal of faith?

We did not ask about prayer on the survey. So, it was striking that our respondents mentioned it frequently in write-in questions. For example, we asked whether they thought faith and/or religious practice had helped people cope with the pandemic. 89% answered 'Yes', 11% said 'I don't know', and no one said 'No'. They were then asked to write in examples of coping. Examples included intensification of prayer among the faithful, as well as stories about people who had previously demonstrated no interest in religion seeking prayer or accessing services online. These are examples from Church of Ireland clergy:

People speak of peace they find in reading the Bible and prayer.

People are talking about worship more than ever before. I believe people are praying in a new way.

A small but faithful group of people have taken part in worship on at least one occasion every day, some twice a day, suggesting that they have found faith a way of maintaining contact and of providing rhythm to their day and indeed their week. Many have commented favourably

that this has kept them going through a very troubling and in some cases a frightening time. I think people are genuinely frightened by the pandemic, but they have also reflected about what it is telling us in terms of how we live our lives, and perhaps ways in which we need to amend things when we come through it.

I had one man who prior to this was not a churchgoer or interested in Christianity at all. On Palm Sunday he found my service on Facebook and from then he began to watch all my online services. He ... told me on Facebook once that my services and prayers brought him comfort in a stressful job. I promised to pray for him every day and his faith has brought him a lot of comfort.

There seems to be a greater willingness to view life spiritually and discuss relevant issues. Many people are now using the daily readings at home, and the lectionary is available on the website. An invitation to borrow a prayer book to join in Daily Matins at a distance, which has always been said daily by the rector or readers, has been taken up by at least 15 people who say that they have a new realisation of the value of contemplative devotion.

We also asked faith leaders to identify the most rewarding aspects of ministry during the pandemic. While a few said there had been 'none', others described an increase in (online) religious practice, new opportunities for pastoral care, a new appreciation for faith leaders, greater lay involvement, and more time for themselves. These are Church of Ireland examples:

The numbers of people we have engaged with online have been frankly astonishing.

More people viewing online services than attend church. Positive feedback from parishioners and colleagues.

Discovering new skills in technology and finding out that there are people 'out there' for whom our religious services provide meaning.

Lay people taking part in services and daily readings some of whom would not have before.

Reaching more people with worship and prayer through social media. Many people seem more appreciative of the existence of the Church.

More pastoral time speaking with people in my church (due to phoning rather than visiting in this rural area).

An increase in pastoral time connecting with people. As this has been reduced to telephone and internet-only connection they tend to be more numerous but with a shorter duration. This has allowed a wide connection with parishioners that would not have been possible if physically visiting their home.

So overall, we find faith leaders across denominations reporting increases in prayer and interest in religion, both among churchgoers and those outside their flock. Faith leaders were surprised and encouraged by what could be interpreted as a renewal of faith. While across the broad sweep of history it has been common for people to turn to religion during crisis, it was perhaps assumed that this would not happen in our more secular age. At the same time, any evidence of renewal is conjectural and second-hand, based as it is on faith leaders' reports of their perceptions of others. And it is possible the apparent renewal may be short-lived, with interest waning as deaths decrease and lockdowns ease.

Serving others

The Irish and UK governments have designated clergy and religious staff as 'key workers' during the pandemic, indicating the importance of their service to others in burying the dead, comforting the grieving, and providing pastoral care. We asked faith leaders about their experiences of pastoral care, including funerals. With face-to-face interaction not possible, they reached out online, by telephone, via post, or by going for walks and talking with people from a distance. These Church of Ireland examples give a sense of those experiences, including awareness of the limitations of online care:

An increase in (online) religious practice, new opportunities for pastoral care, a new appreciation for faith leaders, greater lay involvement

We have devised a telephone rota and started sending service sheets to people at home. Primarily we have stepped up contact (by telephone) with people who we know to be unable to get out.

The weekly service sheets, with a thought based on the Bible readings and news and announcements, are posted to those families who don't have email.

I contact people more by text and phone calls. I also wrote to every household in the group of parishes using the free An Post envelopes. I have also made a number of 'drive by' visits to parishioners whilst maintaining social distancing.

There were examples of creativity:

Visited a dying parishioner outside his room window at local nursing home and prayed through their open window.

Occasional 'at home' days for people to call and chat at the rectory door while observing social distancing.

And awareness of the loss of human touch:

Not being able to sit/stand close to people, not being able to shake hands or give somebody a hug: it is so distant, cold and unsettling ... The essential human contact has had to be put to one side which has made difficult situations much worse and trying to convince some to comply has been very difficult.

The lack of regular hospital visiting, and visits to nursing homes and to the housebound is a huge impoverishment.

Phone is not a replacement for visiting bereaved people. In fact, it is awful not being able to shake hands of bereaved people, and anoint the dying. Yes, phone call is easier, but there is no comparison with face-to-face pastoral work.

For those who conducted funerals, there were additional challenges. This minister's stark description captures the reality of a pandemic funeral:

Outdoors, at graveside, church remained closed; no service at the home before the main service; used a shortened form of the C of I funeral liturgy; no separate tribute or eulogy but have offered a service of Thanksgiving for the life of the loved one at a later time. No hymns; short in length, service length was 15 minutes; 10 people in total present, including 2 undertakers and 1 gravedigger; social distancing was marked out with chain (plastic) - by gravedigger, who was in full PPE. Attendees left soon after.

There were other poignant descriptions:

I said prayers over the phone on speaker in a dying person's bedroom with the family gathered around. Subsequently I said the Prayer Book service for use in the home again over the phone. The family had arranged for speakers in other rooms to be connected by Bluetooth so that all family members could hear.

And in the Republic, some reported that parishioners were upset because Catholic church buildings were open (including for small funerals), but Church of Ireland buildings were not:

Graveyard service only with promise of proper memorial service later. Didn't go down well as Roman Catholic dioceses allowing services in church with 10 people present. C of I guidelines: no church.

We have already noted an increase in laity volunteering for online ministry and caring for people in their own faith communities. In addition, we found that among the four largest denominations – Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist – 74% are providing social services to the wider community during the pandemic. This figure was 68% for Church of Ireland parishes. Of that 68% 39% increased their provision, 51% stayed the same, and 11% decreased. Among all faith communities, 42% said their provision had increased, 33% stayed the same, and 25% had decreased. Faith communities are also working with governmental, secular, and faith-based groups to provide social services. In the Church of Ireland, 65% reported they worked with other groups. Of these, 24% reported that the services they provided with others had increased, 54% stayed the same, and 5% decreased. So, the vast majority of faith communities have increased

or maintained their level of services to the wider community and their partnerships with others. This demonstrates remarkable resilience, considering the constrained circumstances of the pandemic. This may include pressure on parish finances, especially in locations that have not capitalised fully on online giving.

Concluding reflections

The survey has documented a swift and extensive move of religion online, increases in prayer, other signs of renewal, and faith leaders and laity serving others – in most cases at the same or increased levels. Taken together, the survey paints a picture of Christians living out their faith in ways that generate hope.

In most aspects, results for Church of Ireland clergy did not differ much from other denominations. However, Church of Ireland clergy were more likely to be solely responsible for religion online than clergy in other denominations. In most cases, volunteers rather than paid staff were assisting clergy in this aspect of ministry. So, it seems that laity within Church of Ireland parishes were less likely to provide help with online ministries than in other denominations.

At the same time, Church of Ireland ministers were among those most likely to write in that one of the lessons to learn from the pandemic is that the Church is people, not buildings. Here are examples:

Buildings are vastly less important than we think they are. 'Being' is more important than 'Doing'. Being able to meet and share TOGETHER is at the centre of the Christian life.

Buildings, fewer meetings, essentials of life (being rather than doing), Eucharist, how church may change going forward.

When lockdown eases and people return to in-person worship, most churches plan to retain aspects of online religion. Faith leaders acknowledged that blending online and in-person ministries must be considered carefully. Perhaps online ministry could be a chance for the Church of Ireland to expand 'every member ministry' throughout its parishes, relieving what could soon come to be regarded as yet another burden for already over-stretched clergy.⁵ In addition, some

5 David Godfrey and Maria Murphy, "Towards 'every member' ministry", *Search*, 43.2, Summer 2020, pp. 129-127.

faith leaders expressed reservations about online religion. These are Church of Ireland examples:

Online worship isn't 'real', and it should not be embraced, but critically examined.

I would also wish to question some of the assumptions around online worship. Generally, these assumptions are positive – i.e. it is an admirable thing to do and beneficially extends the influence of the local church. However, at least half of the feedback which I get from churchgoing and non-churchgoers is the stark manner in which infantile expressions of faith are exposed. Happily - but not so for many clergy - online worship allows actual real time feedback which is not possible during

a church service. I've just a few minutes ago read reactions to a rector's reflection where he extolled the spiritual virtues of poverty. If online communication is the future, I welcome this new theological accountability but rather fear that many clergy are not equipped for it.

Concerns about the 'realness' of online worship may be linked to beliefs around Eucharist, which can vary within 'low' and 'high' Church of Ireland traditions. One cleric recommended:

Concerns about the 'realness' of online worship may be linked to beliefs around Eucharist, which can vary within 'low' and 'high' Church of Ireland traditions

... the Standing Committee of the Church of Ireland [should] look to produce an approved service booklet for a time when this may happen again. We need to think through the use of Holy Communion when we cannot meet.

In a follow-up interview, another elaborated:⁶

Continuing to offer Holy Communion has been a huge theological debate. At the beginning there were a whole lot of excited clergy throwing in our pennies' worth about it. But at the end of the day we've been left to just get on with it and do what we think is best. I have appreciated

6 Interview with Author, July 2020. The second phase of my research (ongoing), involves follow-up interviews with faith leaders across denominations.

the quiet background support that is there in my tradition without a lot of pressure. Although I think some clergy ... have felt that there maybe hasn't been quite enough guidance from the authorities in the church.

... In Anglican theology you have the belief in the real presence of Christ in some form in the Eucharist. So if we do a Holy Communion service online do viewers participate in the body and blood of Christ through faith as the celebrant receives it theologically? That's a tricky one.... 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. I did more in the early days and I was conflicted about that a bit. Yet, I feel I need to do another one online soon, because there's comfort in the liturgy and I think, well, God's not limited by this.

Concerns about clergy's online ministry skills are also valid. Training for online ministry should be prioritised and go beyond technical skills to include reflection on how to appropriately blend online and in-person approaches to ministry in a range of parish contexts. For example, during the pandemic some faith leaders have discovered people are keen to meet online for evening prayers (compline), even on a daily basis, but would never turn up for it in a church building. In such cases, could online compline continue? For others, the pandemic has revealed a 'virtual' mission field of people who are unlikely to attend traditional, in-person services. Given that even before the pandemic many people increasingly lived much of their lives online, it is possible they are not simply surfing online services in a superficial way. Rather, they may be open to further discipleship through virtual activities. This may especially be the case for young people alienated or bored by traditional services. So how can their faith be nurtured?

Archbishop of Armagh John McDowell has observed that although there is still a certain 'fog' about the future, "It would be very peculiar if we all went through this and nothing changed."⁷ Indeed, if there is one thing that is certain, it is that Irish society will never be the same. This survey hints that with focused and energetic responses to those changes, churches can serve as sources of hope, more so than could have been imagined before the pandemic.

7 Interview with Author, July 2020.