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COVID-19 and religious practice in Northern Ireland

Gladys Ganiel and Chris Morris

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for religious change across societies (Lefebvre and Ricucci, 2021). Religion's roles have changed in three main ways: 1) increased interaction between faith leaders and policymakers on issues related to the pandemic such as the closure and re-opening of religious buildings, regulations about funerals, and so on; 2) increased public visibility of religion in debates around health and science, including faith-based discourses both for and against lockdown measures and vaccines; and 3) an increase in forms of 'virtual' religious practice, prompted by a widespread and rapid move to online religious services during lockdowns. The sense of crisis sparked by the pandemic has led to an intensification of religiosity in some cases (Boguszewski et al., 2020; Molteni et al., 2020); while on the other hand there are indications that some who stopped attending religious services during the pandemic may not return when restrictions ease. In the Republic of Ireland, polls commissioned by the Iona Institute (September 2020 and August 2021) found that one in five of those who attended mass before the pandemic do not know if they will return.

In Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, churches responded to the first lockdown in March 2020 by moving online with remarkable speed and enthusiasm (Ganiel, 2020; 2021a; 2021b). Before the pandemic, 50 per cent of churches in Northern Ireland provided some form of online services; two months into the first lockdown 92 per cent were providing online services. Moreover, 73 per cent of clergy anticipated retaining at least some aspects of their online ministries once all restrictions had eased. On the island as a whole, 56 per cent of clergy reported that their churches provided online services before the pandemic, rising to 87 per cent during the pandemic. Seventy per cent of clergy agreed they would retain aspects of online ministry after the pandemic (Ganiel, 2021b).

This Research Update explores religious practice in Northern Ireland during COVID-19. Using data from the 2020 *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey, it focuses on how people practised religion 'virtually' during the pandemic – by accessing services on the internet, TV or radio.

A secularising society

Northern Ireland retains higher levels of religious practice and belief than almost all other societies in Western Europe, and church leaders remain visible in debates in the public sphere. But even so, it can be argued that Northern Ireland is experiencing secularisation: attendance at religious services has been declining, more people are choosing to identify as having no religion, and the churches' influence on societal debates has decreased. As Hayes and Dowds (2010) noted, by the 2000s frequent, weekly church attendance had declined, replaced by more sporadic patterns of practice. People were not necessarily abandoning church altogether, but they were certainly attending less often. NILT data show that between 2000 and 2019, monthly (or more) rates of attendance among Protestants have held steady but have dropped sharply among Catholics – albeit starting from a higher base (Table 1). The percentage of NILT respondents identifying as no religion increased from 11 per cent in 2000 to 20 per cent in 2019.

Table 1: Church attendance by year

	% attending once a month or more				
	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Catholic	76	73	64	57	46
Protestant	45	58	48	50	47

Changed conditions

Previous editions of NILT were administered via face-to-face interviews. In 2020, due to the pandemic, 95 per cent of the 1,292 responses were gathered with an online questionnaire, and 5 per cent by telephone or Microsoft Teams interview. So, it is no surprise that in 2020, 94 per cent of respondents indicated they had access to the internet, as compared to 78 per cent in 2019. In addition, in 2020, 20 per cent of respondents were aged 65 or over, compared to 33 per cent in 2019, indicating that the survey may not have reached older people without online access. This doubtless had some impact on responses to the question about attending services on the internet. Percentages of those accessing services may appear higher than they were, because those without internet access would have struggled to attend online services, although they might have accessed TV and radio options.

Practising religion virtually

Respondents were asked, ‘Since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, how often did you attend religious services on the internet, TV or radio?’. Protestants were more likely than Catholics to have availed of these options, with 40 per cent attending two to three times per month or more, compared to 27 per cent of Catholics (Table 2).

Rural Protestants were the most likely to attend services, with 48 per cent accessing them two or three times per month or more, followed by urban Protestants at 34 per cent, rural Catholics at 30 per cent and urban Catholics at 25 per cent (Table 3).

Respondents also were asked about their attendance prior to the pandemic. Forty five per cent of Catholics and 53 per cent of Protestants indicated they attended monthly or more before COVID-19. For Catholics, this figure is in line with church attendance in the 2019 NILT (46%), but it is six percentage points higher than 2019 among Protestants. As such, it appears that the 2020 survey included disproportionately more churchgoing Protestants than in previous years.

Unsurprisingly, pre-pandemic attenders were more likely to access online, TV and radio options. Among pre-pandemic

Table 2: Virtual Attendance during COVID-19

	% attending by internet, TV or radio	
	Catholic	Protestant
More than once a week	8	14
Once a week	13	20
2 or 3 times a week	6	6
At least 2 or 3 times a week	27	40
Once a month or less	14	12
Not at all	57	47
Don't know	2	1

Table 3: Virtual attendance during COVID-19, by urban/rural status

	% attending by internet, TV or radio			
	Catholic		Protestant	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
2-3 times per month	30	26	48	34
Less frequently	17	12	10	13
Not at all	51	61	41	52
Don't know	2	2	1	1

Table 4: Virtual attendance during COVID-19, by pre-pandemic attendance

	% attending by internet, TV or radio			
	Catholic		Protestant	
	Frequent before COVID	Not frequent before COVID	Frequent before COVID	Not frequent before COVID
2-3 times per month	56	5	72	4
Less frequently	13	14	11	14
Not at all	29	79	17	82
Don't know	2	2	<0.5	1

attenders, 56 per cent of Catholics and 72 per cent of Protestants accessed these options two or three times per month, or more (Table 4). We consider monthly pre-pandemic attendance ‘frequent’. However, in the question about virtual attendance, people were not given a once per month option, so the before and after figures are not exactly comparing like-for-like.

Moreover, five per cent of Catholics and four per cent of Protestants who

were not frequent attenders before the pandemic indicated they were now availing of online, TV or radio options two or three times per month or more. This may include some people who could not attend church previously due to health reasons, but it also could indicate a small but nonetheless notable percentage of the population (a combined nine per cent of those who identify as Catholic and Protestant) who turned to religion during the pandemic.

People over 45 years old were more likely to access online, TV or radio services. In addition, younger Protestants were more enthusiastic about practising virtual religion than younger Catholics during COVID. Due to small numbers, we have combined the 18-24 and 25-34 year age groups. Among Protestants, 40 per cent of 18-34 year olds reported frequent (two to three times per month or more) attendance, compared to 12 per cent of Catholics in the same age group (Table 5). At the same time, the figures for young people are higher among both Protestants and Catholics than in the Republic of Ireland, where Breen and Macmillan (2020) found that less than three per cent of 18-25 year olds accessed virtual services.

Table 5: Virtual attendance during COVID-19, by age

	Age group	Frequent church attendance during COVID
Catholic	18-34	12
	35-44	18
	45-54	29
	55-64	28
	65+	65
Protestant	18-34	40
	35-44	27
	45-54	34
	55-64	42
	65+	51

Discussion

People attend religious services for a variety of reasons, from the spiritual to the social. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person attendance, but people in Northern Ireland were presented with a range of virtual attendance options on the internet, TV and radio. Attendance, in both its in-person and virtual varieties, cannot tell us the full story about people’s religiosity. But the extent that people availed of virtual options tells us something about how they practised their religion during the pandemic.

Among Protestants, virtual attendance mirrored pre-pandemic patterns, albeit at somewhat lower levels. In the 2019 NILT, 47 per cent of Protestants attended monthly or more, while 40 per cent of Protestants accessed virtual services two or three times per month or more during

the pandemic. For Catholics, there was a greater difference: 46 per cent attended monthly in the 2019 NILT, compared to 27 per cent virtually (two to three times per month or more). Moreover, 72 per cent of Protestants who attended regularly before the pandemic accessed virtual options, compared to 56 per cent of Catholics. Except for people over 65 years old, Protestants were more likely to access virtual services across all age groups. In addition, a combined nine per cent of those who identify as Catholic and Protestant but were not regular attenders before the pandemic accessed virtual services two to three times per month or more during it.

Some of the differences in virtual practice between Protestants and Catholics may be explained by theological emphases: the preaching/teaching

focus of a Protestant service may be more compatible with virtual mediums than the eucharistic focus of a Catholic mass, which is centred on receiving the bread and wine. During the pandemic the Catholic bishops suspended the ‘obligation’ to attend Sunday mass. But they also encouraged the ‘act of spiritual communion’, which could be achieved while accessing virtual services.

Further research is necessary to fully explore the reasons behind the different patterns of virtual attendance among Protestants and Catholics. It also remains to be seen whether in-person levels of church attendance will return to their pre-pandemic levels once all restrictions ease, to what extent churches will continue to offer blended online and in-person service options, and how this may change religious practice going forward.

Key Points:

- During the pandemic, 'virtual' religious attendance (internet, TV or radio) mirrored pre-pandemic levels among Protestants, albeit at somewhat lower levels.
- In 2019, 47% of Protestants attended monthly or more, while 40% of Protestants accessed virtual services two to three times per month or more during the pandemic.
- Catholics were less likely to access virtual services compared to pre-pandemic patterns of attendance: 46% attended monthly in 2019, compared to 27% virtually (two to three times per month or more) in 2020.
- 72% of Protestants who attended regularly before the pandemic accessed virtual options two to three times per month or more, compared to 56 per cent of Catholics.
- Younger Protestants were much more likely than younger Catholics to record frequent church attendance during the pandemic.
- 9% of those who identify as Catholic and Protestant but were not regular attenders before the pandemic accessed virtual services two to three times per month or more during it.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2020, 1,292 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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