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Online Opportunities in Secularizing Societies? Clergy and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland

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Abstract: This article explores how Christian clergy in Ireland have framed their adoption of online ministries during the COVID-19 pandemic as opportunities for the churches to retain some significance, even in secularizing societies. It is based on an island-wide survey of 439 faith leaders and 32 in-depth, follow-up interviews. The results of this study are analysed in light of scholarship in three areas: (1) secularization in Ireland, informed by Norris and Inglehart's evolutionary modernization theory; (2) cross-national research that has found increasing interest in spirituality or religion during the pandemic (with the UK as the main point of comparison); and (3) wider pre-pandemic scholarship on digital religion. The article concludes by arguing that the clergy's framing of online ministries as opportunities is important: if they regard online ministries as potential sites of religious revitalization, they are more likely to invest in them. There is some evidence that they may be assisted in this by lay volunteers. However, given the secularization already underway, it remains to be seen whether an embrace of blended online and in-person religion will have far-reaching impacts on Ireland's religious landscape.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; digital religion; religion online; Ireland; Northern Ireland; secularization; revitalization; clergy; United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Turning to religion in times of crisis is a historical, cross-national phenomenon, with examples arguably including evangelical revivals (Holmes 2012) and Marian apparitions (Allen 2000), among others (Ganiel et al. 2014). In Ireland, Larkin (1972) argued that the Great Famine (1845–1852) sparked a 'devotional revolution' that dramatically altered the island's religious landscape. Larkin claimed that that trauma of the famine prompted people to seek God, transforming Ireland from a land of barely practising Catholics to one of the most devout nations in Europe. This process was facilitated by the introduction of new devotional practices from Europe, which helped consolidate a relationship between Irishness and Catholicism which has persisted for centuries.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of historic proportions, affecting all regions of the world and almost all dimensions of social, economic, and political life. It is just the sort of crisis that, in earlier centuries, might have prompted a turn to religion. However, unlike in previous eras, European nations are starting from much lower baselines of religiosity. As Bruce and Voas (2016) have noted, none of the major crises of the twentieth century prompted a resurgence of churchgoing in Britain. So, it might be expected that during the COVID-19 pandemic, religion would not be the first port of call for Europeans seeking solace and meaning.

This is the case even in Ireland, which long exhibited unusually high levels of religious identification, practice and belief when compared to the rest of Europe. Since the 1990s, secularization has accelerated in Ireland (Inglis 1998, 2014; Ganiel 2016a; Turpin 2019; Turpin et al. 2018). So, we might also expect people in Ireland to forsake religious coping mechanisms. However, ongoing research indicates that some are turning to religious practice to help them deal with the anxiety and trauma of the pandemic

(Ganiel 2020, 2021; Byrne and Sweetman 2021). While this finding may contradict common sense understandings of how secularizing societies cope with crises, it is in line with Norris and Inglehart's (2011) evolutionary modernization theory, which provides room for understanding how a threat to physical and existential security such as the pandemic could potentially slow or reverse secularization in some contexts.

It would be reckless to make big claims based on the emerging data, which show only modest increases of interest in matters spiritual or religious. Perhaps more significantly, Christian clergy in Ireland are 'framing' or talking about the pandemic in terms of opportunities for the churches to retain their significance, even in secularizing societies. Their optimism has been fuelled by their experiences of moving religion online during the pandemic, as their services attracted far greater numbers of viewers and more positive feedback than they expected. Indeed, 70 percent of clergy claim they will retain some online ministries even when all lockdown restrictions are lifted. The clergy's optimism—admittedly based on their subjective interpretations—resonates with some research on digital religion which has emphasized its potential for creating revitalizing, 'post-secular' spaces for religious self-expression (Campbell and Evolvi 2019; Piela 2017). At the same time, others have recognized that digital technology may be 'a tool of secularization', deepening divides between science and religion (Bógdał-Brzezińska 2020). Digital technology may undermine religious authenticity, authority, identity and community (Campbell 2013); while the 'mediatization' of religion through secular media institutions, including their online expressions, may contribute to the development of a banal, individualized religion that ultimately reinforces or accelerates secularization (Hjvard 2008; Lövheim and Lynch 2011).

The article proceeds with an overview of secularization in Ireland, informed by Norris and Inglehart's (2011; Inglehart 2021) evolutionary modernization theory. Next, it considers studies from a range of geographical settings that indicate increasing interest in spirituality or religion during the pandemic. I use research from the UK as the main point of comparison, given the islands' proximity and intertwined (if divergent) religious histories (Ganiel and Steven, forthcoming). These studies are considered in the broader context of pre-pandemic research on digital religion, noting that it is nothing new for faith leaders to conceive of religion online as an innovative tool for discipleship and evangelization. What is new is the interest in online ministries among Irish clergy, which has been prompted and accelerated by the pandemic. I present the methods and results and conclude by arguing that the clergy's framing of online ministries as opportunities is important: if they regard online ministries as potential sites of religious revitalization, they are more likely to invest in them. At the same time, another trend identified in the research—increased volunteerism among laity who have assisted clergy with developing online ministries—could contribute to revitalization. However, given the recent acceleration of secularization, it remains to be seen whether an embrace of blended online and in-person religion will have far-reaching impacts on Ireland's religious landscape.

2. Could the Pandemic Slow or Reverse Secularization?

Norris and Inglehart's (2011) evolutionary modernization theory links secularization with rising levels of physical and existential security. They acknowledge that religion has historically served as a coping mechanism in challenging times, helping people give meaning to their struggles. However, as societies become more prosperous and relatively equal, struggle is replaced by self-expression and religion becomes less important. At the same time, they recognize that contextual differences matter: historically more religious countries, especially those that have experienced societal traumas, may retain vestiges of religious influence for longer periods.

There is, of course, a vast and varied debate on secularization. It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate it. I have contextualized my study with Norris and Inglehart's approach because its focus on insecurity and crisis is especially relevant in pandemic times. However, it is worth pointing out that Norris and Inglehart's approach is functionalist; that is, it follows major trends in the sociology of religion that potentially fall into 'a trap

of burdening religion with either an instrumentality or ultimate political rationality, and sometimes both' (Han 2016, p. 5). Han reminds us that we should avoid reducing religion to a coping mechanism or a prop for national identity. For him, functionalist arguments overlook religion's concern with the nature of being and thus miss its world-forming, creative qualities, especially in its relation to other spheres of life, such as technological lifeworlds (Han 2016, pp. 29–49). Han explains the persistence of religion by arguing that it is characterized by relational networks that interact with digital technology and consumer capitalism, which have their own religious qualities. This view challenges modernist distinctions between secular and religious aspects of life, and provides further scope for understanding religion in a digital age, even in the absence of an existential crisis such as a pandemic. Inglehart (2021) has recently argued that, in the last decade or so, some affluent Western societies have reached tipping points where religion's decline has accelerated even more rapidly than might have been expected. Concurrently, rising inequalities within and between nations have made some societies vulnerable to an 'authoritarian reflex', which reflects rising existential insecurity (Inglehart 2021, p. 146). The pandemic has complicated this mix, so much so that Inglehart (2021, pp. 166–67) concludes: 'for the immediate future, we would expect the insecurities linked with the pandemic to generate support for religion.'

Globally, there is some evidence that Inglehart's expectation is correct, at least in the short-term. Bentzen's (2020, p. 53) study of 95 countries in March 2020, the month in which COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, found that the share of Google searches for prayer had 'surged to the highest level ever recorded'. This was more than 50 percent higher than Google searches for prayer in February 2020. Unsurprisingly, Bentzen found that searches for prayer rose more in more religious countries and in poorer, unequal, and insecure countries, which tend to be more religious (Bentzen 2020, pp. 55–56). While Googling prayer is a rather low bar for measuring religiosity, Bentzen still echoed Norris and Inglehart when she concluded (Bentzen 2020, pp. 73–74): 'people from across the globe experience emotional distress in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they use religion to cope'. In that light, increased interest in religion in Ireland is not entirely surprising. Ireland retains higher levels of religiosity than most Western nations, meaning it has relatively more vestiges of religious influence readily available. It also is still recovering from a recently violent and traumatic past. These important historical and contextual factors are explored briefly below.

Early in the seventeenth century, primarily Protestant settlers from Britain and Scotland colonized the island, seizing economic and political control. After centuries of periodic rebellions and a war for independence (1919–1921), a 26-county Irish Free State was created in 1922, while six counties in the northeast remained in the United Kingdom. The Free State (later Republic) enshrined the 'special position' of the Catholic Church in its constitution and entrusted it with its education and health systems. Northern Ireland had a Protestant majority which quickly grasped almost all meaningful political power, disadvantaging its substantial Catholic minority. Protestant churches maintained close relationships with political power (Mitchel 2003). Northern Ireland's violent Troubles (1968–1998), often described as an ethno-national conflict, had religious dimensions (Mitchell 2005; Ruane 2021). At the same time, the churches remained organized on an all-island basis, rather than the denominations in Northern Ireland aligning themselves with British ones. In this article, I use the term 'Ireland' when referring to the whole island, and Northern Ireland and the Republic when referring to the different jurisdictions on the island. It can be contentious to refer to the whole island as 'Ireland', because for some this implies an aspiration towards a united Ireland. However, in this context I use 'Ireland' due to the churches' all-island basis. I also use the plural 'societies' rather than the singular 'society'. This signals that there are social and religious differences between Northern Ireland and the Republic, as well as significant regional and urban/rural variations across the island.

In these contexts, religious identification and practice functioned (partially) as a way for people to identify more deeply with their ethno-national group (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 2009). So, to the extent that it can be argued that the link between religion and national identity helped

keep religious practice high, it also could be argued that the ending of the Troubles improved relations between the British and Irish states, and the declining influence of churches on politics contributed to drops in religious identification and practice (Ganiel 2016b). The data seem to corroborate this. According to the Census, in 1991, 92 percent in the Republic identified as Catholic. This declined to 87 percent in 2006 and 78 percent in 2016. Most decline is due to an increase in those who have 'no religion'—which was 2 percent in 1991 and 10 percent in 2016. Pew Research Center's (2018) survey found 15 percent in the Republic were 'religiously unaffiliated,' while the 2018 European Social Survey put this figure at 32 percent (O'Connell et al. 2019). The category of 'religiously unaffiliated' has different connotations than 'no religion': someone unaffiliated to an institutional religion may still consider themselves religious. This may partly explain why these figures are so much higher than the Census. At the same time, the Irish Census question on religion may artificially inflate religious identification because it is interpreted as a question about religious background rather than practice (O'Leary 2016).[1] Attendance at religious services stood at 66 percent in 1997 (down from 91 percent in 1972) and has since fallen to 44 percent in 2007 and 35 percent in 2016.[2] There are regional variations in attendance, with figures for some parishes in Dublin in the single digits (Ganiel 2016b, pp. 81–85). In Northern Ireland, religious identification has remained relatively robust and stable among Catholics. It stood at 41 percent in the 1968 Loyalty survey, 41 percent in the 2011 Census, and 36 percent in the 2019 Life and Times Survey. This is probably primarily due to demographics: the percentage of the overall population of people from Catholic backgrounds is growing, and the Protestant-background population is declining due to lower birth and higher emigration rates. The two largest Protestant denominations, Presbyterian and Church of Ireland, have experienced steady declines in identification, with Presbyterians falling from 28 percent to 18 percent and Church of Ireland receding from 22 percent to 14 percent between 1968 and 2019. In addition, the 'no religion' category reached a high of 17 percent in the 2011 Census (and 20 percent in the 2019 Life and Times) from a low of less than one percent in 1968. Attendance also has declined, most steeply among Catholics, albeit starting from a much higher point (Ganiel 2016b, pp. 81–85). Attendance stood at 81 percent in 1998 (down from 95 percent in 1968). It had fallen to 68 percent in 2008 and 46 percent in 2019. Among Protestants, it was 52 percent in 1998, 52 percent in 2008, and 46 percent in 2019.[3]

While Northern Ireland is included in UK data in cross-national surveys, we have some sense of where the Republic now ranks in terms of European religiosity. Pew's 2018 survey found 24 percent in the Republic are 'highly religious', fifteenth among European countries but third among those in Western Europe, trailing Portugal and Italy.[4]

In sum, evolutionary modernization theory gives us the tools to understand why interest in religion is increasing during the pandemic. It also explains why even secularizing societies such as those in Ireland could experience a slowing or reversal of secularization during this time, due to retaining relatively high (Western European) pre-pandemic levels of religiosity, coupled with its ongoing recovery from a violent and traumatic past.

3. Religion during the Pandemic

A range of studies have found increases in prayer and other spiritual/religious practices during the pandemic. Although the focus of this article is Ireland, the UK is included as a point of comparison. The UK is much less religious than Ireland, with more than 50 percent of the population reporting they have 'no religion' and well under 10 percent regularly attending religious services, with regional variations (Woodhead 2016; Bruce 2020). Only 11 percent of UK adults were 'highly religious' on Pew's 2018 survey, 29th of the 34 countries surveyed. Comparing Ireland with a much less religious context is useful because we can see its higher pre-pandemic religiosity reflected in correspondingly more 'religious' responses to the pandemic.

3.1. Praying More Than Usual

Several nationally representative surveys on religion have been conducted during the pandemic, with some commissioned by Christian organizations and others carried out by academic researchers.[5] In the Republic, an April 2020 survey commissioned by the Iona Institute found that 18 percent of people in the Republic (15 percent of men and 22 percent of women) said they were praying 'more than usual' during the lockdown. When the 43 percent of the population who said that they 'don't pray' are removed from the overall figures, 32 percent of people who pray are praying 'more than usual' (27 percent of men and 38 percent of women). In the UK, a Tearfund survey was carried out between 24 and 27 April 2020. It found that 44 percent of the population pray. Unsurprisingly, Northern Ireland was the most devout region in this regard at 65 percent, followed by England (44 percent), Wales (36 percent) and Scotland (35 percent).

A Theos Think Tank/YouGov survey in the UK in May/June 2020 provided a different perspective, casting doubt on whether there was indeed renewed interest in religion.[6] The Iona Institute replicated some questions from the Theos poll in August 2020, allowing for direct comparisons. Both Iona and Theos found that when asked what matters most when trying to live a fulfilling life, people in the Republic and the UK did not value 'growing your spirituality or religion or faith' very much. In both countries, this choice ranked 13 out of 16 options: 11 percent in the Republic and 10 percent in the UK chose it. The top three choices in both countries were 'being with family', 'being content with what you have', and 'being financially comfortable'. However, both surveys confirmed an increased search for meaning in life and an increased concern about death (which is, of course, unsurprising during a pandemic). In the Republic, people searched for meaning and worried about death more than in the UK, which could reflect Ireland's higher baseline levels of religiosity and belief in life after death (including hell). It also could reflect how the pandemic has been constructed in popular discourses in Ireland and the UK, including different emphases on the ability of the government and health care systems to cope with the pandemic and find solutions.

Substantial minorities were engaging in practices that could be described as spiritual, such as 'spending time in quiet reflection' (40 percent Republic, 26 percent UK); 'feeling a deep connection with nature/the earth' (26 percent Republic, 18 percent UK); prayer (26 percent Republic, 14 percent UK), and meditation (21 percent Republic, 12 percent UK). In addition, people were thinking about what makes life meaningful more than before (45 percent Republic, 31 percent UK) and talking to other people about what makes life meaningful more than before (33 percent Republic, 20 percent UK).

In addition, in an October–December 2020 survey, 40 percent of faith leaders in Scotland said their faith was made stronger during the pandemic and reported that people were praying more (Brendan Research 2021). A non-representative survey of laity and clergy carried out by Dublin City University's Mater Dei Institute in May/June 2020 found that in the Republic, 56 percent of laity and 65 percent of ordained were 'more prayerful'; while 33 percent of laity and 35 percent of ordained felt 'closer to God' (Byrne and Sweetman 2021, p. 151).

3.2. Accessing Religious Services

Some surveys asked about accessing religious services online, on television or via radio. The first Iona survey in April found that 27 percent of the public had watched or listened to a religious service during the lockdown, roughly in line with (or somewhat lower than) religious attendance prior to the pandemic. This finding was replicated in another Iona survey in November 2020 (26 percent) and had risen to 36 percent by March 2021.[7] In Northern Ireland, the Tearfund survey found 39 percent accessing services, in line with higher church attendances in the region. In the UK, the Tearfund survey found that 24 percent of UK adults had watched or listened to a religious service during the lockdown, much higher than pre-lockdown church attendance, which is less than 10 percent (Woodhead 2016; Bruce 2020). Subsequent surveys then seemed to confirm

increased interest in prayer, spirituality, or religion in the UK, including by Christian Aid, Catholic Voices/York St John University, and Durham University. The July–August 2020 Durham University poll found that 25 percent of people in the UK had engaged 'regularly' in online organised worship during lockdown, including more than 50 percent of people aged 18–34. However, the Durham researchers concluded that 'this seems to reflect a wider spirituality among Gen Z rather than signalling engagement with institutional faith' (Durham University 2020, p. 4).

3.3. Wider Perspectives

Scholarship in the field of digital religion stretches back decades. It can be divided into distinct eras, developing alongside changing technological trends and capabilities (Campbell and Lövheim 2011). Over time, researchers have engaged with debates about digital religious practices and ritual, identity, community, authority, and authenticity (See especially Campbell 2013; Lövheim and Campbell 2017; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019).

Campbell (2016) has identified three broad theoretical approaches in the field of digital religion: mediatization, mediation of meaning, and the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST). RSST, developed by Campbell, has the most immediate relevance for my analysis. RSST has four stages,[8] with the latter two relating directly to processes apparent during the pandemic in Ireland: faith communities' negotiation of 'new technology, relative to which aspects they accept, reject, or need to innovate in light of their values'; and how faith communities frame or 'justify their technology use as representative of the community's identity performance in a wider society' (Campbell 2016, pp. 20–21). Irish churches' moves online have been so rapid that the 'negotiation' of new technology has involved less reflection on 'values' than a more leisurely adoption of online ministries would have entailed. Indeed, Campbell and Shepherd (2021) have noted that the pandemic is forcing faith communities to identify what values are most important to them as they negotiate new online ministries. Similarly, faith communities' widespread use of technology has been justified primarily by the pandemic. Ireland's new online ministries may in part constitute 'identity performances', but mostly they have been rationalized as meeting immediate needs and, crucially, framed as opportunities to create space for faith in secularizing societies.

Helland's (2005, p. 1) distinction between 'online religion' and 'religion online' also is relevant for my analysis. Online religion includes 'highly free and interactive' websites, often outside the control of 'official' off-line religious institutions. Religion online is more likely to consist of 'religious information and not interaction' and is usually controlled or monitored by representatives of official institutions. In this article, I use the term religion online to indicate that during the pandemic in Ireland, moving to online ministries has largely been instigated by 'official' actors: local clergy, in some cases assisted by their denominations. However, many Irish clergy have sought to incorporate participatory elements in their new online ministries, blurring the distinction somewhat. Finally, for some, the term online religion can imply that for those accessing it, the internet is their primary site for religious practice. While this has been the case during lockdown, no Irish clergy indicated that online ministries should substitute for in-person varieties indefinitely. Therefore, the term religion online more easily allows us to be mindful of Irish clergy's desire to blend online and in person practices. I use the term religion online even though the ongoing 'fourth wave' of study in this field has settled on the term 'digital religion' to emphasize the blending of online and in person practices (Campbell 2013). I do not employ the term digital religion in the analysis of my data because it was rarely used by my research subjects, who almost universally talked about moving religion 'online'. I refer to 'online ministries' as a shorthand for the variety of online opportunities offered during the pandemic, including Sunday worship services, prayer meetings, youth groups, bible studies, etc.

The vast pandemic-fuelled move of religion online has increased interest in digital religion scholarship globally, renewing questions about whether it will revitalize religion,

lead to fragmented individualization and decline, or challenge religious authority or bolster it, among other issues (Baker et al. 2020; O'Brien 2020). Even seasoned scholars such as Campbell (2021) see the pandemic as a unique moment:

> As someone who has studied how religious communities respond to technology for two and a half decades, I quickly realized that this move marked a unique and important moment for contemporary religion.

Campbell has edited several collections that document how the pandemic has prompted the shift of religion online, consisting of short essays by a mix of scholars, theologians, clergy, and other religious practitioners from around the world. Contributions include examples of how 'the coronavirus crisis unleashed a new vitality' in Germany (Reimann 2020, p. 32); enabled better communication among rural congregations in the USA (Schaper 2020; Perry 2020); enhanced online spiritual community in the Church of Sweden (Silverkors 2020); improved intergenerational cooperation within congregations in South Africa (Cloete 2020); accelerated digital ritual innovations (Berger 2020), and 'disrupted' existing religious patterns in the UK by pushing faith communities towards blended online/offline forms of practice, including online celebrations of communion/Eucharist (Phillips 2020), amongst others. Research on Scottish churches found 'a 430% growth in online worship and other content, with 92% of churches offering some form of weekly online worship' (Brendan Research 2021, p. 2). Ongoing large-scale studies, such as the cross-national 'CONTOC'—Churches online in times of Corona' and 'BRIC-19—British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19' are likely to yield further insights.[9] These wider perspectives resonate with the findings of my research in Ireland, detailed below.

4. Methods

My research was designed in partnership with the Irish Council of Churches (ICC)/Irish Inter Church Meeting (IICM).[10] It can be considered action research because ICC/IICM helped formulate research questions, assisted in data-gathering, and published two initial reports based on the research (Ganiel 2020, 2021). As an action research project, it reflected the practical and pastoral concerns of ICC/IICM. ICC/IICM also have held internal meetings to reflect on the findings, which have shaped its guidance to member churches during the pandemic.

In April 2020, about a month after lockdown restrictions had been imposed, I approached the ICC to ask whether the inter-church bodies planned to gather information about how churches were responding to the pandemic. They did not, so we agreed to co-design a research project. Nicola Brady, General Secretary of the ICC, organized a task group of representatives from member churches. We met virtually to clarify research aims, and questions that would be distributed as a survey of faith leaders. The survey covered four areas: pastoral care (including conducting funerals during lockdown); moving religion online; providing social services in the wider community; and stress and ministry. There were tick-box and write-in questions. In line with the question type, quantitative or qualitative analysis was conducted; for example, the write-in questions required thematic qualitative analysis and the identification of codes, such as 'descriptions of funerals' or 'increases in prayer'.

By drawing on ICC/IICM's relationships with its member churches, we hoped that the survey would be distributed to a nearly universal sample of faith leaders. Faith leaders were conceived broadly to include Christian clergy, Christian Religious (ordained and non-ordained, including women Religious), and leaders of other religious traditions.[11] Most were emailed on our behalf by their denominational offices, their bishop, or their Religious Order/Congregation. The email requests were coordinated by the ICC/IICM and included their member churches: the island's four largest denominations—the Catholic Church, Church of Ireland (Anglican), Presbyterian Church, and Methodist Church; and a range of smaller denominations and non-Christian religions.[12] Some bishops or diocesan offices opted not to send the survey to their clergy, due to pastoral concerns about high workloads and heavy administrative burdens. In the end, the survey was distributed by

the central offices of the Presbyterian Church (357 ministers, response rate 18 percent) and Methodist Church (109 ministers, response rate 37 percent). In the Church of Ireland, the survey was distributed among clergy in 10 of 12 dioceses (328 ministers, response rate 24 percent). In the Catholic Church, the survey was distributed among priests in 11 of 26 dioceses (885 priests) and among Religious Orders and Congregations. The response rate among diocesan priests was 11 percent. For various reasons, we cannot calculate the response rate among Religious, smaller denominations and non-Christian religions. Taken together, this means results should be considered indicative rather than representative.

The survey was distributed to more than 2000 faith leaders via a direct email and remained open between 6 and 22 May 2020. We received 439 usable responses, from every county on the island. Thirty-five percent of respondents were Catholic (23 percent diocesan priest or deacon/12 percent Religious), 18 percent Church of Ireland, 14 percent Presbyterian, 9 percent Methodist, 23 percent 'Other' Christian, and less than 1 percent 'Other' religion. Given that Catholicism is by far the largest Christian tradition, Protestants are over-represented among our respondents. In addition, 55 percent of the responses came from the Republic, while 45 percent were from Northern Ireland, indicating a greater proportional response from Northern Ireland, given its smaller population.[13] The greater response from Northern Ireland correlates with the greater proportion of Protestant traditions that responded to the survey. In addition, 21 percent of respondents were women, indicating that female clergy—a small minority on the island—were disproportionately likely to respond. Among these 90 women, 31 were Catholic Religious and the rest were leaders in Protestant traditions.

Between June and December 2020, I conducted 32 follow-up interviews with Christian clergy. I accessed most interviewees via the survey itself: it was anonymous, but faith leaders were given the option to include their contact details if they were willing to be interviewed. Of the 439 respondents, 196 (45 percent) were willing. Interviewees were selected to reflect a range of experiences across denominations, geographical areas, approaches to online ministry, and service in the wider community. The original survey was distributed among faith leaders from outside Christianity, but with only three respondents I focused on Christian clergy in the interviews.[14] Interviewees included seven Catholics, six Church of Ireland, 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. To gain wider perspectives on the range of experiences within denominations, I interviewed clergy serving outside parish or congregational ministry, such as Catholic bishops or leaders in similar positions in Protestant denominations. The 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. Interviews covered areas addressed in the survey in more depth, as well as re-opening churches, a key issue during the timeframe when they were conducted.[15]

I conducted qualitative, thematic analysis of the interviews, identifying codes such as 'online ministry', 'returning to church', 'drive in services', 'young people', 'inter-church cooperation', and 'understanding of church (ecclesiology)', among others. The segments coded under 'online ministry' were most relevant for this article and were organized under sub-codes, including: 'continue after lockdown', 'denominational support', 'digital divide', 'older people', and 'volunteer support'.

Several caveats are in order. Firstly, some questions gauged faith leaders' perceptions of others, such as congregants/parishioners and those outside their faith community. It is possible faith leaders interpreted the actions of others in the most positive possible light. Indeed, Byrne and Sweetman's (2021, p. 152) survey found that 52 percent of ordained versus 41 percent of laity felt 'more hopeful' during the pandemic; while 46 percent of ordained versus 35 percent of laity agreed with the statement 'We will finally learn

how to be Church online in the digital age' (p. 151).[16] Secondly, since the study was conducted online, faith leaders with weak technological skills may have been unlikely to participate, including faith leaders who did not organize online services or did so with more difficulty than enthusiasm. Therefore, the relative positivity about religion online may be characteristic only of technologically competent faith leaders. Thirdly, the especially low response rate among Catholic priests raises questions about whether the survey may have failed to pick up on more pessimistic readings of the pandemic, which may relate to the Catholic Church's especially sharp decline in the Republic since the 1990s. Such sentiments were captured in remarks by the then-Archbishop of Dublin, who, in November 2020, warned that 'Many whose attendance at church services before the pandemic was fragile will never return to public worship' (Gleeson 2020). Finally, the survey was promoted and distributed via ICC/IICM, so it is likely to have attracted responses from faith leaders sympathetic to their work. Moderate and ecumenically inclined perspectives may be over-represented. Finally, my own identities may affect my interpretation of the results. I am part of a Presbyterian congregation in Northern Ireland, and this is an action research project, designed and carried out in partnership with ecumenical church bodies. That means I may be especially attuned to findings that seem useful or encouraging for the churches.

5. Results

While the study covered four areas, here my analysis focuses on moving religion online, and the key finding that clergy framed this as an opportunity, even beyond the pandemic. Decades of international, pre-pandemic research on digital religion confirms that advocates of online ministries also have framed them in terms of opportunities for evangelization, discipleship, renewal and so on. What is different about the pandemic context in Ireland is that many, if not most, clergy would have spent very little time thinking about or using online ministries prior to lockdown. In contrast, many previous studies of digital religion have focused on the experiences of enthusiasts or early adopters of digital religion (Hutchings 2017).

5.1. Survey Results

This section outlines survey findings about the scale of provision of religion online during the pandemic, enthusiasm for religion online, and misgivings about religion online.

5.2. Provision of Religion Online

In the Republic, Government restrictions stated that places of worship must close for public gatherings from mid-March 2020, although they could remain open for private prayer. In Northern Ireland, places of worship closed from the end of March and private prayer in religious buildings was not permitted. The survey was conducted less than two months after these closures, so churches were still closed for public worship. The speed and scale of religion's move online was remarkable: 87 percent of faith communities were providing online worship opportunities during the pandemic, up from 56 percent before the pandemic. In some denominations, the increase in online provision was spectacular: Methodists increased from 25 percent to 90 percent; Church of Ireland from 24 percent to 88 percent; and Presbyterians from 48 percent to 98 percent. Table 1 below details those changes, with N indicating the total number of respondents in each category. The question allowed respondents to specify the types of services provided, including livestreaming, recorded service or sermons, other, or no services (these have been combined in the table for ease of comparison). Prior to the pandemic, Catholic dioceses and Religious were much more likely to have livestreaming, which was very rare among Protestant congregations. This may be due to the traditional Catholic stance that attendance at Sunday mass is an 'obligation', with livestreaming facilitating that for shut-ins and the gravely ill. There is an anomaly in that provision of online worship by Catholic Religious declined during the pandemic; this seems to be due to a decrease in 'other' options, which were not specified, rather than livestreaming options.

Table 1. Provision of online worship by denomination, before and during the pandemic.

Faith Community	Online Worship before Pandemic	Online Worship during Pandemic
All (N = 439)	56%	87%
Catholic Diocesan (N = 101)	62%	82%
Catholic Religious (N = 52)	79%	65%
Church of Ireland (N = 79)	24%	88%
Presbyterian (N = 63)	48%	98%
Methodist (N = 40)	25%	90%
Other (N = 104)	58%	93%

There also were substantial changes in who was responsible for online worship and outreach. Before the pandemic, 'no one' was responsible among 31 percent of our respondents' faith communities. During the pandemic, just 7 percent of faith communities had 'no one' responsible. There are differences between denominations in terms of the extent that responsibilities have fallen to clergy, or to some combination of clergy/paid staff/volunteers or paid staff/volunteers (see Table 2). Before the pandemic, the most likely denominations to have no one responsible were Church of Ireland (39 percent), Methodist (38 percent) and Presbyterian (35 percent). However, during the pandemic, Catholics were more likely to have no one responsible. During the pandemic, Church of Ireland (40 percent) and Presbyterian (30 percent) ministers have been most likely to be solely responsible for online worship/outreach. Methodist (71 percent) and Presbyterian (65 percent) ministers have been most likely to be responsible alongside other paid staff and volunteers. While these figures confirm increased responsibilities for clergy, they also indicate an increase in lay volunteerism for online ministries.

Table 2. Responsible for online worship/outreach before and during the pandemic.[17]

Faith Community	Me Only	Me, Other Paid Staff, and Volunteers	Other Paid Staff and Volunteers	Other	No One
All (before)	12%	40%	10%	8%	31%
All (during)	22%	55%	7%	9%	7%
Catholic Diocesan (before)	8%	44%	8%	10%	30%
Catholic Diocesan (during)	21%	49%	7%	12%	11%
Catholic Religious (before)	17%	27%	34%	0%	23%
Catholic Religious (during)	13%	33%	35%	2%	17%
Church of Ireland (before)	22%	25%	6%	4%	39%
Church of Ireland (during)	40%	45%	8%	0%	6%
Presbyterian (before)	13%	41%	2%	0%	35%
Presbyterian (during)	30%	65%	2%	3%	0%
Methodist (before)	13%	39%	10%	0%	38%
Methodist (during)	21%	71%	3%	0%	5%
Other (before)	8%	49%	16%	0%	27%
Other (during)	10%	64%	21%	1%	5%

When we asked faith leaders if they would retain aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings lifted, 70 percent said yes. This included 15 percent who said they would retain all of them and 55 percent who said they would retain some of them. Twenty-one percent said they did not know and only nine percent said that they would not retain any.

5.3. Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm for online ministries was apparent in the write-in answers. Many faith leaders perceived an increase in religious practice during the pandemic, linked to moving services online. Almost all reported higher numbers of people engaging online than would normally attend their in-person services. A Catholic priest admitted, 'I was taken by pleasant surprise at the demand for online streaming of Mass,' while a Church of Ireland minister said:

> The feedback [on online worship] has been heart-warming. The numbers of people we have engaged with online have been frankly astonishing. The opportunities for imaginative liturgy are remarkable.

Faith leaders also reported that people were praying more. This was striking, because the survey did not ask specifically about prayer. Some noted that people who had not engaged with their church before were accessing services, and that some of those had been 'saved'. A minister from the Free Presbyterian Church, an evangelical denomination, wrote about 'feedback from internet broadcasts and news of precious souls being saved as a result of meetings under difficult circumstances', while several Presbyterians noted 'hearing of people who come to trust in Jesus as their saviour' through online ministries.

Accordingly, when asked what lessons faith communities should learn from the pandemic, many wrote about continuing online ministries. As a non-denominational minister put it: 'Be online, prepare for more online'; while a Methodist conceived of online ministry as evangelization: 'Online presence is important for those who may never enter our churches'.

5.4. Misgivings

A few faith leaders expressed misgivings about online ministries. A Church of Ireland minister put it starkly: 'Online worship isn't "real", and it should not be embraced, but critically examined.' Some Catholic priests expressed frustration that the move online meant that people could not receive the Sacraments. One priest said the bishops should have challenged Government restrictions on public gatherings, lamenting that they had 'let people think reception of Holy Communion and absolution could be so easily designated as unimportant.' Others noted an unhealthy 'competition' had arisen around who could produce the best online services, which demoralized those without good technical skills or access to specialized equipment. Some noted digital divides, and how those without skills or access could be left behind.

In sum, the survey revealed the sheer scale with which Ireland's faith leaders embraced online ministries; a desire to continue online ministries after the pandemic; and the extent to which faith leaders had been primarily responsible for this shift, or assisted by others. The write-in questions on the survey allowed faith leaders to express enthusiasm for online ministries, with some also voicing misgivings.

5.5. Interview Results

This section outlines interview findings around how clergy framed moving religion online as an opportunity, the importance of volunteers for moving religion online, and misgivings about religion online. Clergy are identified only by their denomination, because other identifying characteristics such as age or gender (in some cases) could compromise anonymity.[18]

5.6. Religion Online as Opportunity

Surprisingly large numbers of people accessing online services caused clergy to think about these ministries as opportunities for discipleship of the faithful, and evangelization for those outside the fold. A Church of Ireland minister initially thought he would end online ministries once lockdowns ceased, but 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 in-house. . . . 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 [while accessing online services] 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.

Similarly, a Catholic priest expressed bewilderment at the popularity of online Mass:

> It's a phenomenon which I can't grasp. I'm told up to 1000 used to come in on this thing for us, you see. Really? What are they doing?

He then 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 ... 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.

Clergy tried their best to interpret the unexpectedly high numbers accessing services, acknowledging that 'views' can be deceptive, because people may not be engaging in depth or staying on for a full service. Some reported a sort of online church tourism, where they were aware of visitors from other parishes/congregations in Ireland or abroad who accessed services, sometimes multiple times on the same day. As a Methodist explained:

> [I think] that it 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 ... I wish it were different, but there's no clear evidence that there's hundreds of people looking to join the church.

A Presbyterian had a similar interpretation, although he was more optimistic that online services could attract people 'on the fringe':

> It's obviously easier to go online: you can still be in your pyjamas 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 sum, most interviewees felt the relatively high numbers could be accounted for by an intensification of faith among the already committed, such as those who attended services pre-pandemic but now tuned in for extra services during the week; 'tourism' among the already committed, who were curious about what other churches were doing; and people on the 'fringes' or who had 'lapsed' tuning in to see what services were like without having to take the more difficult step of attending in-person. At the same time, clergy talked about online ministries as opportunities to encourage their own and to reach out to others beyond their faith communities.

5.7. Volunteering for Religion Online

> Interviewees confirmed the survey finding that volunteers had been essential for moving religion online. For this Catholic priest, whose parish did not have a webcam before the pandemic, volunteer support was vital:

> 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 [online for the first time].

A Catholic bishop confirmed this trend:

> 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.

Interviewees also described how they accessed denominational resources or training for online ministries, shared tips with colleagues, or availed of resources from other organizations such as the Evangelical Alliance.[19]

5.8. Misgivings about Religion Online

Some clergy expressed reservations about moving religion online. They 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 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.

During an interview with a pastor from the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a denomination of Nigerian origin whose members are primarily immigrants or second-generation, we lost our internet connection just as he was explaining 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. . . . We experience all these things and we say, I can't hear you, I'm disconnected. You've witnessed it here too.

At the same time, some clergy deliberately chose not to go online. A Presbyterian 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 pyjamas at church on Sunday morning.

His thoughts were echoed by a Catholic priest whose parish offered online services, despite his misgivings:

> I still have reservations about kind of language that even Catholic bishops are using: 'the 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.

In sum, clergy framed moving religion online as an opportunity to connect in new ways with their flocks and the society around them. Moving religion online also sparked a wave of lay volunteerism, as those with expertise assisted with technical aspects. Some misgivings were expressed, and no one argued that online ministries should replace in-person gatherings.

6. Discussion

'Unprecedented' has been an overused word during pandemic times. However, it seems an appropriate descriptor of the Irish clergy's embrace of religion online. Lockdown forced Irish churches online, but most clergy now profess that they plan to use blended online and in-person approaches to ministry, even when all restrictions are lifted. Their enthusiasm has been driven by a perception that online ministries have facilitated a renewed

interest in religion, intensifying the commitment of stalwarts and even reaching those on the fringes of faith. Studies of religion during lockdown in Ireland, the UK and around the world seem to confirm increased interest in religion, or at least spirituality. Indeed, the clergy I spoke with were often aware of the results of these surveys, which may have fed into some of their more optimistic assessments of the future.

Norris and Inglehart's evolutionary modernization theory claims that people are more likely to turn to religion in periods of heightened physical and existential insecurity: in short, conditions such as those created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Societies with relatively high levels of religiosity and recent histories of trauma also may be more likely to embrace religion during such times. It could be argued that Ireland fits these criteria; although there is some countervailing evidence that even Ireland has reached a 'tipping point' in which secularization may no longer be slowed or reversed.[20] How long the pandemic continues to provoke higher levels of physical and existential insecurity remains to be seen, and doubtless depends on government policies, including the effective roll-out of vaccines and efforts to alleviate inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. It is not yet clear if increased interest in religion will be fleeting, or longer lasting, in Ireland and elsewhere. It also should be noted that the potential embrace of religion can be narrowly or broadly conceived. A narrowly conceived revitalization of religion is when the faith of the committed is intensified or transformed in some way; while a more broadly conceived revival would include new converts. In recent decades, examples of narrowly conceived vitality have been more common in Western societies, and often rather fleeting (Bruce 2020).

We cannot predict the future course of the pandemic or government responses to it. So, it seems rather fruitless to speculate on how much these external, macro-level forces will affect physical and existential security and thus have knock-on effects on the fortunes of Ireland's churches. However, we can analyse how the churches are negotiating the present context. As Joas (2014, p. 46) has reminded us, seeming exceptions to decline during previous 'waves' of secularization may be explained by 'superior feats of institutional adaptation to changing conditions'. Accordingly, it is significant that Irish clergy are speaking of the development of online ministries as opportunities for renewal and to contribute positively to the societies they see secularizing around them. If they understand online ministries as potential sites of religious revitalization, they are more likely to invest in them, thereby accelerating a transformation of religion from something primarily events-based (Sunday in a building) to something spread across multiple virtual and in-person networks (see Osteen and Campbell 2020). This wider reaching, holistic approach to religion may fit more effectively in Ireland's increasingly networked societies. Conversely, declines in vocations and church attendance may mean Ireland's churches lack the human resources to facilitate such a transformation. This is where the evidence of increased volunteerism potentially becomes significant. There are some hints that Irish laity have mobilized well, comparatively speaking: in Ireland, clergy are solely responsible for online ministries in 22 percent of faith communities, while in Scotland 42 percent of clergy are solely responsible (Brendan Research 2021, p. 14). Given the scale of the enterprise, a revitalization of religion seems more likely if a critical mass of laity become co-producers, and not merely consumers, of religion online. In addition, my research found some evidence of increased ecumenical cooperation, especially through national level inter-church organizations. While a full discussion of this finding is beyond the scope of this article, it reflects a growing willingness for the churches to work together in responding to pressing social and political issues. Ecumenical sharing of resources and expertise may enhance churches' ability to participate in the public sphere, even in secularizing societies.

Of course, Irish clergy's rather optimistic framing of the situation as an 'opportunity' may in part be attributed to the limitations of the survey and interview samples. Since it is likely that clergy with technical skills completed the online survey, their competence may contribute to their enthusiasm. This, coupled with the low response rate among Catholic priests, may mean that alternative framings of the pandemic have been overlooked. While some clergy expressed misgivings about moving religion online, perhaps others might have

said more about the possibilities that people will not return to regular churchgoing after the pandemic, and that watching services online will foster an individualized, superficial, non-participatory faith that easily evaporates. Indeed, the Iona Institute's August 2020 survey found that up to one in five Catholics may not return to mass when the pandemic ends. Both the Belfast Telegraph and Irish Catholic newspapers framed this finding as 'a wake-up call' (Harte 2020; Brady 2020). Such reluctance to return to church after the pandemic may signal an acceleration of secularization, prompted by the loss of the 'habit', deaths of elderly churchgoers, and, in contexts where immigrants have higher levels of religiosity, pandemic-related declines in immigration (Bullivant 2020). Churches also have experienced losses in revenue. Passing the collection plate has not translated so easily to online giving: Catholic priests in Dublin have had a 25 percent pay cut (Mac Donald 2020). Lack of financial resources may contribute to the closure or clustering of parishes and congregations, leading to demoralization.

This research also is limited in that it does not include the perspectives of laity, who may have different—less positive—experiences of moving faith online. This is suggested in Byrne and Sweetman's (2021) survey among laity in Ireland, discussed above. Further research should be carried out in Ireland to explore laity's perspectives in more depth. Finally, more cross-national comparisons of the experiences of moving faith online during the pandemic (among both clergy and laity) should be conducted. Pre-pandemic research suggests differences in the way religion is practised online between countries with 'clear secular traditions' and those where religion retains a stronger influence on public life. Digital religion is more likely to be 'used to exchange ideas' in the former and 'more often used for information and interpretation of the official position of religious institutions' in the latter (Bógdał-Brzezińska 2020, p. 190). So, the relative strength of religious institutions across contexts may be a key variable to consider in further research about moving religion online during the pandemic. Such cross-national comparisons may reveal differences in the extent that moving religion online during the pandemic has been interpreted as accelerating secularization, or as an opportunity to revitalize religion.

Notes

1. Individuals, churches or organizations can become members of Evangelical Alliance, which has branches in the Republic and Northern Ireland. Most members are from Protestant denominations and the use of their resources was mentioned by Protestant ministers in Northern Ireland.
2. See the Republic and Northern Ireland's positions on Inglehart's (2021, pp. 31–36) global cultural maps. Over time, Ireland looks more similar to other, more secular English-speaking countries.
3. With the 'no religion' trend increasing, it is possible that in the next Census (scheduled for April 2021 but postponed to 2022 due to the pandemic) more people will choose this option. The Census question about religion also is expected to change in a way that may encourage people to identify according to practice rather than background.
4. For discussion of these and other attendance figures from the European Social Survey, see O'Mahony (2013). The 2016 figure is from the European Social Survey.
5. Monthly attendance figures from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. See also Hayes and Dowds (2010).

6   The 'highly religious' index combined self-assessment of religion's importance in one's life, attendance, frequency of prayer, and belief in God, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/ (accessed on 7 April 2021).

7   These are the surveys referenced: The Iona Institute, a Catholic advocacy group based in Dublin, commissioned nationally representative polls, carried out by Amarach Research: April 2020, August 2020, November 2020, March 2021. Results of the polls can be found in press releases at https://ionainstitute.ie/ (accessed on 4 June 2021). Iona also provided me with full results of the polls. Other survey results can be found: Christian Aid, https://mediacentre.christianaid.org.uk/embargo-0900am-sunday-10-may-2020brits-praying-for-end-to-coronavirus-crisis-for-frontline-workers-and-the-worlds-poor-new-poll-reveals/ (accessed on 16 March 2021); Tearfund, https://comresglobal.com/polls/tearfund-covid-19-prayer-public-omnibus-research/ (accessed on 16 March 2021); Catholic Voices/York St John University, https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/CC&Y-survey-initial-report.pdf (accessed on 4 June 2021); Durham University, https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/digitaltheology/PressReleasereOnlineChurch.pdf (accessed on 4 June 2021); Theos/YouGov, https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2020/08/06/religious-trends-in-a-time-of-international-crisis (accessed on 4 June 2021); Dublin City University/Mater Dei Institute, https://www.dcu.ie/materdei-centre-catholic-education/adult-religious-education-and-faith-development-research-project (accessed on 4 June 2021); Scottish churches (carried out by Brendan Research), file:///C:/Users/bango/Downloads/The%20Scottish%20Church%20and%20the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic.pdf (accessed on 4 June 2021).

8   The Theos poll was nationally representative and included Northern Ireland. I have not included separate results from Northern Ireland because its sample size was just 54.

9   The March 2021 survey asked, 'Since the new lockdown began in late December have you watched the Mass or any other religious services online, on TV or listened to it on the radio?' Churches were open in Ireland over Christmas and limited numbers attended in person, with the 'new' lockdown starting just days after Christmas. Some people may have accessed Christmas services online/TV/radio and included this in their response, even if Christmas did not occur during the 'new' lockdown. It is impossible to be certain, but this may explain the higher figure.

10   Campbell's use of stages has a chronological logic, so my focus on the last two does some violence to her approach. Campbell's first two stages are gaining understandings of religious communities' traditions of 'community, authority, and textual engagement'; and identifying 'core values' that influence faith communities' 'beliefs about media' (Campbell 2016, p. 20). As faith communities that moved online during the pandemic consider if or how they will retain online ministries after lockdown, more research should be carried out to understand how the first two stages influence their decisions.

11   See CONTOC, https://contoc.org/de/contoc/ and BRIC-19, https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk/ (accessed on 4 June 2021).

12   The Irish Council of Churches is the island's main ecumenical body for Protestant, Orthodox, Reformed and Independent Church traditions. The Irish Inter Church Meeting is an ecumenical structure that facilitates meetings between the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference.

13   This article uses the language of 'faith leader' and 'clergy'. When the language of clergy is used, it refers to ordained Christian clergy. When 'faith leader' is used, it refers to the broader categorization described in the text.

14   For more detail on methods see (Ganiel 2020, pp. 7–8).

15   The population of the Republic is 4.75 million and the population of Northern Ireland is 1.85 million.

16   I wish to acknowledge the experiences of people of other faiths. As a Buddhist wrote on the survey: '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'.

17   In the Republic, churches re-opened for public worship in late June 2020. They were closed completely for public worship again after Christmas 2020 until early May 2021, in response to a resurgent virus. In Northern Ireland, churches re-opened in late June 2020. They closed for a two-week period in November 2020 as part of a wider societal effort to stem coronavirus cases, re-opening again until Christmas. They closed again after Christmas until early April 2021, just in time for Good Friday and Easter services. The earlier opening in Northern Ireland reflected a more widespread vaccine roll-out. All re-openings have included restrictions on the numbers that can attend and social distancing measures. In some parishes and congregations, online booking systems for in-person services were put in place.

18   Byrne and Sweetman's results should be interpreted cautiously, because the sample was not representative and included just 124 clergy.

19   For ease of comprehension, choices from the survey have been combined. For example, 'Me, other paid staff and volunteers' includes the categories of 'Me and other paid staff', 'Me and volunteers', and 'Me, other paid staff and volunteers'. 'Other paid staff and volunteers' includes the categories of 'other paid staff', 'volunteers', and 'other paid staff and volunteers'.

20   In some cases, masculine pronouns are used, i.e., with Catholic priests or when I was certain it would not compromise anonymity. The numbers of female ministers on the island are so small that indicating age and gender for every quotation could compromise anonymity.

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