



MAY 2020

PEOPLE STILL NEED US

A Report on a Survey of Faith Leaders
on the Island of Ireland
during the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Dr Gladys Ganiel
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Churches
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‘People Still Need Us’:

**A Report on a Survey of Faith Leaders on
the Island of Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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Introduction

‘People still need us.’ These are the words of a Catholic Religious, responding to a ‘write-in’ question about what lessons faith communities should learn from ministering through the Covid-19 pandemic. It succinctly summarizes the main insights of the survey: faith leaders and communities have not only played important roles in providing pastoral care and social services during the pandemic, but there is also evidence of increased prayer and surprisingly high levels of online religious practice among people on the island of Ireland.

During the pandemic, clergy and religious staff have been designated as ‘key workers’ by both the Irish and the UK Governments, signaling their important role in burying the dead, comforting the grieving, and providing focal points for communities. At the same time, in the interest of public safety, severe restrictions have been placed on the everyday practice of faith. Church buildings have been closed for religious services, so people cannot meet for worship or funerals in the usual ways. (Churches were permitted to remain open for private prayer in the Republic of Ireland but were completely closed in Northern Ireland until 20 May 2020.) Most religious services and pastoral care have moved online.

The results of this survey provide us with a snapshot of how faith leaders and communities are adapting in a time of rapid and disorientating change. They show us how people of faith are grieving, coping, moving religion online and serving the wider community. They also allow us to see how faith leaders are coping with the stresses of ministry.

The survey was distributed to more than 2,000 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 1 percent ‘Other’ religion.

Given that Catholicism is by far the largest Christian tradition on the island, with 78 percent of the population in the Republic and 45 percent in Northern Ireland identifying as Catholic, it is immediately obvious that Protestants are over-represented among our respondents. In addition, 55 percent of the responses came from the Republic of Ireland while 45 percent were from Northern Ireland, indicating a greater proportional response from Northern Ireland, given its smaller population. The greater response from Northern Ireland also correlates with the greater proportion of Protestant traditions that responded to the survey. In addition, 21 percent of respondents were women, indicating that female faith leaders – 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.

Key Findings:

Pastoral Care

82 percent of faith leaders who are cocooning for age or underlying health conditions have continued their ministry.

89 percent of faith leaders said that faith had helped people cope with stress during the pandemic. They provided examples of people praying more and people who had previously demonstrated no interest in faith or religion tuning in to religious services or seeking prayer.

Religion Online

Before the pandemic, 44 percent of faith communities did not provide online worship opportunities; now only 13 percent of faith communities do not provide these opportunities. There were significant denominational differences, with Protestant churches much less likely to have provided online worship opportunities prior to the pandemic: no services were provided by 76 percent of Church of Ireland, 75 percent of Methodist, and 52 percent of Presbyterian communities. Now, Presbyterians are the most likely to have some sort of online provision, with just two percent reporting no online services.

71 percent of faith communities have provided their members with other opportunities for online fellowship during the pandemic, including the use of Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, Youtube, etc for activities such as prayer meetings, bible studies, youth groups, children's and youth groups, book clubs, coffee mornings, afternoon teas, novenas, quizzes, question and answer sessions, marriage courses, retreats, spiritual direction, membership classes, and more.

Before the pandemic, 'no one' was responsible for online worship/outreach among 31 percent of faith communities; now that figure is just 7 percent. Before the pandemic, the most likely denominations to have no one responsible were Church of Ireland (39%), Methodist (38%) and Presbyterian (35%). But during the pandemic, Catholics were more likely to have no one responsible, at 17% for Religious and 7% for diocesan (parish level). Now, there are no Presbyterian congregations reporting that no one is responsible, with Methodists at 5% and Church of Ireland at 6%.

70 percent of respondents agreed that they would retain aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings are lifted, including 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 just nine percent said that they would not retain any online aspects. In 'write-in' questions, faith leaders described how blending online and in-person ministries could enhance religious practice in the future.

Social Services and the Wider Community

74 percent of faith communities from the largest denominations – Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist – were providing social services to the wider community during the pandemic.

Among those providing services, 42 percent said their services had increased, 33 percent had stayed the same, and just 25 percent had decreased their services, demonstrating resiliency in challenging times.

Stress and Ministry

Forty-six percent of faith leaders said their ministry had been more stressful than usual, 33 percent said the stress had been ‘about the same’, and 21 percent said it had been less stressful than usual. Methodists (58%) were most likely to say their ministry had been more stressful than usual, while Catholic Religious (34%) were most likely to say their ministry had been less stressful than usual.

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

The most stressful experiences for faith leaders during the pandemic have been: comforting those bereaved by Covid-19, comforting those bereaved of other causes, conducting funerals, ‘feeling guilty that I am not doing enough to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic’, learning new skills for online ministry, and balancing work and life. Twenty-nine percent of faith leaders would like further information or support about how to cope with stress during the pandemic.

‘People Still Need Us’

The survey included ‘write-in’ questions that enabled faith leaders to make these points:

Faith leaders observed increases in prayer and in (online) religious practice, improved interaction with people, new opportunities for pastoral care, new appreciation for faith leaders among laity, greater lay involvement, greater opportunities for service, and more time and space for themselves.

Faith leaders also indicated that the pandemic has revealed that ‘faith matters’, not just for faith communities themselves but for wider society; churches should not be preoccupied with keeping buildings open; faith communities are facing severe financial challenges; future ministries must blend online and in-person aspects; there are significant limitations to online ministries; lifestyles should be re-evaluated and changed; and ministry should be a team effort, including greater involvement from laity. Faith leaders also raised concerns about Government and church leadership during the pandemic.

About the Survey

The survey is a collaboration between Queen's University and the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting (ICC/IICM). The principal investigator at Queen's, Gladys Ganiel, worked with the General Secretary of the ICC, Nicola Brady, and representatives of member denominations to develop the survey questions.

The survey was distributed to more than 2,000 faith leaders via a direct email and remained open between 6 and 22 May 2020. Most clergy, ministers, and faith leaders were emailed on our behalf by their denominational headquarters, their bishop, or their Religious Order or Congregation. This process was coordinated by Brady and Damian Jackson, Programme Officer for the ICC, and included the ICC/IICM member churches: the island's four largest denominations – the Catholic Church, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church, and Methodist Church; as well as the Antiochian Orthodox Church, Cherubim and Seraphim, Greek Orthodox Church, Indian Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church, Moravian Church, Non Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and the Salvation Army. Leaders of some Christian denominations outside the ICC/IICM were reached through the email list of Evangelical Alliance (Republic of Ireland). It also was distributed to religions other than Christianity through the Dublin City Inter-Faith Forum, the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum and the Community Faiths Forum (Northern Ireland).

There was uneven distribution of the survey by the denominations. Some bishops or central offices opted not to send the survey to their faith leaders, due to pastoral concerns about high workloads and heavy administrative burdens. In other cases, surveys may have been sent to parish or congregational email addresses that were not monitored at the time, due to support staff being furloughed, which likely lowered response rates.

The survey was distributed to serving ministers by the central offices of the Presbyterian Church (357 ministers, response rate 18 percent) and Methodist Church (109 ministers, response rate 37 percent). Within the Church of Ireland, the survey was distributed among clergy in 10 of 12 dioceses (328 ministers, response rate 24 percent). Within 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. We cannot calculate the response rate among Religious. More Religious returned the survey than we have a record of being sent the survey, so it is possible that Religious forwarded it amongst themselves or that we did not receive a full account of its distribution.

A number of the island's small denominations are not affiliated with the ICC/IICM or these other organizations. We contacted leaders in the following denominations after identifying more than 350 publicly available email addresses associated with an individual pastor or congregation: Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland, the Elim Pentecostal Church, the Free Presbyterian Church, Christian Churches Ireland (formerly Assemblies of God), the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and Vineyard Churches. We could not calculate accurate response rates for the 'Other' category, which

included these as well as the smaller denominations associated with ICC and Evangelical Alliance, due to potential inconsistencies in the way people identified their denomination/faith community in the 'Other' category.

Taken together, this means that the results should be considered indicative rather than representative. We can speak with most confidence about the results for denominations with higher response rates, particularly Methodist and Church of Ireland.

To protect anonymity, individual responses in the text below are identified by denomination/faith community and whether their faith community is located in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland.

Pastoral Care

Above all, the pandemic has been a human tragedy in terms of the scale of illness and death. Because burying the dead and providing pastoral care to the ill and the bereaved are among their main duties, faith leaders have been on the front lines in responding to this tragedy. This section considers pastoral care through the lenses of ministry while cocooning, conducting funerals, changes in pastoral care, and coping and praying.

Ministry while Cocooning

Faith leaders themselves are among those most vulnerable to the pandemic, given its disproportionate impact on older age groups. Among our respondents, 24 percent were 65 or older, including 15 percent at over 70, the recommended age for not leaving one's home at all, known colloquially as 'cocooning'. A further 50 percent were between 51 and 65 years, 24 percent between 36 and 50 years, and just three percent under 35.

Twenty-seven percent of our respondents indicated that they were themselves cocooning for reasons of age or underlying conditions. While this might imply that many faith leaders had to step back from ministry, 82 percent of those cocooning have continued their ministry. We invited them to write-in what duties they continued to perform. Most appeared to be continuing in their ministries with the same vigour as their non-cocooning colleagues. As a Baptist from Northern Ireland put it: 'Everything as before but now through internet, telephone, etc. Services as before.' Others, across a range of denominations, described continuing in other specialist areas like hospital chaplaincy work, homeless ministries, and even conducting funerals. These comments reflect the range of their ministries:

Funerals. Live streaming of Mass at weekends. Daily meditation (written) on parish Facebook page. I've made it known that I am available for confessions and anointings, with full observance of sanitary protocols. Daily Mass celebrated in one or other of the churches ... Contacting parishioners by phone. Keeping in touch with school principal regarding any management issues. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

I keep in touch with parishioners who need pastoral care by phone. I have said prayers in bereaved houses over a phone on speaker at for example a dying person's bedside. I distribute our monthly parish magazines, which I type, by email and post. I produce a weekly online service by videoing it or live streaming it on our Parish Facebook page. Although people say, 'You must be having a quiet time Rector', life is busy with all its remote communicating. This is time consuming. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

I prepare a weekly prayer sheet and monthly newsletters for residents and staff in homeless centres. Daily quote and promise to all staff and others in group. – Salvation Army, Republic of Ireland

Members of Religious Orders and Congregations also gave some insight into how these clergy are continuing with their ministries, which in some contexts includes care for their own elderly members in nursing homes:

Administration. Meetings and contacts through emails, Zoom, phone. All the members in Ireland of our congregation are aged 70+ so contacts are important. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

I'm a pastoral carer in our nursing home. Since I cannot enter the home, I keep contact by phone, remind staff of birthdays, feast days, other important events in lives of residents. As I'm the designated next of kin, I get communication re: welfare of sisters. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

I'm in a nursing home - I minister in a small way to the Religious Community here and to the residents. – Catholic Religious Order/Congregation, Republic of Ireland

Conducting Funerals

Restrictions on public gatherings and social distancing guidelines have radically changed how funerals have been conducted during the pandemic. In both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, government guidance has allowed for up to ten people to attend funerals, following social distancing measures. Because some church buildings remained open in the Republic, this meant some funerals could be held inside church buildings. In Northern Ireland, all church buildings have been closed since 28 March 2020, with some re-opening for prayer beginning 20 May 2020. In both jurisdictions, funerals have taken place in funeral homes, gravesides, or outside the deceased's homes.

Fifty-one percent of our respondents have conducted a funeral during the pandemic. We asked them to describe how they had adjusted funeral services. Their replies provide a stark account of the challenges posed while following the guidelines, but also of thoughtful and at times creative pastoral care:

It was for a member in his 90s who died in a nursing home due to Covid-19. The only service allowed was at the graveside which was in a Presbyterian graveyard. We were allowed 30 minutes to pray, read Scripture, pay tribute, and preach a short message of comfort to 14 people present (eight family members, two pastors, three undertakers and one gravedigger). We sang his favourite hymn (unaccompanied) to end the service. – Baptist, Northern Ireland

We are trying our best to go with the government regulations of social distancing, wearing masks and protective gears while washing the body of the deceased. – Muslim, Northern Ireland

It was shorter. No singing - the lady had requested two hymns for her funeral, so I quoted from them in the short 15 minute service. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Funeral was conducted at the graveside and seemed like a very 'cold' way for family and friends to say goodbye. Still the opportunity was there to preach the Gospel that Jesus Saves! – Free Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

I found a terrible sadness – we could not touch family members whom we knew well or be really present to those who suffered this terrible loss. The various changes made by the State bodies during the pandemic: just ten could be present, some did not receive the Sacrament of the Sick, others no funeral Mass, others not even a prayer was said at the cremation ceremony. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

I gave out a fuller paper copy of what I would have said [without time restrictions]. I broadcast what I would have said and sent it out by email to relatives and congregation. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

We had two funerals in our [Religious] community from a nursing home facility. We followed church and state guidelines but still managed to have a lovely meaningful liturgy for both that was streamed all over the world and greatly appreciated by many. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

Several faith leaders mentioned that it could be difficult to 'enforce' social distancing during the funerals, which was a further source of stress. And a Church of Ireland minister noted that the fact that their Church had prohibited funeral services in churches in the Republic, while the Catholic Church had not, had caused some distress:

Graveyard service only with promise of a proper memorial service later. Didn't go down well as Roman Catholic dioceses allowing services in church with 10 people present. Church of Ireland guidelines: no church. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Changes in Pastoral Care

Faith leaders have been tasked with providing pastoral care for people facing new and intense challenges. Traditionally, most pastoral care has been provided face-to-face, in close physical proximity – something that is no longer possible due to social distancing. We asked faith leaders to 'write-in' how they had changed the ways they provided pastoral care during the pandemic. We received answers describing how faith leaders had reached out through online applications and programmes, by telephone, via post, or by going for walks and talking with people as they kept their distance:

I have phoned parishioners; set up Parish WhatsApp and text message groups. Visited a dying parishioner outside his room window at local Nursing Home and prayed through their open room window as I was not allowed to visit the parishioner inside the Nursing Home. – Church of Ireland, Northern Ireland

I have been phoning parishioners who are house-bound or who are self-isolating each week. I work with community organizations to ensure that vulnerable people are

receiving groceries and medicines from pharmacies. I have been working with our youth leaders to ensure that all our young people, especially the most vulnerable, are being contacted by staff and fully engaged in youth centre activities. Since all my staff have been furloughed, I have taken on secretarial duties and house-keeping duties. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

I use online ministry and pastoral care with fellow hospital chaplains. This has included FaceTime calls between patients and loved ones and myself and patients. In some cases, these have been final conversations before patient died. Provided a wedding in hospital with a terminally ill patient where family members linked in online to participate. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Spiritual accompaniment has moved online; Lectio Divina takes place by Zoom. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

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

I have been regularly in telephone contact with parishioners. I have also posted out a hard copy of my weekly sermon to those who have no internet connection. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Some described how laypeople within their faith communities had swung into action, providing extra assistance with pastoral care:

We have reinvigorated our church districts, which had been disintegrating, and assigned elders as well as volunteer callers. They have been keeping in touch with members by regular calls. We have also volunteered to do shopping and collect prescriptions for those who are self-isolating. Most of my ministry has been on the phone – listening, sharing and praying. I have covered more people than I would be able to normally! – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

The pastoral team in the church has taken a bigger role (phone calls/shopping and collection of prescriptions for cocooners) and bringing meals to families where Covid-19 is present. This has allowed me to concentrate primarily on providing Bible teaching resources. – Independent Evangelical, Republic of Ireland

We enrolled a 'love in action team' of younger church members to get groceries etc for our older members. We sent regular food packages to older members and NHS workers. We sent family packs to poorer community families. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

We provided food packs in the month of Ramadan. Provided bank transfer from Zakat money to the people who are in need. – Muslim, Northern Ireland

Others expressed deep concerns about what they considered the inadequacy of pastoral ministry during this time:

The provision of pastoral care has been reduced dramatically, and not by choice. I think it is inaccurate to speak of 'changes.' When we frame the issue as a 'change,' we risk denying the gravity of the situation. It's not so much a change as a collapse. The various efforts are, at best, a stopgap. Again, to describe them as a 'change' risks conveying the idea that they can be considered adequate in the longer term. There is, to a great extent, a pastoral lockdown. I am wary of some of the talk of 'change' and 'new normal.' It does not fit the pastoral situation. This is not a question of resistance to change as such, but of recognizing what pastoral ministry consists of. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

It is extremely difficult. The only contact I have with people now is by telephone. I am fearful that whenever we get to the far side of this pandemic, many, many people will be left traumatized as a direct result of having to cope with unprocessed grief or of having been precluded from attending to grief through the recognised rituals. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Coping and Praying

Because they are on the frontlines providing pastoral care, faith leaders have some insights into the issues people are facing and how they are coping. When asked how people in their faith community have experienced mental health difficulties during the pandemic, 55 percent said people's experience was 'about the same', while 40 percent had experienced mental health difficulties 'more than usual' and 21 percent 'less than usual'. Of course, under non-pandemic/lockdown conditions it would be alarming for 40 percent of people to experience mental health difficulties 'more than usual'. But under the unprecedented challenges of pandemic/lockdown life, this figure is perhaps lower than expected.

We also asked faith leaders to indicate which challenges people in their faith community had faced during the pandemic, instructing them to select all that applied. The table below documents these challenges, from the most common to the least common.

Challenges Faced During the Pandemic

Challenge	Frequency
Loneliness	356
Reduction in wages	294
Bereavement (Other)	289
Disruption of study	286
Sickness (Other)	271
Sickness (Covid-19)	221
Depression	215
Job loss	198
Bereavement (Covid-19)	168
Difficulty 'making ends meet' financially	168
Other mental health issues	138
Suicidal thoughts	52
Other	45
Domestic abuse	42

Then we asked faith leaders if they thought faith and/or religious practice had helped people cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Eighty-nine percent said 'yes', 11 percent said 'I don't know', and no one at all said 'no'. It is unsurprising that so many faith leaders saw faith as an important resource for coping. But we also asked them to 'write-in' examples of how faith had helped people cope. Here, we received many replies that described an intensification or invigoration of faith, including examples of people praying more and people who had previously demonstrated no interest in faith or religion tuning in to religious services or seeking prayer. It is significant that so many faith leaders brought up prayer themselves, because we did not ask them specifically about it. There were many examples of this type, what follows is but a small selection:

I could keep the church heated from the shrine candles alone! If this increased devotional activity points to people seeking comfort in faith, then clearly at least some people are finding strength in their faith. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

The daily grind has changed. People have so much more time on their hands. Some are lonely and some are afraid, and some can't visit loved ones in care homes. I have noticed a deeper desire for prayer and reading the Bible for solace. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

Numbers going online for prayer meetings have tripled giving an indication that people are much in prayer. Prayer WhatsApp numbers have gone up eight-fold to over 250. People display a confidence in God's sovereignty, a recognition of God's love and continual presence and of a firm belief that already good things are happening through this. Some have recently testified online as to how this has brought them to trust Christ for salvation. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Family participating together at Mass transmitted online. More prayer of Rosary. Prayer spaces created in house. May altars. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

The children participate in Bible study and praise. – Coptic Orthodox Church, Republic of Ireland

Tribulations are inevitable for us, but we should rejoice, for we are overcomers. And Psalm 91 helped people's faith. – Cherubim & Seraphim Church, Republic of Ireland

Some who had previously shown no interest in faith or hostile towards Church have requested prayers, Masses – Catholic Religious Order/Congregation, Northern Ireland

People I know are spending more time following online prayer services. There is more prayer. – Religious Sister, Northern Ireland

Lots of parishioners who are not regular attenders at Mass have been contacting us via social media and saying that they are getting a lot of hope and support from our streaming. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

As I phoned members they would often say 'I don't know how anyone could cope with all this without faith'. Some have said this has helped reboot their faith. Many who have not attended church for years are listening in and appreciating the services. One atheist has asked for prayer when he appeared to have symptoms. Relieved and thankful when they did not develop. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

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. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Through messages and phone calls received from parishioners, some of whom had not been attending Church but have been viewing the livestreaming of Mass. They say even other family members are watching as well. Some comment that my homilies and some of the songs I sing or choose have given them some hope and consolation. – Catholic Religious Order/Congregation, Northern Ireland

The different view on our lives due to Covid-19 and the restriction lead into a deeper understanding of the value of each life. Many people expressed their view that God is telling us important things through the crisis: The world needs this pause, we are able to live with less traveling, nature, small things get a higher value, we are together in this, I can't fall deeper than in the palm of God's hands. And especially on Good Friday it was interesting to see how many people agreed that God knows the pain of people because through Jesus he was himself in this. – Lutheran, Republic of Ireland

Some have organised rosaries outside their home with neighbours keeping their distance and following the Government restrictions. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

More mindful of faith for inspiration and hope. I hear of small gatherings around a lighted candle, family members meeting online although living far apart, neighbours standing at doors as funerals pass by. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

The positive feedback from so many different sources. I think we are truly tending to the 'spirit'. People refer to how it keeps them going. A number of lapsed Catholics have sent in very reflective comments. They often said so, sent prayer cards and Mass cards. – Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Religion Online

Restrictions on physical gatherings meant that in many cases, almost overnight, the practice of faith was moved online. This posed challenges for faith leaders and communities, particularly those that did not provide online services or resources prior to the pandemic.

Among our respondents, 44 percent indicated that they did not provide online worship opportunities prior to the pandemic, with 24 percent providing livestreaming, 20 providing a recorded service or sermons, and 12 percent providing ‘other’. There were significant denominational differences in services provided prior to the pandemic, with Protestant churches much less likely to have provided online worship opportunities. No services were provided by 76 percent of Church of Ireland, 75 percent of Methodist, and 52 percent of Presbyterian communities. Among Catholics, livestreaming was by far the most popular type of online service.

Opportunities for Online Worship Before the Pandemic

Faith Community	No Services Provided	Livestreaming	Recorded Service or Sermons available after for download	Other
All	44%	24%	20%	12%
Catholic Diocesan	38%	43%	2%	18%
Catholic Religious	21%	55%	2%	23%
Church of Ireland	76%	5%	5%	7%
Presbyterian	52%	3%	27%	18%
Methodist	75%	2%	13%	8%
Other	42%	27%	27%	5%

The provision of online services has changed dramatically during the pandemic. Now, only 13 percent of faith communities are not providing any opportunities for online worship. All categories of faith community have dramatically increased their online provision, except for Catholic Religious, whose online presence appears to have diminished. But it is unlikely that this reflects an actual scaling-back of online provision; rather, Catholic Religious were more likely to write-in ‘other’ options of online provision before the pandemic (see table above), which is not necessarily accounted for in the table below. Presbyterians are now the most likely to have some sort of online provision, with just two percent reporting no online services.

Percentage with No Online Worship Opportunities Before and During the Pandemic

Faith Community	No Service Before Pandemic	No Service During Pandemic
All	44%	13%
Catholic Diocesan	38%	18%
Catholic Religious	21%	35%
Church of Ireland	76%	12%
Presbyterian	52%	2%
Methodist	75%	10%
Other	42%	7%

Faith communities also differed in the frequency of online worship opportunities during the pandemic. 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. This reflects these traditions' off-line patterns of worship in pre-pandemic times.

Frequency of Online Worship Opportunities During the Pandemic

Faith Community	Several Times per Day	Once a Day	Several Times per Week	Once a Week	Several Times per Month	No Services Provided
All	12%	14%	33%	26%	1%	13%
Catholic Diocesan	32%	31%	7%	11%	0%	18%
Catholic Religious	23%	27%	12%	2%	2%	35%
Church of Ireland	4%	3%	37%	45%	0%	12%
Presbyterian	2%	11%	44%	42%	0%	2%
Methodist	0%	5%	33%	51%	0%	10%
Other	6%	4%	61%	21%	2%	7%

In addition, 71 percent of faith communities have provided their members with other opportunities for online fellowship during the pandemic. Respondents were invited to ‘write-in’ examples of those opportunities, which included the use of Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, Youtube, etc for a range of activities, including prayer meetings, bible studies, youth groups, children’s and youth groups, book clubs, coffee mornings, afternoon teas, novenas, quizzes, question and answer sessions, marriage courses, retreats, spiritual direction, membership classes, and more. Most faith leaders have directed members of their faith community to other opportunities for online services, fellowship or resources, with 81 percent indicating that they have done so.

There also has been significant change in who is responsible for online worship and outreach during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, ‘no one’ was responsible for online worship/outreach among 31 percent of our respondents’ faith communities. That figure is now at just 7 percent. There also are differences between denominations. Before the pandemic, the most likely denominations to have no one responsible were Church of Ireland (39%), Methodist (38%) and Presbyterian (35%). But during the pandemic, Catholics were more likely to have no one responsible, at 17% for Religious and 7% for diocesan (parish level). In fact, there are now no Presbyterian congregations reporting that no one is responsible, with Methodists at 5% and Church of Ireland at 6%. It seems that Protestant faith leaders have taken on much of the responsibility, assisted by an increase in volunteers.

Responsible for Online Worship/Outreach Before the Pandemic

Faith Community	Me only	Me and other paid staff	Me and volunteers	Me, other paid staff & volunteers	Other paid staff	Volunteers	Other paid staff and Volunteers	Other	No one
All	12%	6%	24%	10%	1%	7%	2%	8%	31%
Catholic Diocesan	8%	14%	22%	8%	2%	3%	3%	10%	30%
Catholic Religious	17%	4%	10%	13%	13%	15%	6%	0	23%
Church of Ireland	22%	3%	20%	5%	1%	5%	0%	4%	39%
Presbyterian	13%	3%	27%	11%	0%	2%	0%	0%	35%
Methodist	13%	3%	26%	10%	0%	10%	0%	0%	38%
Other	8%	5%	33%	11%	1%	14%	1%	0%	27%

Responsible for Online Worship/Outreach During the Pandemic

Faith Community	Me only	Me and other paid staff	Me and volunteers	Me, other paid staff & volunteers	Other paid staff	Volunteers	Other paid staff and Volunteers	Other	No one
All	22%	9%	35%	11%	1%	5%	1%	9%	7%
Catholic Diocesan	21%	15%	28%	6%	3%	3%	1%	12%	11%
Catholic Religious	13%	6%	21%	6%	11%	13%	11%	2%	17%
Church of Ireland	40%	9%	31%	5%	1%	4%	3%	0%	6%
Presbyterian	30%	8%	40%	17%	0%	2%	0%	3%	0%
Methodist	21%	8%	45%	18%	0%	3%	0%	0%	5%
Other	10%	7%	43%	14%	3%	13%	5%	1%	5%

Given the scramble to move religion online, we asked faith leaders if they had received advice or guidance about providing online services, fellowship or resources, instructing them to select all that applied from a range of options. The table below documents these sources, from the most common to the least common.

Sources of Advice or Guidance about Providing Online Services

Source	Frequency
Through my own personal research	207
From my denomination	202
From clergy/ministerial colleagues	154
From laypeople in my faith community with expertise	125
From an ecumenical or inter-denominational body	37
Other	31

Bearing in mind that respondents could tick more than one option for this question, we looked at what percentage of respondents from each denomination had received advice or guidance from their denomination, either as a stand-alone answer or in combination with others. There were stark differences. Ninety-three percent of Methodists 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%). It is likely that this in part reflects the fact that more Protestant than Catholic congregations did not offer online worship opportunities before the pandemic. Still, the 93 percent figure for Methodists is remarkably high.

Finally, 70 percent of respondents agreed that they would retain aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings are lifted, including 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 just nine percent said that they would not retain any online aspects. With faith having moved online during the pandemic, it seems as if it will stay there for the foreseeable future.

Social Services and the Wider Community

An important aspect of religious practice for many people is serving the wider community outside their own parish, congregation or faith community. Among our faith communities, 62 percent were providing social services for the wider community during the pandemic. Our respondents included a disproportionately high number of faith leaders from the island’s small ‘other’ Christian communities. In many cases these faith communities are very small and lack the human resources and financial capacity of the larger faith communities. Among the largest faith communities – Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist – 74 percent were providing social services to the wider community during the pandemic.

Among those providing services, 42 percent said their services had increased, 33 percent had stayed the same, and just 25 percent had decreased their services, demonstrating resiliency in challenging times.

We also asked faith leaders to indicate for which groups they were providing services during the pandemic, instructing them to select all that applied. The table below documents these groups, from the most common to the least common.

Wider Social Services Provided during the Pandemic

Societal group	Frequency
The elderly in your area	186
Food bank in your area	139
Other vulnerable groups in your area	102
Other	71
Vulnerable groups in other parts of the world	70
Young people in your area	60
The homeless in your area	48
Parents and toddlers in your area	44

In addition, we asked faith leaders if their faith community was working with other groups to provide social services during the pandemic, instructing them to select all that applied. The table below records their partnerships, from the most common to the least common. While the most popular choice was ‘not at all’ at 134, this included respondents who had indicated in a previous question that their faith community was not providing any services. After removing those the frequency is 54, which indicates the number of faith communities providing social services on their own, without any partnerships.

Among those working with other groups, 46 percent said the services provided had stayed the same, 37 percent said the services had increased and just 18 percent said the services had decreased, which again demonstrates resiliency in challenging times.

Partnerships for Providing Social Services during the Pandemic

Partnership	Frequency
Secular charities or non-governmental organisations	129
Faith-based charities or non-governmental organisations	100
Local government	76
Other congregations/parishes (Christian only)	76
Other congregations/parishes in my denomination	67
No partnerships	54
Ecumenical Christian and/or inter-religious groups	45
Other	34
Other faith communities (non-Christian religions)	17

Stress and Ministry

As ‘key workers’ on the frontline, we were interested in how faith leaders were coping with the stress of ministry during the pandemic. Forty-six percent of our respondents said that their ministry had been more stressful than usual, 33 percent said the stress had been ‘about the same’, and 21 percent said it had been less stressful than usual. Methodists (58%) were most likely to say their ministry had been more stressful than usual, while Catholic Religious (34%) were most likely to say their ministry had been less stressful than usual.

Stress and Ministry during the Pandemic

Faith Community	More Stressful	About the Same	Less Stressful
All	46%	33%	21%
Catholic Diocesan	44%	33%	23%
Catholic Religious	40%	26%	34%
Church of Ireland	39%	42%	19%
Presbyterian	46%	32%	22%
Methodist	58%	38%	5%
Other	50%	28%	21%

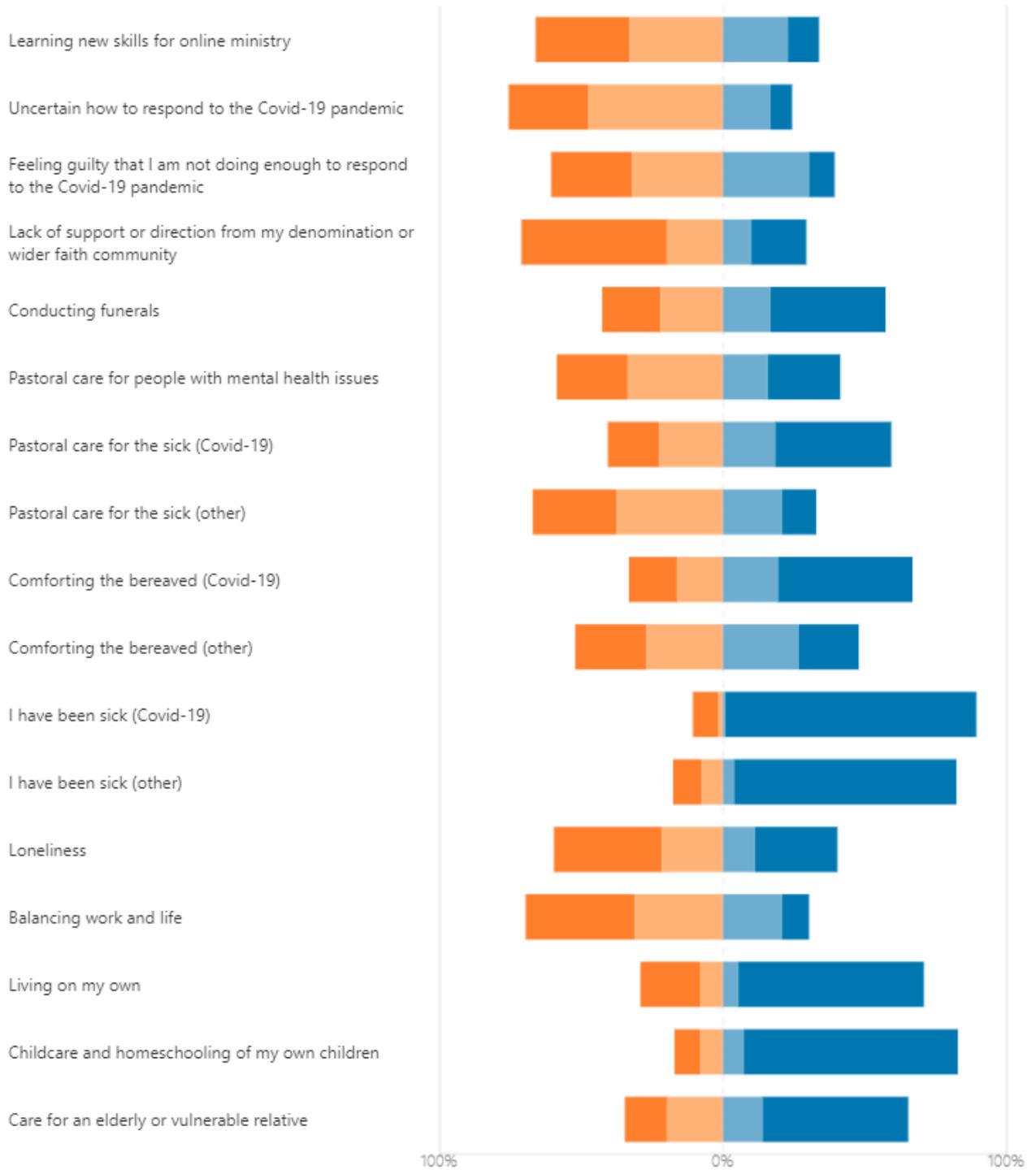
When asked about how they were coping with the stress, 62 percent said ‘about the same’, 26 percent said better than usual, and just 12 percent said worse than usual. And although Methodists were the mostly likely to say their ministries had been more stressful than usual (58%, above), they also were the second most likely to say they had coped with stress better than usual at 32 percent, just behind Catholic Religious (33%).

Coping with Stress during the Pandemic

Faith Community	Worse than Usual	About the Same	Better than Usual
All	12%	62%	26%
Catholic Diocesan	12%	62%	26%
Catholic Religious	11%	57%	33%
Church of Ireland	9%	67%	24%
Presbyterian	16%	60%	24%
Methodist	13%	55%	32%
Other	13%	63%	24%

We also were interested in what experiences had been most stressful for faith leaders. We asked them to rate on a scale of one to three, with three the most stressful, how stressful the following experiences had been. Responses are displayed in the graphic below:

1 2 3 Not applicable



The most stressful experience for most faith leaders was ‘Feeling guilty that I am not doing enough to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic’, which 30 percent rated at three. But when we removed the ‘Not Applicable’ category from the experience of ‘comforting the bereaved’, we found this was the most stressful experience for those who had gone through it. Among those who comforted those bereaved by Covid-19, 40 percent rated it at three. Among those who comforted those bereaved by other causes, 37 percent rated it at three. In addition, when we removed those who had not conducted any funerals during the pandemic from the experience of ‘conducting funerals’, this proved equally as stressful as ‘feeling guilty’: 30 percent of those who had conducted funerals rated it at three. The next most significant causes of stress were learning new skills for online ministry (23 percent chose three – the figure rose to 27 percent when those who selected ‘Not Applicable’ were removed), and balancing work and life (21 percent chose three).

Most faith leaders reported receiving direction and support from their denomination or wider faith community about dealing with stress during the Covid-19 pandemic: just 13 percent said they had received ‘none at all’. Remarkably, no Methodists and just three percent of Presbyterians said they had received ‘none at all’. Methodists reported receiving the most support from their denomination, with 50 percent receiving ‘a lot’ and 43% receiving ‘some’.

Direction and Support from Denomination or Wider Faith Community

Faith Community	A Lot	Some	A Little	None at All
All	29%	37%	22%	13%
Catholic Diocesan	37%	27%	22%	15%
Catholic Religious	26%	36%	22%	16%
Church of Ireland	24%	44%	21%	12%
Presbyterian	14%	52%	30%	3%
Methodist	50%	43%	8%	0%
Other	25%	32%	22%	20%

When asked if they would like further information or support about how to cope with stress during the pandemic, 29 percent said ‘yes’ and 71 percent said ‘no’. Methodists (79% ‘no’) and Presbyterians (77% ‘no’) were the least likely to want further information or support. While a majority of faith leaders across the faith communities indicate that they would not

like further information or support, it is worth pointing out that the 29 percent who desire further information or support is a sizeable minority.

In particular, some Catholic priests expressed a concern that pastoral care for clergy, primarily in the form of phone calls from the bishop, was insufficient. At the same time, care and appreciation from parishioners was acknowledged as an important support.

My Parish is very supportive - my diocesan leadership is not - only two phone calls in two months. Letters were written to school Principals and students - but none to clergy. Sense of value diminished. – Diocesan priest

The only affirmation and support I am receiving is from my congregation and the lay administrative employees in the Church. There appears to be a lack of pastoral care for ministers and lay Church workers from the hierarchy/administration. It is very clear that our superiors do not have any real concern for us. We become ‘a problem’ when we get sick or stop functioning/working. This needs to change. The only contact I have had with my senior minister was when he phoned to tell me that if I got the Coronavirus I would immediately have to inform him and withdraw from ministry! – Diocesan priest

I am astounded with the lack of leadership and care from the Catholic bishops and the lack of brotherly support from priests. ... The biggest talking point among us to date has been the loss of income. This period of pandemic will define our future more than anything before. For me it has highlighted the lack of brotherhood and care from each other as clergy and from our bishops. I am thankful that I have such caring and loving parishioners who reach out daily to make sure I am ok. –Diocesan priest

Further Information or Support about Coping with Stress?

Faith Community	Yes	No
All	29%	71%
Catholic Diocesan	32%	68%
Catholic Religious	33%	67%
Church of Ireland	37%	63%
Presbyterian	23%	77%
Methodist	20%	79%
Other	25%	75%

The final question on the survey asked faith leaders if there was anything else they thought we should know. Some took this as an opportunity to provide more details about dealing with the stresses of ministry during the pandemic:

I've been taken aback by how stressful I've found this whole period. I feel very exposed, and expectations by many people (including myself!) of delivering online resources and services are unrealistic. The gifts, strengths and skills I bring to ministry of social interaction and pastoral care are totally undermined and I find myself floundering as I try to replace them with impersonal technological solutions. I frequently come away from pastoral calls, Zoom meetings and services feeling very frustrated and inadequate. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

I have missed so much the interaction with other people. It's difficult to speak to a camera rather than make eye contact from the pulpit with people you love! Conducting funerals without being able to shake hands, hug or embrace. Doing bereavement calls on the phone and trying to respond to the silences. It has been exhausting, while at the same time less busy than life would normally be. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

The list of stressors - having to work all day from home and not being able to 'escape the village' for a coffee with family or friends has been a major stressor I think because you are never as a minister out of the ministry/work space no matter how hard you try to switch off. I and many of the colleagues I speak to have not had a proper 24-hour period of Sabbath day off during lockdown, when we've been totally free of contact with church matters and able to fully rest and recharge (this is a challenge in 'normal' times, but for some reason greater in lockdown). That said, I and others have coped quite well because less evening meetings means we can get a walk or some other exercise that maybe we don't manage in 'normal' times. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

A real sense of loss of the diversity of a day in ministry accompanied by a deep-seated fatigue and a feeling of being constantly under pressure. Also really difficult to handle criticism about why we couldn't do things some other churches/denominations were doing (when there were very valid reasons as to why we couldn't). – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

A Renewal of Faith?

Immediately after our questions about stress and ministry, we asked faith leaders to write in what had been the most rewarding aspects of their ministry during the pandemic. A diocesan priest in Northern Ireland said there had been, 'Very few, if any, rewarding aspects'; a Church of Ireland minister in the Republic of Ireland said, 'None'; and a retired diocesan priest in Northern Ireland said, 'There is little positivity in my ministry since the imposition of the restrictions. My retired life as a priest was rewarded by celebrating Mass with the people. I can't do that now and it's a massive hole in my life.' But such bleak views were a minority among those who responded to this question. They noted an increase in (online) religious practice, improved interaction and new opportunities for pastoral care, a new appreciation for faith leaders, greater lay involvement, greater service, and more time and space for themselves.

Increase in (Online) Religious Practice

Many faith leaders described an increase in religious practice, linked to moving online. They observed surprising numbers of people tuning in for worship services and other events, noting that people who would not have entered their church building were accessing online services. Some from evangelical traditions wrote of people being 'saved' or converting to Christianity during the pandemic. These are just some examples of those who wrote about an increase in religious practice:

Realising how much God, faith, and the Church mean to people. I was taken by pleasant surprise at the demand for online streaming of Mass. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Phoning and thus reconnecting with lapsed members and hearing how much they appreciate online service. Working with others in producing service. Record numbers at prayer meeting. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

... 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. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Seeing an increased spiritual hunger and grasp for meaning in the population. – Elim Pentecostal, Republic of Ireland

As a scattered, small church it is a pleasure how many people are glad about our online services and Zoom Meetings: we reach significantly more people than before. It is obvious that physical meetings and services are more appreciated, but the new online paths will remain in addition to the physical ones. Another aspect is the increased sense of being responsible for each other. – Lutheran, Republic of Ireland

Reaching many outside of church buildings who would otherwise never attend church. – Christian Churches Ireland (former Assemblies of God), Republic of Ireland

Feedback from internet broadcasts and news of precious souls being saved as a result of meetings under difficult circumstances. – Free Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Hearing of people who have come to trust in Jesus as their saviour. It has been frustrating that we cannot disciple them as we might if this situation was not happening. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Hearing of people watching our services who had nothing to do with church before. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Someone coming to saving faith in Christ. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

*1) Supporting the bereaved and anxious (probably everybody) in my community.
2) The level of interest from 'non parishioners' in joining the parish Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and engaging with/watching recorded worship and other posts (approximately 33% of the group's membership, some from different traditions and from outside the immediate locality). – Church of Ireland, Northern Ireland*

Christians growing bolder in evangelism. Non-believers opening up to God. The church being strengthened and refined through the trials. – Independent Evangelical, Republic of Ireland

People with no prior church connection making contact through online church services. – Baptist, Northern Ireland

Discovering new skills in technology and finding out that there are people 'out there' for whom our religious services provide meaning. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Seeing new or fringe people engage with the new forms of ministry online. Having less pressure to be away in meetings. – Methodist, Republic of Ireland

More people join online services. – Redeemed Christian Church of God, Republic of Ireland

A number of members of our congregation have not been able to come to Quaker Meetings because they are elderly or live far away [and they] have been able to participate in our Zoom Meetings regularly for the first time in years. This has been extremely gratifying. – Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Republic of Ireland

Increase in connection between different age groups throughout a geographically large circuit. People who had not attended church for many years are now viewing Sunday worship on Facebook and WhatsApp. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

Improved Interaction and New Opportunities for Pastoral Care

Others commented that moving online had in some cases improved interactions within their faith communities and created new opportunities for pastoral care. So while faith leaders long to return to face-to-face contact, many identified benefits of online interactions:

More pastoral time speaking with people in my church (due to phoning rather than visiting in this rural area). – Church of Ireland, Ulster, Republic of Ireland

Long conversations on the phone - real personal interaction. A lot of listening... – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

People commenting on sermons (which never really happened before). – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

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. – Church of Ireland, Northern Ireland

Feedback from members who don't normally give feedback. – Religious Society of Friends, Northern Ireland

New Appreciation for Faith Leaders

Faith leaders felt affirmed by the interest in religious practice shown during the pandemic, with some recognizing a renewed respect for churches and their own ministries:

Knowing that having gone through the terrible years of abuse within the church globally and feeling slightly irrelevant, that the Church matters more than we fully really realised. Given great hope for the future. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

People gentler and less demanding or critical of my ministry. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

The new level of gratitude and affirmation parishioners are displaying for the Church and Ministers. – Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

Greater Lay Involvement

Some faith leaders revealed that the pandemic had prompted people from their faith communities to become more active, assisting them with aspects of their ministries:

Feel closer to my congregation- more people involved in the life of the congregation- before we were a Sunday only congregation, leaving work to paid staff. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

Seeing my elders rise to the challenge of pastoral care. Seeing church members eagerly share the church services with non-believing friends and family. Seeing the vastly increased numbers of people ‘attending’ our services. The slower pace allowing much more time for reflection and reading and prayer. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Working through Zoom with Parish Pastoral Council members and so I have others to take responsibility with me for connecting with parishioners. – Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

There has been an increase of congregational involvement in online activities and a group of volunteers supporting isolated elderly people. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

Seeing lay people becoming more engaged in the discovery Church is not the building. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

Greater Service

For some faith leaders, this translated into being of greater service in the wider community:

Being of real service to people. – Buddhist, Republic of Ireland

To witness the generosity and fellowship of communities in reaching out to neighbours, friends and strangers regardless of religious denomination or none. It was uplifting to see true Christian fellowship in operation. – Greek Orthodox, Republic of Ireland

Even some faith leaders who were cocooning created new ways to serve:

My ministry before Covid-19 had to end due to cocooning but I am trying new ways. One of the most rewarding is writing letters in longhand to members of my congregation especially those with disability/dementia and enclosing a little treat. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

More Time and Space

Others observed that since the pace of life had slowed down and they were no longer physically attending so many meetings, they had more personal time and space for relaxation and spiritual contemplation. They perceived this as beneficial not only to their own mental health, but also to others as it improved their ability to minister:

Time to think. Time to exercise. The first time in my life; I have had a minute. – Catholic Religious Order/Congregation, Republic of Ireland

More time to study and pray. – Redeemed Christian Church of God, Republic of Ireland

Time and space to pray, do some writing, study and read. Using WhatsApp to keep up the morale of my students, friends, neighbours and relatives. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

A Renewal of Faith?

When these observations are taken together and set alongside earlier examples of an increase in prayer, it could be argued that there is evidence of a renewal of faith during the pandemic. At the same time, the depth of interest in faith and commitment to greater service and involvement is not clear. In particular, some aspects of online faith could be quite superficial and ephemeral, fading as the pandemic subsides. Faith leaders themselves recognize this possibility:

I've been really blessed by hearing from our older folk who do not have internet access yet are undeterred in their faith. They have a confidence and a security in Christ that is challenging and has made me question in some ways whether our online presence is feeding a consumer spoon feeding faith rather than building a deep-rooted faith. If we were all stripped of these online resources, would we find the peace and contentment in Christ as these older warriors have. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

‘We Can’t Go Back to how we Were’

The final part of the survey asked faith leaders to ‘write-in’ responses to two questions: ‘Looking towards the time when the pandemic has passed, what do you think are the most important lessons faith communities should learn from it?’; and ‘If there is anything else that is important or that you think we should know, please write it in here.’ Answers to these questions painted a picture of what faith leaders thought faith communities should look like in the future, having learned lessons during the pandemic. There was widespread recognition that things had changed and must continue to do so. As a Methodist from Northern Ireland put it: ‘We can’t go back to how we were.’ A Salvation Army leader from Northern Ireland had a similar response: ‘The old way of doing Church was at a turning point. That has been revealed, accelerated by the crisis.’

Among the points raised were that ‘faith matters’, not just for faith communities themselves but for wider society; churches should not be preoccupied with keeping buildings open; faith communities are facing severe financial challenges; future ministries must blend online and in-person aspects, but there are limitations to online ministries; lifestyles should be re-evaluated and changed; and ministry should be a team effort, including greater involvement from laity. Many faith leaders also raised concerns about Government and church leadership during the pandemic.

Faith Matters

Some faith leaders observed that the pandemic had confirmed the important role religion still plays in society, not only within faith communities themselves but also as part of wider communities. They were hopeful faith communities could continue to ‘matter’ in the future:

Lament is as important as laughter! Church is part of the community. – Church of Ireland, Northern Ireland

The importance of community, of physical and social contact. I would see the aftermath as an opportunity to promote ‘church attendance,’ not in a moralistic way, but as part of the heightened realisation that we are social beings who thrive on being gathered rather than isolated. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Support each other. – Hindu, Northern Ireland

Have confidence. The gospel message is very relevant, materialism cannot satisfy man’s deepest needs. We are incredibly relevant. Togetherness and community are important and churches are expert at it. – Baptist, Northern Ireland

Be pleased with our care for one another during the time of lockdown. Today many people have a fairly tenuous connection to a faith community, but at the moment of greatest need in living memory, it was the togetherness provided by faith communities that was the greatest source of support to many people. But do not take the sense of community for granted - community doesn't just happen, it is not

like a tap which can be turned on and off at a whim, and it is people who have a good sense of belonging to a community, be it faith-based or otherwise, who've probably coped best in the midst of isolation. And if community is to flourish and thrive, then it requires the constant input of all of us. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Faith and Religion is strong in a crisis. We are able to adapt to completely new situations in an astonishingly short time. This lesson gives me more confidence facing challenges like Churches getting smaller by numbers. – Lutheran, Republic of Ireland

At the same time, a Buddhist pointed out that there is still a tendency for the role of minority faith communities to be overlooked, even more so than a tendency for the churches to be overlooked due to secularization:

That faith still has a role in society. Government need to recognize that. Also, the state needs to catch up with the diverse religious affiliation now in society. There are people of many faiths that are excluded from services: chaplaincy; correct funeral services; in the Health Service; in prayer rooms only designed for Christian worship. The state still provides for a Christian-only reality. But that reality no longer exists. The state has not stepped up to the plate to accommodate the reality of diversity. ... 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. – Buddhist, Republic of Ireland

People Matter more than Buildings

Others reflected on how, in a pre-pandemic context of declining church attendance, some faith leaders and communities had been preoccupied with maintaining church buildings for dwindling congregations. While financial pressures exacerbated by the pandemic may accelerate the closure of buildings, faith leaders emphasized the importance of flesh-and-blood over bricks and mortar:

People matter more than programs and buildings. Meeting together on Sundays is precious. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

A lot of what we do as a Church is unnecessary and we should focus on what is important - the worship of God. Do less and worry less about the secondary things. Also, do we really need so many Church buildings? – Church of Ireland, Northern Ireland

More people are reached when church gets out of the buildings. – Methodist, Republic of Ireland

Look at having church outside of the walls of the church. – Pentecostal, Republic of Ireland

That buildings are vastly less important than we think they are. That 'Being' is more important than 'Doing'. That being able to meet and share TOGETHER is at the centre of the Christian life. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Being Church is not about a building, it's people and we should invest more in people than buildings. We should think about how to do church better. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

1. Life is very fragile and can be disrupted profoundly. 2. The local church as we know it can no longer be taken for granted. There is a sense of the impermanent whereby the parish church could easily no longer continue to exist due to financial uncertainty and effects of long-term closure of the parish for worship and events. 3. Human relationships are no longer defined in geographically special terms. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. 4. The status quo of church complacency will not ride out these new challenges as it has done in previous times. – Church of Ireland, no location provided

Financial Concerns

The possible closure of buildings was just one concern linked to increased financial pressures. Some faith leaders were anxious about how effective ministry could continue in a context of dwindling finances:

The reduction of income into the church and all the stress that is related to that. – Methodist, Republic of Ireland

The big thing is how this is financially utterly devastating. My congregation estimates a loss through 3 areas of estimated £20,000 income in the three-month period April, May, June. My congregation runs a separate charity ... [for it] the effects of our closure of groups and activities are severe. – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

The financial challenges that churches have had to face with this lockdown. Some church staffers may not be able to get a salary, except they turn to the government. – Evangelical/Pentecostal, Republic of Ireland

It may well be a financial struggle to rebuild our churches in the next few months as some people may have lost the habit of attending - we have to be leaner and more disciplined about the essentials (how to re-build/attract new people at church and online) and less concerned about purely internal agendas. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Blending Online and In-Person Ministries

Others valued the new opportunities provided by moving faith online. Consistent with the 70 percent who indicated that they would retain at least some aspects of online ministry after the pandemic, faith leaders reflected on how blending online and in-person ministries could enhance religious practice in the future:

Be online, prepare for more online, prepare your faith community to 'walk by faith, not by sight.' Respect our government officials, regardless of political affiliations, who did their best in this crisis. – Non-denominational, Republic of Ireland

Online presence is important for those who may never enter our churches. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

I would like to have time to reflect on what Church and community means in an online world - I love being connected to Taizé but realistically I very seldom watch an entire service - so how do we realistically offer worship online that will captivate not just the regulars but also draw in the people on the side-lines? In a practical sense many meetings will now be done by Zoom so there will be much less travel. But the converse also means because there is less travel more meetings will be scheduled in!!! – Moravian, Northern Ireland

That liturgy, whilst cherished by some, is inaccessible for many and that a short, focused message with scripture reading and intercession is making a connection for people for whom liturgy is not. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Limitations of Online Ministry

At the same time, enthusiasm for online ministry was tempered by recognition of its limitations, including its potential superficiality, unequal access to the internet, and how it excludes people who lack the skills to access it:

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. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Online worship isn't 'real', and it should not be embraced, but critically examined. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Perhaps children have been neglected to some extent by the church outreach (during the pandemic). Am I dealing mostly with an adult virtual audience or congregation? – Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

Personally, it was easy to transit from face to face meetings to virtual meetings because this was a personal aspiration. However, the change revealed the disparity between communities and families, where some found it easy, but others struggled

more to engage with the requirement for being active online. The crisis has also revealed the differences in Broadband competencies, with rural areas struggling to stay consistently connected. This lack of effective broadband connection caused frustration. – Moravian, Northern Ireland

The emphasis on ‘the boasting of what people are doing online’ left those with poor skills feeling even worse than they already did. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Sometimes it feels like a competition to who has the best online service and technology. Many elderly cannot access technology and have missed out in keeping connected. Thankful for the phone. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

More help has to be given to those elderly people and those who are nervous of, or uninterested in, modern technologies which have proved to be very supportive in helping to combat loneliness, exclusion and mental health problems. (I suggest the help should come to them rather than their having to search out and go to venues to learn, when mobility or transport issues may be a problem). A recommendation must be made to government to provide dependable good quality internet to those areas of Northern Ireland which are currently poorly served. – Non-Subscribing Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Leadership’s online abilities must be brought up to speed. Those without online skills must be catered for and not feel belittled. – Church of Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Probably one of the most beneficial services we have provided is the service via the telephone, I have added the link below but this is the only thing we will likely keep going after Covid, those who are not connected to the internet have valued it considerably. <https://www.switchedonnetwork.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-create-a-phone-number-which-plays-podcasts-or-sermon-recordings-over-the-phone/> – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Re-evaluating Lifestyles

Other faith leaders wrote about how the pandemic is an opportunity to re-evaluate lifestyles, both inside and outside faith communities. But as a Methodist from Belfast City put it, this is not without significant challenges:

I think this season of Covid most certainly provides us with an opportunity to think differently and to reimagine. I've felt a certain denominational pressure to come up with what the church will look like, and to have some sort of strategy for the future. Yet, it unsettles my spirit, I think the process in front of us calls for careful steps and gentle discernment. I think first this season takes us into a season of grief. When I talk with my congregation, they are missing what has been and are fearful of what will be, they need to grieve before I start asking them to reimagine. For most of them I don't think they can begin to reimagine while they battle with loneliness and worry about finance. I sense their grief with great heaviness, and maybe that is why I

struggle to answer the question of what the church will look like. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

Some faith leaders interpreted the pandemic as ‘God’s wake-up call’ for people to change their ways:

I see Covid-19 as God's wake up call to the world and his church and am encouraged by how people are desiring prayer, truth, scripture, community and belonging in a way that was previously absent. – Independent Evangelical, Republic of Ireland

I don't believe God was taken by surprise by this pandemic. I believe God has finally got our attention. – Elim Pentecostal, Northern Ireland

Having legalized abortion and so much else offensive to God has to come with a heavy cost. Continue to sin and we can expect worse. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

Others believed that the pandemic should prompt people to change their lifestyles in ways that would be gentler on the environment and would allow everyone to live at a slower pace:

I hope our value system will change, with a stronger focus on God and on our relationship with Him and with our brothers and sisters and with all of creation, especially the earth. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

That there are ways to live our lives in greater simplicity and equality, and in increased care and love for God's Creation. That the message of love and service is what draws us together in times of danger. That coping with living is going to be very hard for many people going forward, but that God's love and the support of the Holy Spirit are there for us all. – Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Republic of Ireland

That the frenetic pace of life now being lived is not entirely necessary. It is rather artificial, as we push each other to live very intense lives in which reflection, prayer and enjoying each other's company have become rare. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Keep things much simpler generally in all aspects of life. To learn what the Lord is teaching us through this and not to get back into life as it was before Covid-19. – Plumblin, Republic of Ireland

Many of my priest friends and I have talked about this as like being on a wonderful long retreat - a Camino. That this has been - despite the horror of the disease - amongst the happiest time of our ministry. That we have learned how little people want and that we have been angsty for years to give more and more without knowing what it is we should be doing. The line from the Gospel: 'you worry and fret about so many things and yet so few are needed.' This comes to mind. I am

determined never to return to the old frenzy whereby we priests - not the people - have turned the Parish into a type of spiritual Tesco's. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

Ministry is a Team Effort

For others, an important lesson has been that ministry is a team effort and cannot be left entirely to faith leaders. Some were heartened that volunteers in their own communities were increasingly helping out, while others emphasized that structures or programmes should be put in place to facilitate team ministries:

I believe that it will be a crucial time for all our churches to learn to be about ministry very differently. The main emphasis needs to be on pastoral care, healing and compassion. Ministers will need to work with teams involving professionals rather than on their own. Women need to be to the fore in this new way of ministering and there is no question of returning to business as usual. Our Churches and Ministers MUST change or lose the faithful. This is a wonderful opportunity for renewal and new life. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

Maintaining an ongoing pastoral care team beyond just the minister. – Non-Subscribing Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

Adaptability. New outreach methods. Value of all types of prayer/worship. New financial methodologies for raising money. Review of required number of Religious Services. Admiring the role of each Christian/Monotheistic person in this crisis. The Vocation of the Laity. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

To appreciate the priesthood of the laity and the need to lessen the pressures on elderly ordained priests. – Religious Sister, Republic of Ireland

Bishops' and priests' conferences should urgently develop leadership programmes for laity. Everyone seems to be waiting for an upturn in vocations - there is no real sign of it happening. – Catholic Religious Order/Congregation, Republic of Ireland

That, within our church community, we need to have a team of people involved in helping people grow and develop spiritually so that all the responsibility doesn't fall back onto the church leader. That our church members should be equipped to care for and encourage and build up one another. That we should remember that our days are not in our hands and that we should be prepared to carry out the core functions of the church in whatever circumstances God calls us to - resilience! The value of good administrative process! – Presbyterian, Northern Ireland

We should have trained pastoral workers to assist with our faith communities. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Other people taking responsibility for things not just the minister. – Methodist, Northern Ireland

We Can Do Better ...

Some faith leaders were disappointed by how Governments had interacted with faith communities, primarily for not providing enough guidance on how religion could be safely practised during the pandemic:

I think politicians haven't always been helpful when it comes to advice for the church. They talk about when we should go back into church, but haven't given proper advice on how to do it with social distancing, e.g. our church building would seat 150 but with social distancing we could get 15 people in church at one time, and even on a rota what the cost of proper cleaning would be impossible for a lot of small congregations! – Church of Ireland, Northern Ireland

As clergy are seen as key workers there has been no mention of clergy being provided with PPE and I think that is something that the Governments and faith communities need to plan for. – Catholic Diocesan priest, Northern Ireland

Religious communities [should be] valued more for their input as I have not experienced the notion that we are key workers. – Evangelical, Republic of Ireland

Government should understand that it is not just health service workers that are front lines, the clergy/pastors/ministers are engaging in same assignments every day. There is even greater demand on them now during Covid-19 and if not for their service and being on ground things could have been worse. – Evangelical, Republic of Ireland

I am concerned that nobody at leadership level seems to be working on how we can return to regular Mass schedule and at the same time limit the size of the congregations to ensure social distancing. The theory is fine but what actually happens on Sundays when too many people want to attend a given Mass? Do we have bouncers to turn people away? Pre-registration and tickets? Will be we asking people to attend Mass once a month instead of once a week? I also worry about how the parish can survive financially with reduced numbers contributing to collections every Sunday. I wonder if people will have got out of the habit of attending Mass? – Catholic Diocesan priest, Republic of Ireland

Others criticized the national or regional leadership of their own faith communities. A Church of Ireland minister characterized their bishop's leadership as 'poor', while Presbyterians remarked that their headquarters should have had 'a plan on how to deal with a crisis' and provided more support 'for using new technologies and digital platforms.'

But most concerns were expressed by Catholics, including criticisms of the bishops' leadership at national level. These criticisms should be seen in the context of the Catholic Church as the largest faith-based body on the island, which has historically exercised vast social and political influence. Expectations for the Catholic Church to demonstrate national-

level leadership, including interaction with politicians, are undoubtedly higher than for Protestant denominations and other faith traditions. There were criticisms that the bishops had not challenged Government restrictions which in effect prohibited Catholics from receiving the sacraments: *'letting people think reception of Holy Communion and absolution could be so easily designated as unimportant'*.

Given the central place given to receiving the Eucharist in Catholicism, this issue has been framed in terms of religious freedom: *'It will not be forgotten that in a dark time, the sacraments were withdrawn from the faithful'*. It also has been raised in other countries in which religious gatherings have been banned during the pandemic, especially by Catholics (but also by some Protestants). So the island of Ireland is not unique in this regard. But some priests agreed with the bishops' approach of closely following Government restrictions; in fact, one priest was 'horrified' that, in his view, bishops were moving too quickly to re-open churches in Northern Ireland. Another expressed concern about divergence in practice between dioceses, stating that he was *'disappointed that they could not act as one in terms of funerals, Covid grants, opening/closing churches'*.

Where do we Go from Here?

It is hoped that the results of this survey can inform and improve the practices of faith communities as the people of this island continue to negotiate the effects of the pandemic and lockdown.

The survey findings affirm the important role that faith leaders and communities continue to play across society, documenting the scale and character of their services.

Signs of increased interest in prayer and (online) religious practice indicate that faith communities may play a more important role during than pandemic than might have been expected, given recent trends of increased secularization, north and south.

Here, we offer some final observations and recommendations, in the knowledge that some faith communities are acting on these already:

Observations and Recommendations:

Faith leaders are coping relatively well with the added stresses of the pandemic, but a significant minority would like further information or support about dealing with stress. Others feel they are not themselves receiving adequate pastoral care. Faith communities should put mechanisms in place for pastoral care for their own pastors, especially given the emotional toll of conducting funerals and comforting the bereaved.

There is an increased desire for prayer among faith communities and the wider population. Faith communities should provide ample opportunities and resources to facilitate personal and (socially-distanced) corporate prayer. Prayer, including opportunities for grieving and lament, may become more important as illnesses and deaths increase.

Moving faith online has created new opportunities for religious practice. In some cases, lay volunteers have assisted faith leaders in moving faith online. This is an opportunity to increase and enhance lay involvement in many aspects of ministry and should be encouraged.

Religious practice will continue to feature a mixture of online and in-person elements. Faith communities should invest in training and resources for faith leaders and laity to develop blended online/offline ministries.

Many faith communities face a bleak financial future. Even if there is an increased interest in religion during the pandemic, it is likely that decreased revenues will lead to the closure of church buildings and the scaling-back of ministries, including those providing valuable social services.

The pastoral and financial challenges facing faith communities are more likely to be met with collaboration, rather than competition, among faith communities and secular partners.