COVID-19, Christian Faith and Wellbeing

A report prepared for the Arthur Rank Centre.

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1. Introduction

Following decades of 'peacetime', which has allowed uninterrupted worship and engagement in the practice of one's faith for communities across the U.K, the unexpected advent of the COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt change to such activities in early 2020. Normally able to take for granted the ability to worship together, engage in faith-based activities and interact with associated communities, faith-based groups in the U.K have had to react, adapt, and reassess how to continue their engagement with their spiritual beliefs. While some Christian leaders internationally challenged government authority decisions to temporarily stop congregations at places of worship, and others held clandestine services against government regulation, churches in the U.K were forced to close on the 24th March 2020 with seemingly little resistance.

Such closures did, however, create faith-related challenges, most obviously in the curtailment of religious expression normally practiced in groups and congregations. As social distancing and shielding measures were implemented nationally, Christian denominations were required to negotiate new means of engaging in worship and staying connected with their faith, their congregations and their varying communities. This may have taken the form of greater emphasis on private or family worship, but for many it may also have stimulated a greater interest in the use of technology and more novel forms of engagement and worship.

This study examines how communities of the Christian faith transitioned to new forms of engagement and worship during lockdown, identifying preferred means of engagement and connection and the general effects of the COVID-19 crisis on individuals across the country. It seeks to identify where people sought information from, and whether beliefs, levels of worship, and connections were affected and in what way.

The research aimed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and the related curtailment to everyday activities might have affected i) individual and community engagement with faith ii) how individuals of faith engaged with worship during lockdown and iii) the ability of individuals to connect with their communities during lockdown.

The Arthur Rank Centre provides resources for rural Christians and churches, with a specific emphasis on being 'Together Apart' during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research will feed into their current response to the pandemic, inform efforts to re-engage people with their faiths, and assist in preparations for any potentially similar outbreaks in the future.

2. Method

Using an online survey software provider domiciled in the EU, 36 questions were sent out as a link by the Arthur Rank Centre to a sample size of approximately 2,000 individuals in their community network, as well as being promoted on various social media sites, in order to document the transitions that occurred in respondents' worship practices and levels of community engagement. The majority of questions were multiple-choice, although a small proportion were open-text, allowing for a variety of thoughts and opinions regarding the experience of COVID-19 on faith and worship.

In order to measure potential changes in feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and in keeping with the Government's Loneliness Strategy, the national indicators as guided by the Office of National Statistics were incorporated into the survey[1]. This measures loneliness in two ways, the first measure used three indirect questions[2] and the second using one direct question. The adoption of this multi-measured approach allows for the valid and reliable measurement of loneliness, as well as encouraging more honest responses where participants might be reluctant to admit to feeling lonely when asked directly.

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[1] ONS, Measuring loneliness: guidance for use of the national indicators on surveys: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/measuringlonelinessguidanceforuseofthenationalindicatorsonsurveys

[2] 1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship? 2. How often do you feel left out? 3. How often do you feel isolated from others?
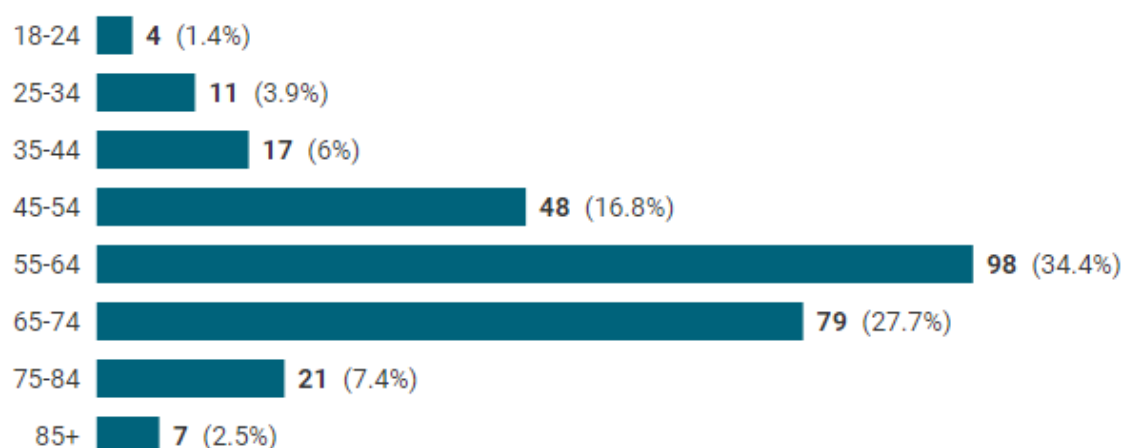
3. Results

The survey received a total of 288 responses, with the survey running for three weeks between August and September.

3.1 Sample profile

3.1.1 Age

The following proportion of age groups were represented in the survey (Figure 1):

18-24	**4** (1.4%)
25-34	**11** (3.9%)
35-44	**17** (6%)
45-54	**48** (16.8%)
55-64	**98** (34.4%)
65-74	**79** (27.7%)
75-84	**21** (7.4%)
85+	**7** (2.5%)

Figure 1. Age of survey participants, as a percentage

The majority of respondents fell in the over 55 category, with only 11.3 per cent made up of people under 44.

3.1.2 Gender

Just over 33 per cent of respondents were male and 66 per cent female, with fewer than one per cent preferring not to disclose their gender.

3.1.3 Sexual orientation

94 per cent reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual, 1.8 per cent as gay or lesbian, 2.1 per cent as bisexual, and 2.1 per cent of respondents preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation.

3.1.4 Ethnic Group

White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British) made up 95.1 per cent of respondents, with 3.2 per cent reporting as white (any other background), 0.7 per cent as mixed/multiple ethnic groups, 0.4 per cent as Asian/Asian British - Indian and 0.4 per cent reporting as white Irish.

3.1.5 Denomination

Over 50 per cent of respondents identified as Anglican (57.5%), while Methodists made up 13.3 per cent of respondents and United Reform Church 11.6 per cent. 8.1 per cent of respondents identified as 'Christian with no allegiance' with the remainder identifying as Baptist, Catholic, agnostic, Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEP), Quaker, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Elim Pentecostal, Pentecostal, Apostolic, and the United Church of Canada (Figure 2).
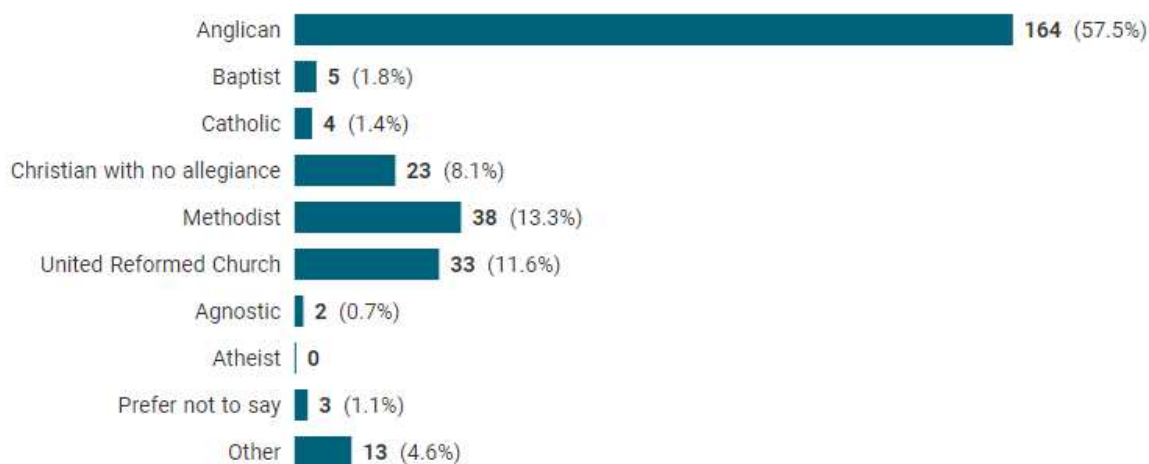
Figure 2. Denomination of survey participants, as a percentage

3.2 The 'situation' of respondents during COVID-19

3.2.1 Location during the outbreak

The majority of respondents (96.9%) were located in England during the outbreak, with only 2.1 per cent in Wales, one respondent in Northern Ireland and no respondents in Scotland. 2 individuals reported having not been in the U.K at all during the outbreak.

3.2.2 Type of location

Almost half of all respondents reported having resided in a village during the outbreak, with 23.2 per cent of the remainder residing in an urban setting, 23.2 per cent residing in a small town and 4.6 per cent living in a more dispersed/remote location, at the time of the crisis (Figure 3).
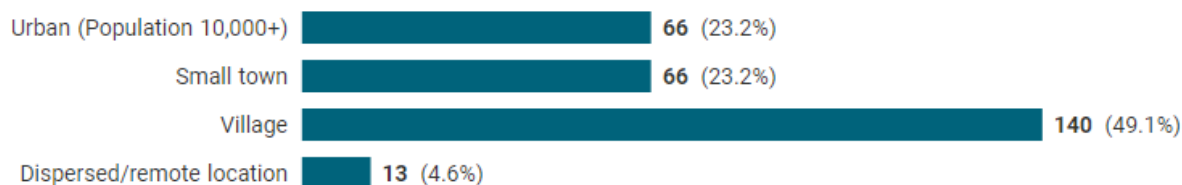
Figure 3. Type of location lived in by participants during lockdown

3.2.3 Living situation

20 per cent of respondents were living alone during the outbreak, while 77.2 per cent were living with family members and 1.8 per cent with friends. Of those stating that they lived alone during the crisis, those in the 75-84 year old category were more likely to live alone than any other age group. Two individuals in the 'other' category reported living with lodgers and one individual alone with a young daughter.

3.2.4 Lockdown circumstances
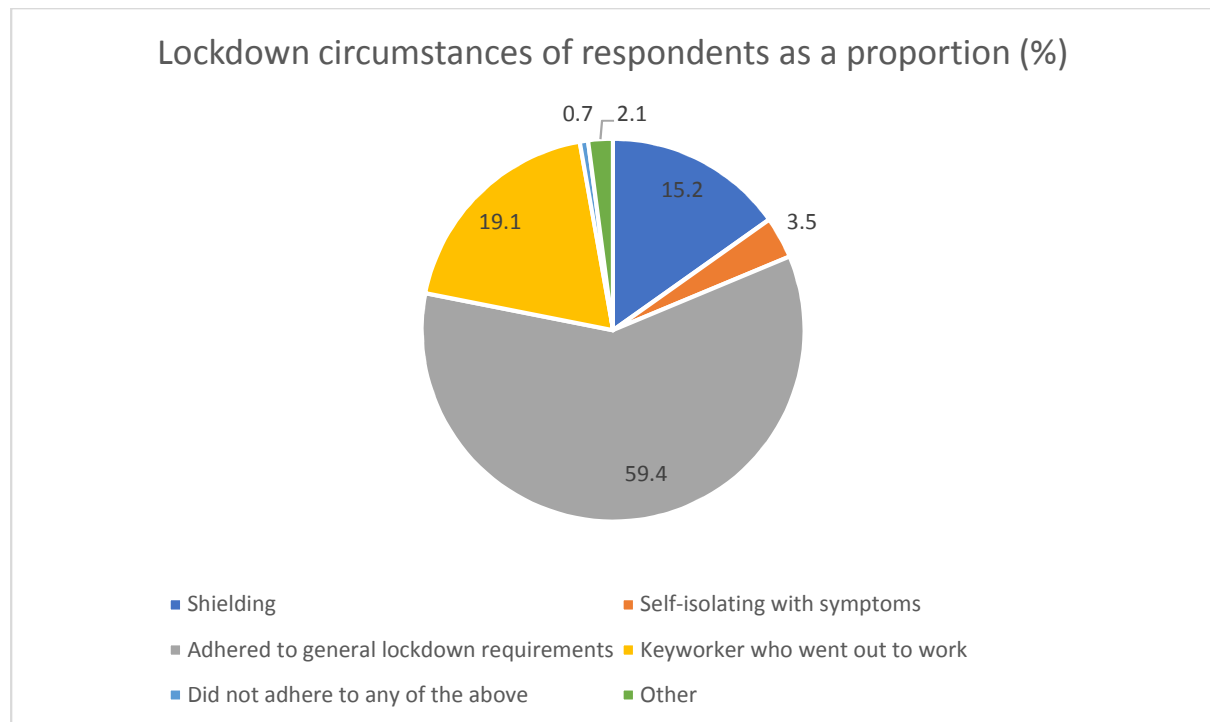
Figure 4. Proportion of respondents according to their lockdown circumstances (%)

Almost 60 per cent of respondents reported having adhered to general lockdown requirements, with 19.1 per cent still going out to work as key workers. 15.2 per cent were shielding due to being over 70 or being at higher risk of complications and only 3.5 per cent choosing to self-isolate due to showing symptoms. Of those reporting in the 'other' category, one individual had to self-isolate due to a recent trip overseas, and three were shielding on behalf of another at-risk family member (Figure 4).

3.2.5 Coronavirus symptoms

Proportion of respondents showing symptoms during lockdown (%)

1.8
5.3
9.1
83.9

- No, no symptoms
- Yes, mild symptoms
- Yes, severe symptoms
- I don't know
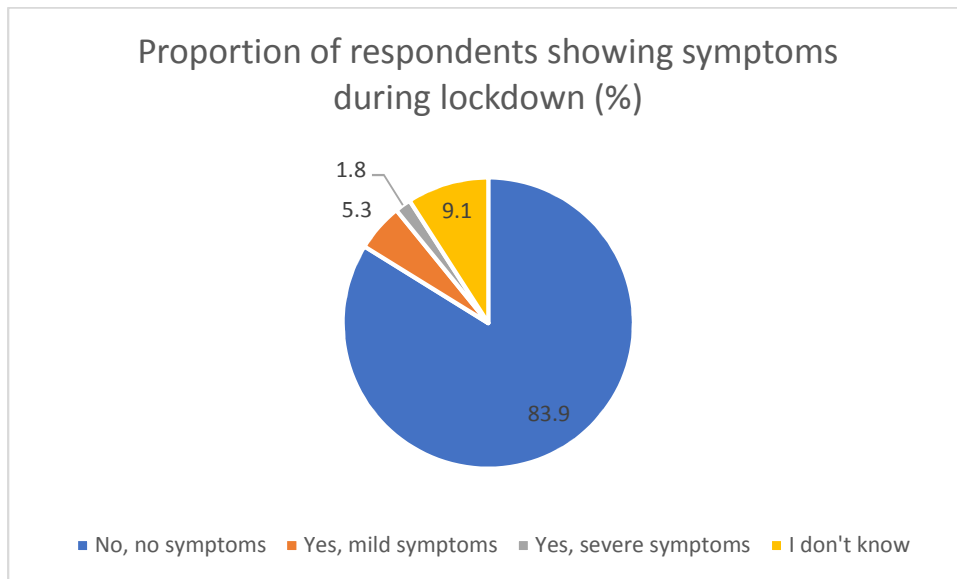
Figure 5. Proportion of respondents showing symptoms during lockdown (%)

The majority of respondents reported having experienced no symptoms of Coronavirus at the time of the survey, while 5.3 per cent reported experiencing mild symptoms and 1.8 per cent experienced severe symptoms. No respondents reported having been hospitalised with COVID-19 symptoms (Figure 5).

3.2.6 Effect of the crisis on employment situation

Employment situation of respondents as a proportion %

Categories (x-axis): Retired, Unemployed, Continued to work, Student, Furloughed, Lost job, Hours reduced, Hours increased, Gained employment, Other
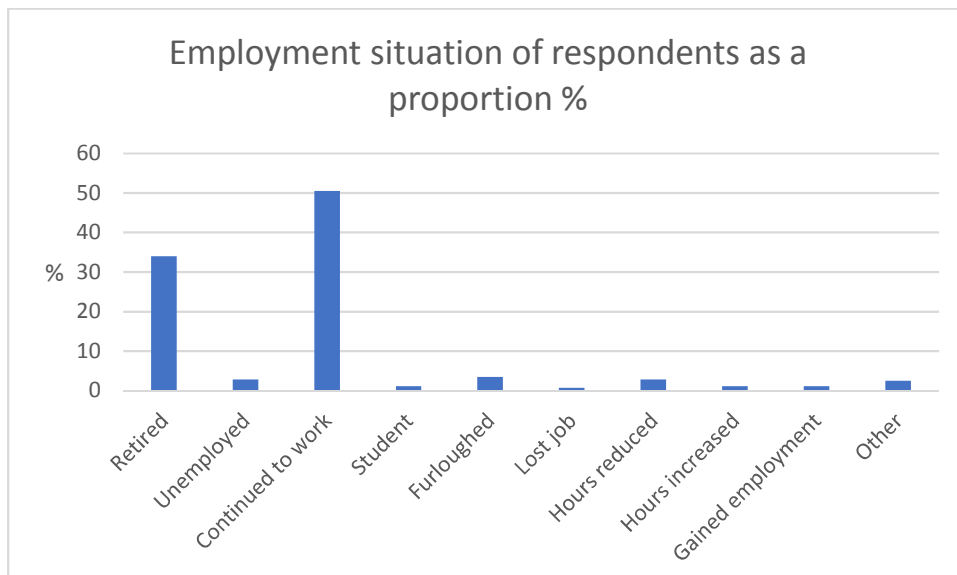
Figure 6: Employment situation of respondents as a proportion (%)

50 per cent of respondents reported that they were able to continue working, either as key workers or from home where possible. 34 per cent were already retired, which is unsurprising given the age profile of the sample, 2.8 per cent were unemployed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, and 1.1 per

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cent were students (Figure 6). Therefore, the effect on the employment situation for the survey respondents of working age appears to have been minimal, with only 5.3 per cent of those being furloughed, 1.1 per cent losing their job as a result of the crisis, and 4.3 per cent experiencing a reduction in their work hours. 3.2 per cent either had their hours increased or gained employment during the crisis.

Of those who identified as 'other' in the survey, two classified themselves as homemakers, two were local church leaders, two were self-employed (both of whom were unable to work due to the crisis) and one identified as a full-time carer for an individual who was shielding.

3.3 Lockdown and wellbeing

3.3.1 Social isolation and loneliness

Findings revealed that the effects of lockdown impacted individuals differently in terms of experiencing feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Overall scores (using the UCLA scale as per ONS measuring loneliness guidance) demonstrate that feelings of loneliness as measured by the three indicators increased during lockdown (Figure 7).

This was also the case when individual scores were compared between pre and during-lockdown periods. While UCLA loneliness scores revealed that many experienced no change in their experience of loneliness as a result of lockdown (Figure 8), 25.3 per cent of respondents scores revealed that they felt more lonely, with the majority of these only mildly, while 14.5 per cent revealed that they actually felt less lonely as a result of lockdown. Reasons for this are not known but might be attributed to increases in 'neighbourliness', connection to community support groups and changes in behaviours of family and friends. Survey data revealed that under 45s were slightly more likely to feel lonely some of all of the time than other age groups both before COVID-19 and during, while men were less likely to feel lonely during COVID-19 than women. No correlation was discovered between type of location lived in (rural/remote) and levels of social isolation but pre-COVID 19 those living alone were revealed as likely to feel somewhat lonely more than those not living alone, while during the crisis they were more likely to feel very lonely compared to people living with family or friends. These results are not dissimilar to the ONS' analysis of Coronavirus and loneliness[3], which also suggests that individuals between the ages of 55 and 69 years who live with friends or family are less likely to feel lonely than those falling in other categories. People falling into younger age groups are, according to ONS data, more likely to have experienced lockdown loneliness.

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[3] ONS. (2020). Coronavirus and loneliness, Great Britain: 3 April to 3 May 2020: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandlonelinessgreatbritain/3aprilto3may2020
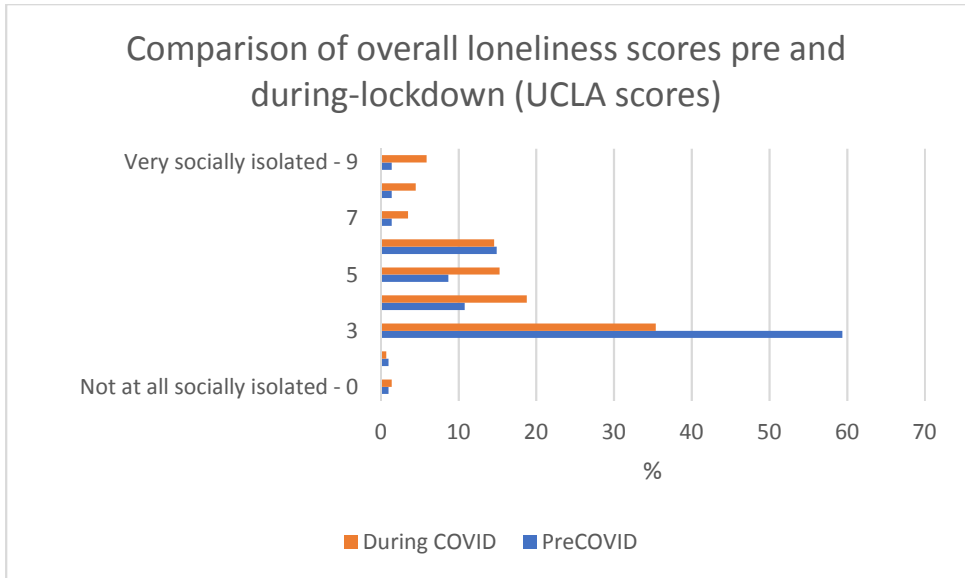
Figure 7: Comparison of overall loneliness scores pre and during-lockdown as a proportion of respondents (%), using the UCLA 'indirect questions' scores
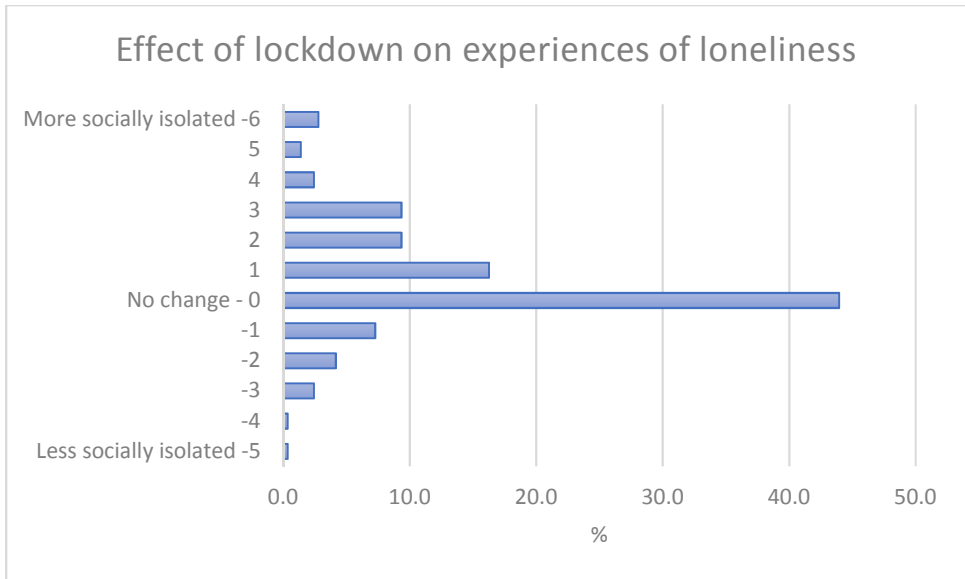
Figure 8: Effect of lockdown on experiences of loneliness, comparing pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 scores, as a proportion of respondents (%), using the UCLA 'indirect questions' scores

With regards to experiences of loneliness as reported when asked directly, Figure 9 demonstrates how feelings of 'direct' loneliness amongst respondents increased as a result of lockdown. While no significant correlation was discovered between age and 'direct' feelings of loneliness pre-COVID-19, it was revealed that under 45s were slightly more likely to feel lonely often or always than other age groups. This was in spite of the over 65 age group being more likely to live alone. Men were also less likely to feel lonely during the crisis than women, although when queried directly, men in general are reported to be less likely to admit to experiencing loneliness. Those in urban areas were more likely to feel lonely than individuals living in small towns or dispersed/remote locations, according to the survey. With regards to living arrangements, again those living alone, when asked the 'direct' loneliness question, were more likely to feel lonely occasionally pre-COVID compared to those living with friends or family, and this increased to those living alone being more likely to feel alone often/always or some of the time than others during the crisis.
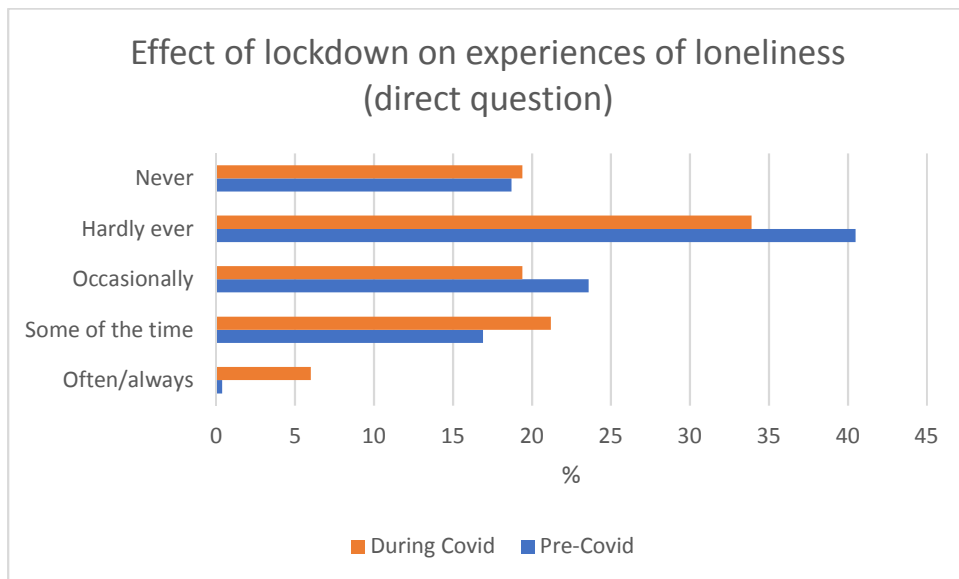
Figure 9: Effect of lockdown on experiences of loneliness (direct question), comparing pre_COVID-19 and during COVID-19 scores, by percentage

3.3.2 Levels of support
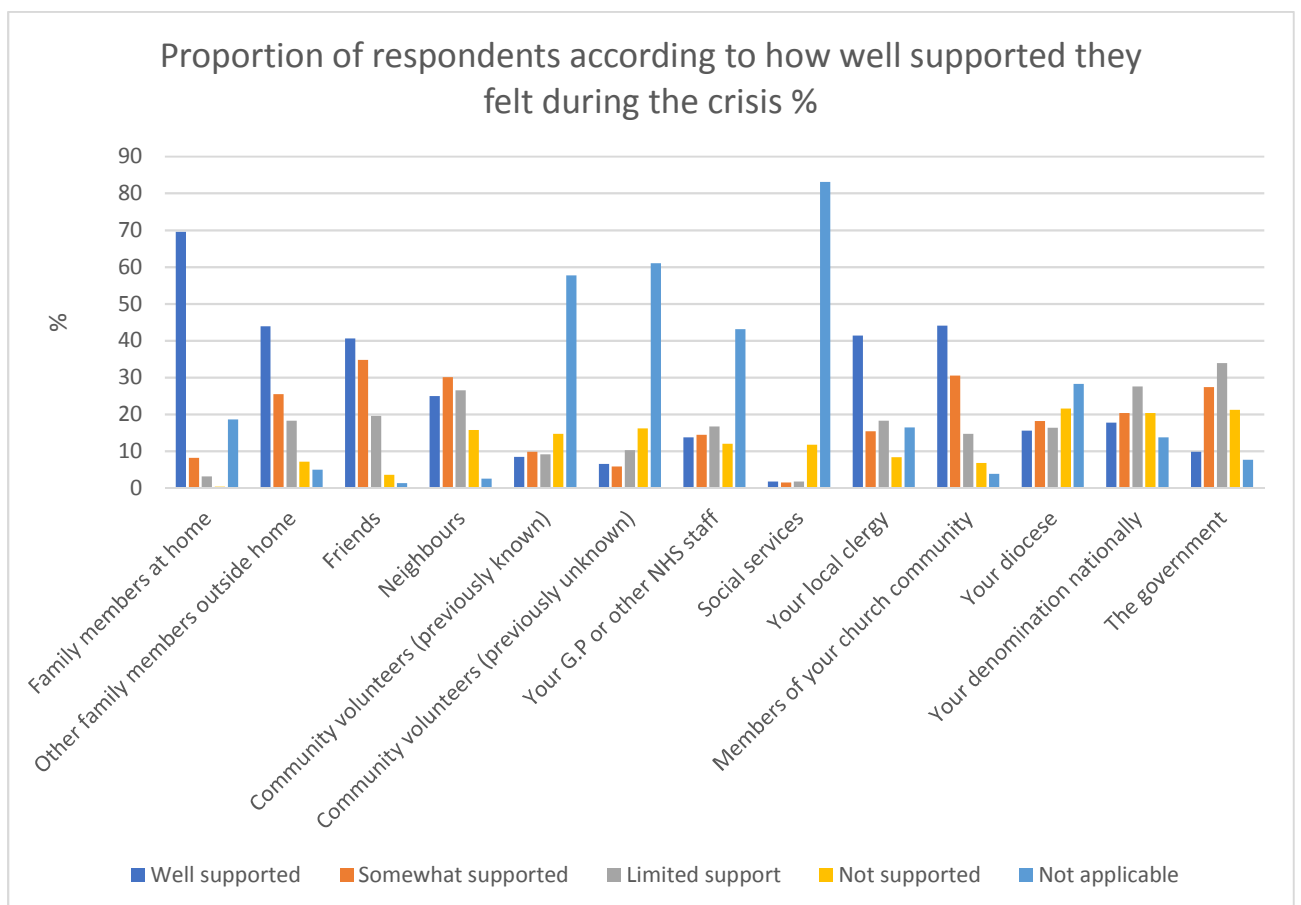
Figure 10: Proportion of respondents according to how well supported they felt during the crisis as a percentage

Perceptions regarding levels of support received by varying systems show, unsurprisingly, that family members at home provided the highest level of support, while respondents felt less supported by community volunteers (known or unknown) and social services. Although, for these groups, a large proportion of respondents stated 'not applicable'. As a category it has been retained, however, to outline where respondents might not have received, needed, or been offered such levels of support. With regards to faith communities, 44.1 per cent reported feeling well supported by members of their church communities. Support by the local clergy was also high at 41.4 per cent feeling well supported. The diocese/district appeared to make respondents feel somewhat less supported as did national denomination representation. Views were mixed regarding government support although few felt they were 'well supported' (Figure 10).

3.3.3 Volunteering

41.2 per cent of respondents stated that the level at which they volunteered increased as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. 19 per cent reported decreasing their levels of volunteering, while 39.8 per cent stated that there was no change in the level at which they volunteered. Of those who decreased the level of volunteering, 75.9 per cent said that this was because they were already volunteering prior to the crisis, which suggests that the pandemic impeded their ability to continue to volunteer at the same level as pre-COVID-19 times. Of those who reported an increase in their volunteering activities, 71.6 per cent stated that they would be likely to continue volunteering into the future.

Reasons given for a decrease in the ability to volunteer included: work commitments, home-schooling, falling into one of the 'at-risk' categories and being required to shield.

Reasons provided for an increase in the act of volunteering included: being furloughed and having more time available to help (e.g. at a food bank), developing a greater desire to be of use to the local community as a result of the crisis, and wanting to connect with neighbours, some of whom were perhaps previously unknown.

While some people were unable to volunteer during the crisis at all, due to the aforementioned reasons, several respondents reported changing their volunteering approach in order to continue providing support. Such measures included: phoning or connecting online instead of visiting in person, setting up WhatsApp groups, and/or donating more to either foodbanks or charities. A small proportion of respondents also participated in setting up not-for-profit schemes as a result of COVID-19, such as fruit and vegetable delivery services, or transport services to and from hospital.

Several respondents mentioned having had a desire to volunteer during the crisis but either could not due to work or family commitments (e.g. home schooling, lack of childcare facilities or shielding on behalf of an 'at risk' family member) or offered their time to volunteer to a variety of organisations but received no reply.

> "We offered to help, but there were no responses to our offers"

One respondent mentioned how, 'the Food Bank was inundated with young volunteers and as an older person I was not called on to work for them as I had done previously'.

3.4 COVID-19 and faith, worship and engagement

3.4.1 The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on feelings towards faith and community

The multifaceted experience of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon the faith and social connections of the participants in a variety of ways, as can be seen in Table 1. Overall, responses appear to have been positive, with the majority believing that they coped very well during the crisis, and large numbers praying more, feeling closer to their faith, God, family and local communities. Where physical distance played more of a role, such as in the ability to see friends or attend church, feelings were split between feeling closer to, or further from, friends or church.

Table 1: Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on feelings towards faith and community

		No change		
Coped very well	59.4	30.6	10	**Did not cope**
Prayed more	45.2	48.8	6	**Prayed less**
Felt closer to my faith	35.7	55.1	9.2	**Felt further from my faith**
Felt closer to God	40.3	52.3	7.4	**Felt further from God**
Felt closer to my family	48.4	38.8	12.8	**Felt further from my family**
Felt closer to my friends	25.1	50.5	24.4	**Felt further from my friends**
Felt closer to my local community	39.2	46.6	14.1	**Felt further from my local community**
Felt closer to my church	25.9	46.5	27.7	**Felt further from my church**

A further examination of the data reveals that respondents under the age of 45 were more likely to state that they coped less well in comparison to other age categories responding to the same question. Those over the age of 65 reported having coped very well. A similar pattern revealed itself with regards to feelings of being closer to or further from a faith, as under 45 year olds were likely to feel less close to their faith during the crisis while over 65 year olds proved the opposite. Age, gender, type of location lived in during the crisis and living arrangements appeared to have no impact on level of prayer, feeling closer to or further from God, or feeling closer to or further from one's community. However, those living alone reported having felt further from their families compared to other categories, while those in the over 65 category were less likely to feel further from friends during the crisis. Under 45s, however, were more likely to do so. Under 45s were also more likely to feel further from their church during Coronavirus than over 65s.

The most common reason given for developing a closer relationship with faith during the Coronavirus outbreak was the increased availability of time and space in the respondents' lives.

> "When in total isolation, there was more time to pray, read scripture, meditate and log into various services online"

> "Although I desperately missed attending live services - the additional time I spent alone during lockdown gave me time for self-reflection of my faith"

This was closely followed by the formation of deeper connections with others helping to also deepen one's faith.

> "We loved our neighbour in new ways"

"I recognised how much my faith was connected to and inherent in great community action"

"Perhaps because of the friendship and support that I had received from the people at my church. I've also been able to listen to a lot of choral music and pick up the Bible a bit more"

"There was very specific guidance within our church about looking out for one another, network[s] of making phone calls and small group online zooms. We all became part of the support network and it worked very well"

Other explanations provided by those respondents stating that the situation had made them feel closer to their faith included the use of technology allowing for greater creativity in faith exploration, the harsh reality of the COVID-19 disease driving a deeper connection to faith, the act of physical isolation stimulating a deepening of faith, and a more general trust in God being strengthened during the outbreak.

"Facing unknown and familiar times, as well as feeling isolated from loved ones, meant a deeper need to turn to the arms of our Father"

For those who declared feeling further from their faith, the principal reason provided was isolation from friends, family, and the church community. While many embraced the use of technology for worship and community connection, others found it inaccessible and clunky, stating that it enhanced their experience of feeling 'separated'.

"Not going to church seems to have caused me to lapse somewhat in regular prayer"

"I struggled when people wanted to only focus on positives a false optimism that felt lonely and unreal within my faith community"

"1) Struggled a lot with depression during strict lockdown which always makes me feel more isolated from everything 2) Found the lack of routine difficult to cope with and made concentrating on Bible study and prayer harder 3) Everything felt very 'unreal' which affected every aspect of life, including faith"

Poor leadership was also blamed for changes in feelings of 'closeness to one's faith' by a number of respondents, referring ether to the local church or to more senior church members.

"Failure of our Church AND the rest to be open for those who don't normally use them and were in need of spiritual support - it seemed that they had turned their backs on people just when they were needed most"

"Covid-19 challenges the church to go forward not back and I am not sure we as a local church will be able to make that big step. I long for change and new ways of being church and am very disappointed that this will probably not happen as much as I had hoped for. I feel like I want to resign as Vicar and be a normal person not the leader anymore, and this really has disturbed me in my calling"
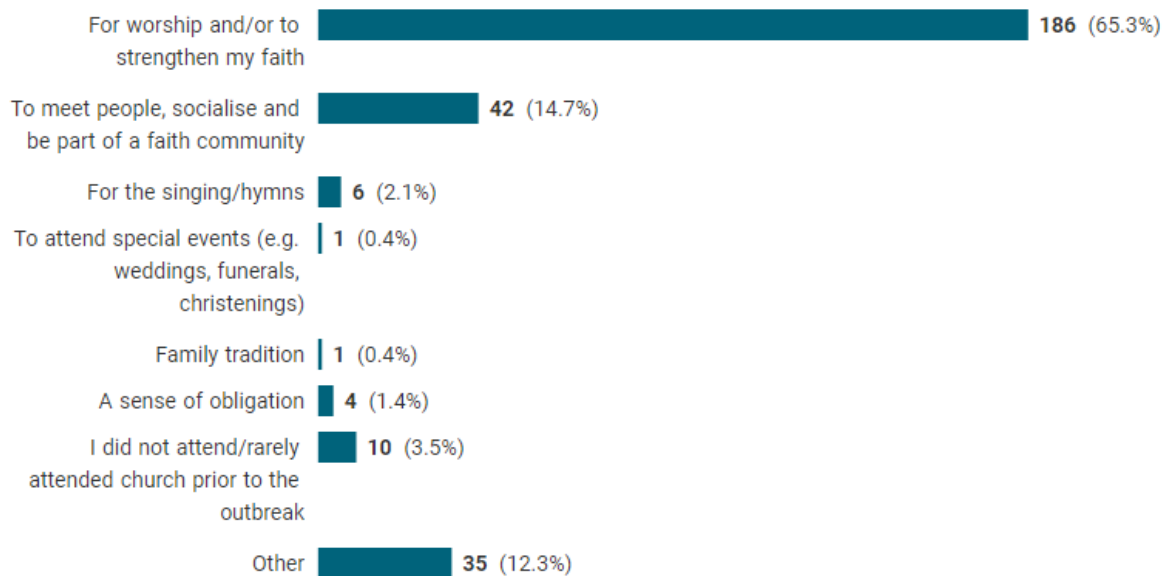
3.4.2 Reasons to attend church prior to the outbreak

The principal reason for physical attendance at church prior to the outbreak was given as 'for worship and/or to strengthen my faith' (Figure 11). However, 14.7 per cent admitted that their main

reason for attending church was to meet people, socialise and be part of a faith community, demonstrating the significance of the act of attendance to the lives of individuals above and beyond simply that of a place for worship.

Those in the 45-64 age group were less likely than those of other age categories to attend church for social reasons. There was no correlation between reasons for church attendance and type of location lived in (e.g. rural/remote).

Those answering as 'other' were largely made up of members of the clergy.

Reason	Count (%)
For worship and/or to strengthen my faith	186 (65.3%)
To meet people, socialise and be part of a faith community	42 (14.7%)
For the singing/hymns	6 (2.1%)
To attend special events (e.g. weddings, funerals, christenings)	1 (0.4%)
Family tradition	1 (0.4%)
A sense of obligation	4 (1.4%)
I did not attend/rarely attended church prior to the outbreak	10 (3.5%)
Other	35 (12.3%)

Figure 11: Reasons to attend church as a proportion of respondents

Of those who reported rarely or never physically attending church, the reasons supplied were i) questionable belief ii) inability to sing so struggled with the hymns iii) lack of time iv) health issues and v) the feeling that church attendance was becoming 'irrelevant'.

> "I began to find it irrelevant.... separate from the people around me, too religious.. hostile even - them and us , better than others, narrow views on heaven, hell, sexual orientation etc. [During the pandemic] I met in a small group where we discussed our faith, challenged views, encouraged each other to be real and honest, cared for one another and got some really good, thoughtful, profound Bible teaching - helping us to be in the world in a normal way! Relatable!"

3.4.3 Engagement with worship

Due to the forced closure of churches across the U.K during the Coronavirus pandemic, it was necessary for members of the clergy, as well as parishioners themselves, to develop new and innovative means of worship and ways to actively engage with faith. Figure 12 demonstrates how, prior to the crisis, over 95 per cent of respondents attended church, with just over a quarter also belonging to a mid-week fellowship programme, and approximately 14 per cent of all respondents also regularly using radio and television resources. But very few used any other kind of service or resource, especially those provided online. Figure 12 shows how significantly these behaviours changed over the course of just several months, with over 50 per cent of respondents stating that they used either non-interactive live streaming of services, or interactive online services (such as zoom) during lockdown. Over a quarter reported using Facebook and 40 per cent turned to pre-

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recorded YouTube videos. While levels of private home worship with no guidance appeared to stay at a similar level to pre-COVID 19 times, levels of home worship with guidance increased by 117 per cent.

Other means of engaging *prior* to the outbreak referred to in the 'other' category included playing own music, meditation groups, participating in a church choir, prayer groups, podcasts, and other group worship arrangements.

Other means of engaging with worship *during* the outbreak referred to in the 'other' category included playing own music, video services hosted on church websites, Christian podcasts, and a Bible study text messaging group. It was revealed that some mid-week fellowships were able to continue, despite the outbreak, using other means. Interestingly, one respondent stated that online interaction was a challenge for the particular congregation to whom she belonged due to internet availability, as 'so few of our congregation have access'.

It is important to remember that not all of the activities highlighted in the study are available to all members of the community, due to either limited bandwidth for online activities, a lack of internet altogether, or a lack of the associated knowledge or skills to use it. This survey is biased towards those who are computer literate and it is possible that responses belonging to individuals who are less computer literate might have been very different to those collated here.

"Most [of our congregation] are very old and don't use computers"

Proportion of respondents engaging in type of activity

Pre-COVID-19   During COVID-19
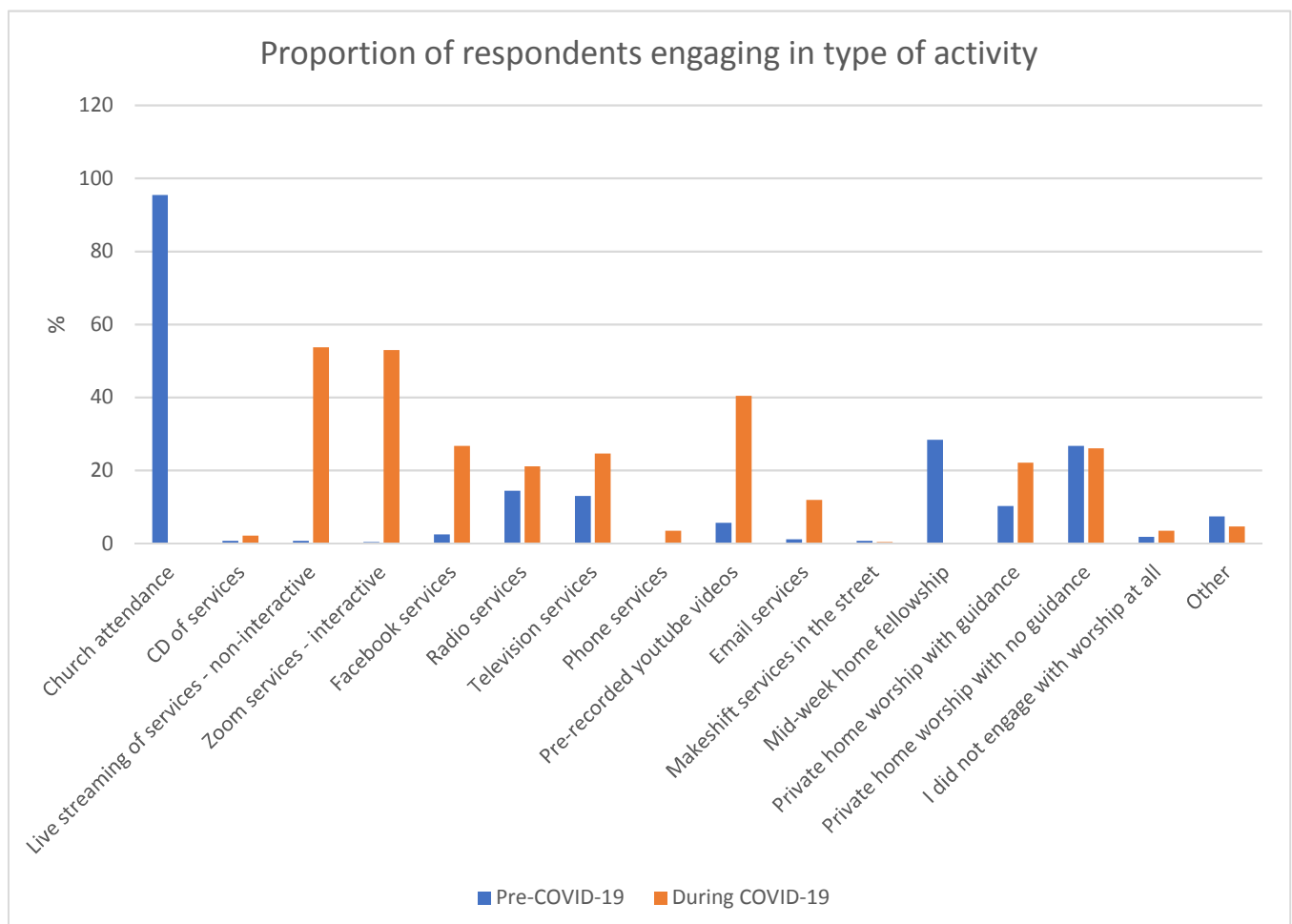
Figure 12: Proportion of respondents engaging in different worship and faith-related activities as a percentage

When probed further regarding preferences of means of worship, it was revealed that interactive zoom services were preferred above any other activity (Figure 13).

> "I did find zoom services very useful because of the companionship of others, though streamed services are also great"

> "Zoom services have given opportunities to meet and get to know people we had not encountered before"

> "I have loved zoom church. Seeing people's faces; the equality where we're all reduced to a square on a screen. The power of zoom to bring together parishioners from a [large] parish benefice; the simplicity of being able to worship from home and the opportunity for different types of worship"

However, as previously mentioned, some respondents recognised that zoom is not accessible to all members of faith communities.

> "Zoom is not for everyone and some do not have computers"

> "I have an aversion to computers. I use the computer when I have to but I generally dislike it"

The second most preferred means of engaging with faith and worship was pre-recorded YouTube videos.

> "YouTube services were the main ones available to us and we were both able to stick with routine and pause if necessary"

15 per cent of those respondents answering this question (n=198) preferred live streaming either over or alongside other forms of engagement.

> "Live streaming was preferable. it felt more as if it were a 'normal' service"

> "Live-streamed worship because I knew other people were sharing the same moment and I felt part of the regular church community"

The use of Facebook increased during lockdown and for some this was the preferred way to connect with others and their faith.

> "I joined a live service on Facebook and was able to interact with others as the service commenced. We became a Facebook community"

For others, email proved to be a popular way to connect.

> "The service prepared by my Church and emailed as an attachment which could be opened when and as often as you liked"

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> "[I preferred] emailed reflections, blogs and pre-recorded videos because I could control the pace, return to them and access at convenient times. Interactive, Zoom services too dependent on reliable broadband"

Being able to access resources at the convenience of the respondent proved important to many, including with regards to home worship with guidance.

> "[I preferred] home worship with guidance. Working from a service sheet. Was difficult at first. But it meant that I could do it in my own time. Have time to reflect on things. Stop, stay silent and pray more. I wish there were pauses/silent times in normal services"

And for a minority of survey respondents, resources and people accessed by phone proved to be most beneficial.

> "[I preferred] service via telephone from local church as it involved people I knew and was accessible to all with no need for technology"

Overall, the response to questions regarding novel or previously unused means of worship was positive.

> "I loved "service surfing" across a wide range of provision on the internet"

> "During lockdown I have started watching Songs of Praise - that has been wonderful as a thing I really miss is congregational singing. My church has done great online services but I've found it hard to "worship" through them (although the teaching has been good). An "outlet" to be able to sing along with full churches has been a lifeline"

> "It was good to be part of something bigger"

However, a minority (3%) stated that they did not believe that any of the available resources could sufficiently substitute church attendance.

> "None really compensate for worship in church with others, despite being good"
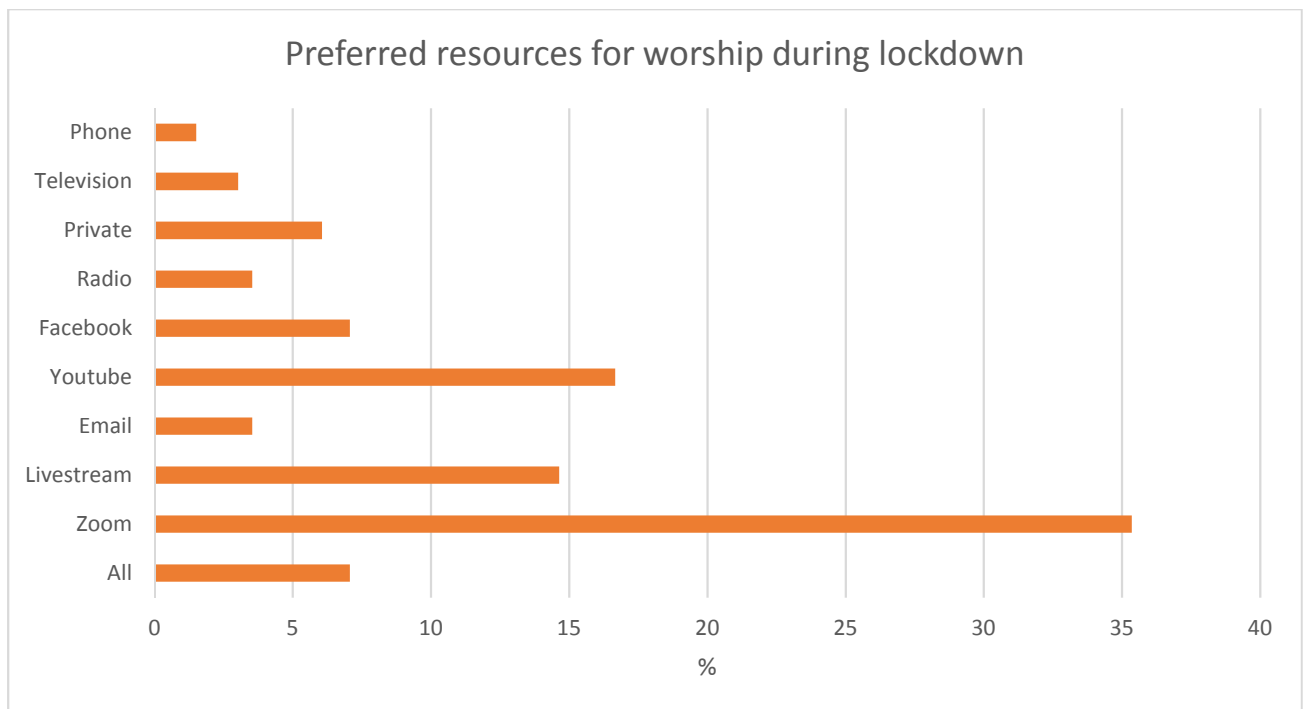
Figure 13: Preferred resources for worship and engagement during lockdown as a proportion of respondents, by percentage

3.4.4 Worship resources
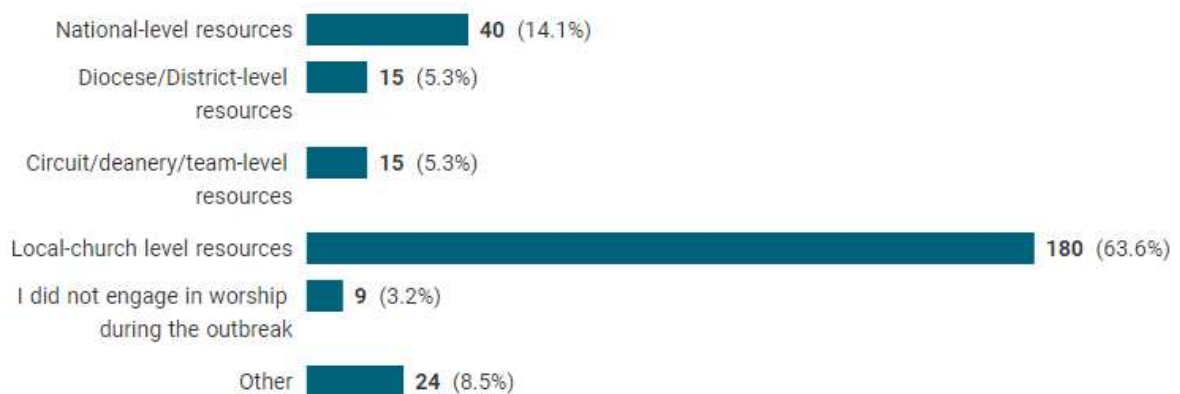
Figure 14: Perceived usefulness of provided resources according to level from which provided, as a percentage of proportion of respondents

The majority of respondents found local-level resources more useful than any other, and this was the same across all denominations (Figure 14). Members of the Anglican Church were slightly less satisfied than other denominations with national-level resources, while Methodists found their circuit/deanery/team-level resources much more useful than did any other denomination.

Others stated that they preferred to seek out their own resources rather than be provided them from any of the 'levels' stated, while others still questioned the need for 'resources' at all, in attempts to worship and celebrate one's faith.

With regards to how local churches might have improved the resources offered during the outbreak, some felt that they believed their local church had done all that they could, given 'the emergency situation'.

> "I am happy that my church provided the right kind of resource, both pastoral and spiritual"

However, for those who felt dissatisfied by the response of their local church, the following reasons were cited:

- Responses were overly geared towards the 'elderly congregation'
- (Conversely) the older generation and those without computers/internet were not appropriately considered in the design of responses.

> "I am concerned that those without internet access have been marginalised. Postal and telephone communication could be used"

- Resources and activities were not sufficiently engaging
- A lack of creativity in the design or execution of means provided

> "The services I did attend on zoom seemed to be exactly the same as they were previously in church - for me it felt like it was going through the motions without real connection. I did not find comfort or hope there"

- Limited interaction of members of the congregation
- Content design and execution monopolised by clergy members

> "I think it would have been better if there were others empowered to lead online worship, but it has taken a lot of time and local effort to enable this and build confidence. As a result I think what we had was too clergy led, at least initially"

> "Clergy [should be] more willing to embrace change, include others and not try to control everything"

> "One person dictated all the content or most of it"

Suggestions to improve responses included; the enablement of improved computer literacy among the congregation; greater levels of inclusivity in the design of content; a broader range of methods being utilised (such as phone, postal and online) to ensure that all members of the community are accessed; better pastoral work; shared worship with other local churches; and limited opening of church buildings for individual private prayer.

3.4.5 Effects of the outbreak on information-seeking behaviours

Changes in information-seeking behaviour as a result of the COVID-19 crisis

Before COVID-19 ■ During COVID-19
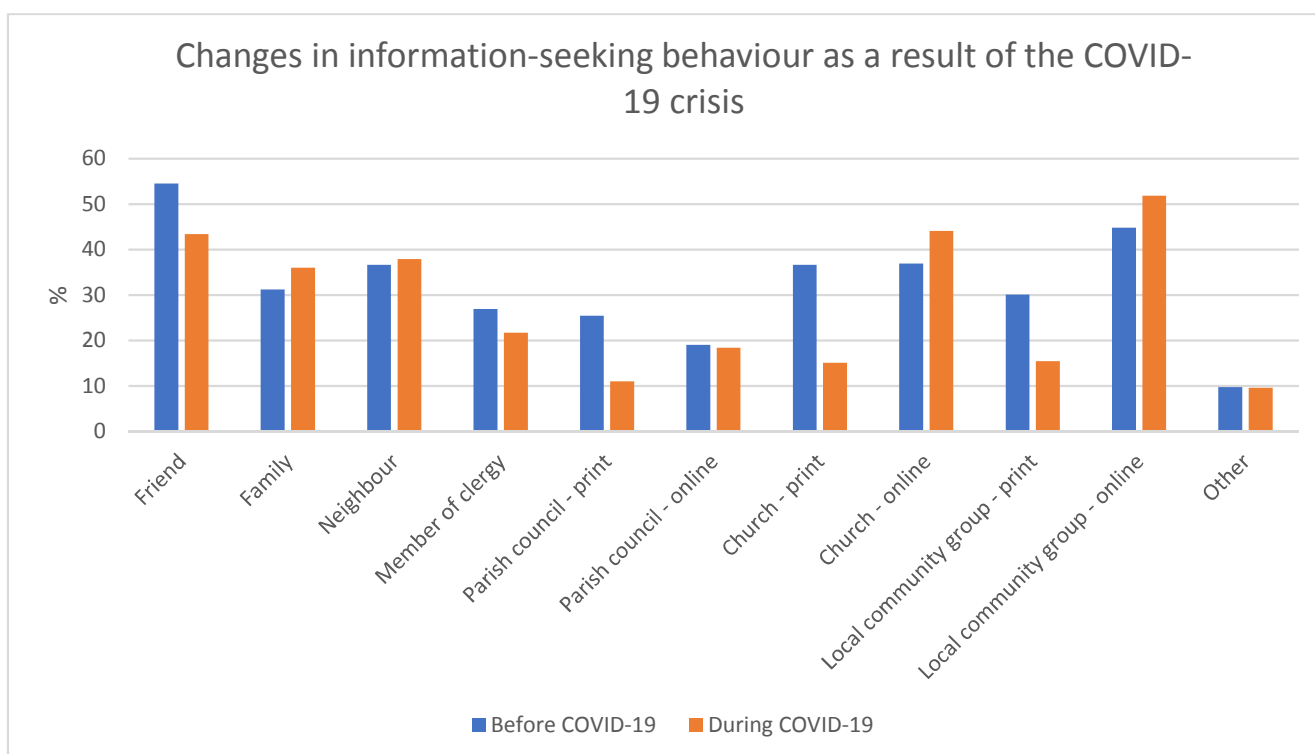
Figure 15: Proportion of respondents seeking information from specific sources, as a percentage

Findings demonstrate that lockdown and social distancing measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic did stimulate some changes in information-seeking behaviour (Figure 15). As a result of social distancing, fewer respondents sought information from friends, members of the clergy, and all printed forms of information whether from the parish council, the church, or local community groups. In contrast, the number of respondents seeking information from family members, and online platforms for the church or local community groups all increased during lockdown. The reasons for such changes are likely to be attributed to a decrease in levels of engagement with friends or other individuals outside of the family unit, as well as a decrease in accessibility to print resources due to leaving the house less frequently if at all, or the actual process of printing itself being affected by the crisis. However, it is possible that a gap exists whereby the need for printed information by some respondents is not being met due to a failure to recognise demand by suppliers, as well as a failure to identify and access those in need of such resources. While online platforms have proven to be extremely important as sources of information during the crisis, for those who are not computer literate, any potential gap in matching printed information resources to needs could be extremely detrimental. The role of printed and other information sources in the lives of those less likely or able to use information technology at times of crises requires further study.

3.4.6 Changes in general behaviour (i.e. going elsewhere)

The above section refers to information-seeking behaviour with regard to *type* of resource. This section further explores *sources* of faith-based resources and whether people changed their behaviours with regards to where they chose to source their faith-based engagement experiences from due to constraints and opportunities arising from lockdown.

52.5 per cent of survey respondents admitted seeking information and resources for worship from sources/people/places/other churches that they 'might not have expected to prior to the outbreak'.

No significant differences in behaviour existed between different denominations. Prior to COVID-19, it is likely that few Christian faith-based institutions opened up their services in the way that many did during lockdown using online platforms, especially for live streaming and interactive services. Opportunities therefore arose for inquisitive Christians to 'visit' other churches or services.

Following comments provided by 124 respondents, the reasons supplied for changes in behaviour fall loosely into the following:

- Because so many resources suddenly became available, across so many sources

  "Geographical boundaries were no longer relevant"

- To add variety and richness to worship

  "Links to a southern group of parishes, daily blogs from a lively bishop, weekly blogs from other vicars. Really uplifting. My diocese so boring and outdated in comparison!"

- Local services did not meet needs

  "I got to worship in a style I liked and found helpful, rather than what was on offer locally"

- To guide thinking around faith
- Sudden accessibility to previously inaccessible sources became available e.g. cathedral streamed worship, Taize daily services, and other friends and family member's church services.

  "Was able to visit churches some distance away; also able to visit churches 'unseen'"

- Curiosity as to 'what others do' and how they were faring during lockdown
- Own church had no online service
- Provided opportunity to hear other speakers
- Greater availability of resources allowed for greater levels of creativity for worship
- To reconnect with clergy from areas of the country previously lived

  "We "visited" old churches that we had been to in previous years, it was great seeing what they got up to and how they've changed. We would not have done this if it weren't for lockdown putting everything online"

- Enjoying the ability to attend more than one service on any given day/week
- To find a 'new' local church to attend post-lockdown (by visiting many online services)
- To sing more
- To widen the search for ways to connect with God, find community, hope and peace
- Emotionally 'easier' to view services at other churches

Many respondents appeared particularly drawn to resources and services provided by cathedrals nationally.

3.4.7 Social events

With regards to non-worship related social events organised by local churches prior to COVID-19, 70.2 per cent of respondents reported having regularly attended such events, but only 24.5 per cent

of those respondents felt that alternative arrangements for those events were made during lockdown to ensure that a similar level of social engagement continued.

82 per cent of those commenting on how social events were able to continue stated that activities were continued using the Zoom app, this included choir practice, Bible study groups, coffee gatherings, home groups, quizzes, social meetings, and fellowship groups. Other means used to continue the social connection usually enabled by church social events involved WhatsApp groups, a phone call support system, socially distanced outdoor meet ups, virtual pub evenings, and newsletters.

> "Most weeks we phoned one other person and were phoned by one other person. So not an equivalent to a social meal or event but built a very good level of relationship (possibly even deeper than a larger physical event would have done)"

### 3.4.8 Perceptions regarding local and national church responses to the crisis

Overall, respondents showed a greater level of satisfaction with provision of content and messages supplied at the local-level than those at national-level, with a greater number believing national-level messages and content to be poor than those supplied at local-level (Figures 16 & 17). In terms of the overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures imposed, however, little difference is shown between perceptions of local-level and national-level responses, with the majority of respondents regarding the overall response of both local and national-levels as being at least satisfactory (Figure 18).
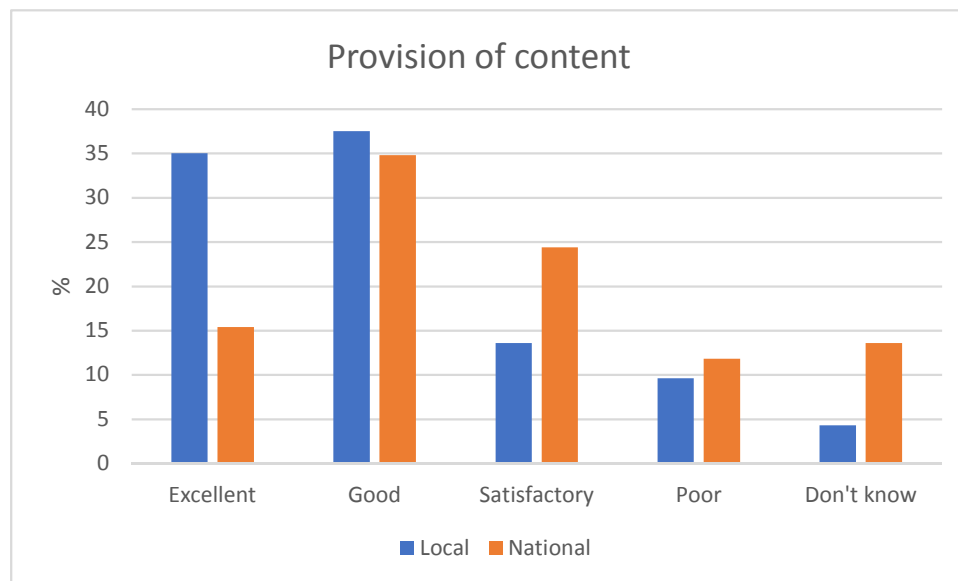
Figure 16: Perceptions of provision of content during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, as a proportion of respondents (%)
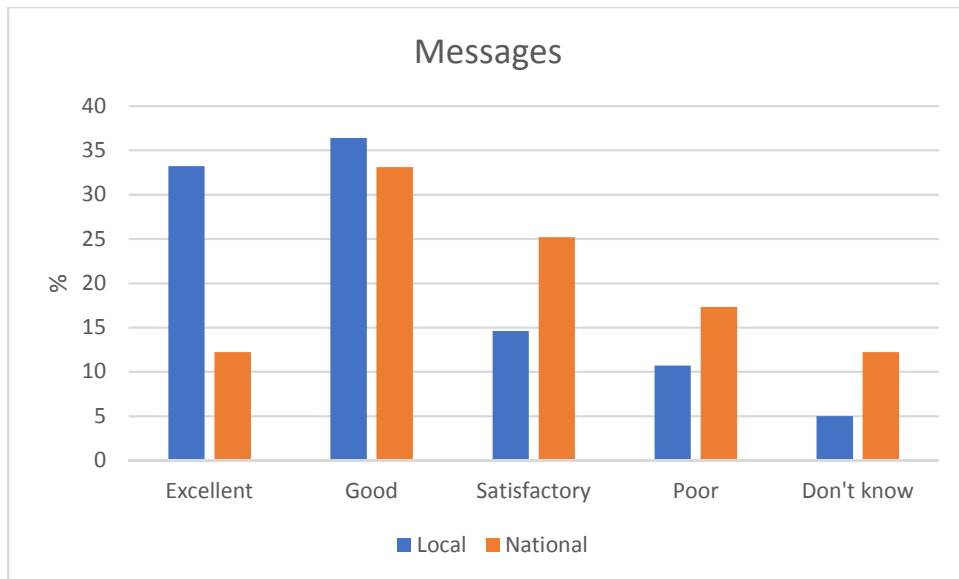
Figure 17: Perceptions of messages coming from the church during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, as a proportion of respondents (%)
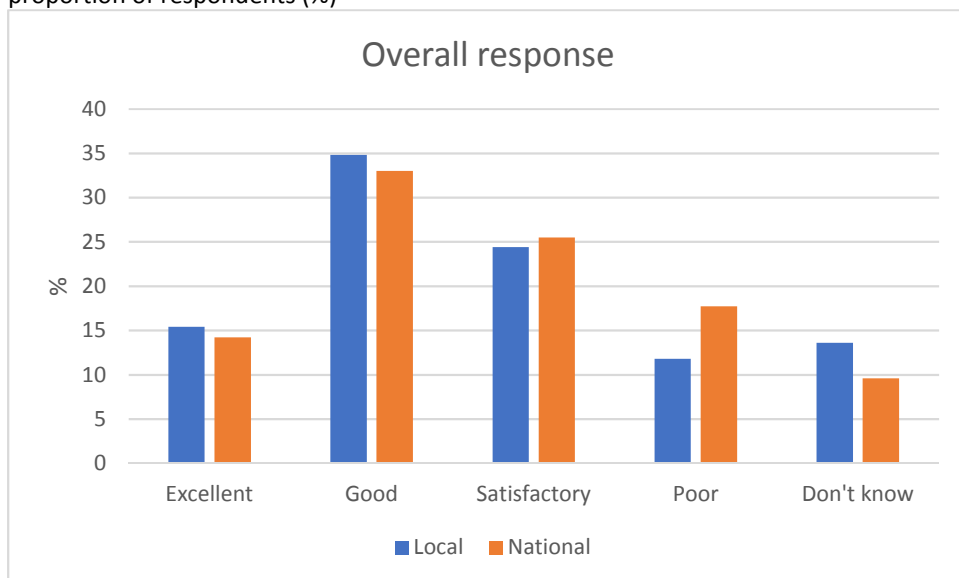
Figure 18: Perceptions of the overall response of the church to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, as a proportion of respondents (%)

3.4.9 Re-engaging with church and other faith-related activities post-lockdown

In response to the question regarding physical reengagement with the church post-lockdown, the overwhelming message was one of a need for support, safety, and confidence. Sufficient support, reassurance regarding all safety aspects, and a building of confidence in those measures, as well as in those enforcing those measures, frequently arose in response to this question.

The need for support referred to a variety of measures; firstly, to support the congregation in their return to church in an efficient way and as several respondents mentioned, with 'clear guidance'; secondly, to continue to support those unable to attend services by either providing improved access to churches (such as for wheelchair users), or by continuing some kind of online presence;

and thirdly by supporting the congregation by ensuring that any return to physical interaction only occurred when safe to do so.

> "I have heard that some churches are preparing to meet while asking vulnerable members to stay home and join in by zoom etc. I would not be happy attending any such event as I believe the church is one body and if it is not safe for part of the body to meet then the rest of the body should not meet either"

Inclusion arose as a common theme throughout the survey responses, and the ability to include individuals who might previously have been unable to participate actively due to illness or other restrictions is clearly important to many, something they would like to see continue even as 'normal' service recommences.

> "Knowing that those who cannot go out (for other reasons) can still engage online, and are not left out like they were before the outbreak"

Numerous respondents also discussed the importance of being kept well-informed and up-to-date regarding all stages of reengagement, another form of inclusion.

> "Just to know what is going on. I feel the leadership team knows what is going on but I don't because I am not on the leadership team"

With regards to safety, many respondents mentioned the need for time, reassurance, and suitable risk assessments being carried out, before they would consider returning physically to their church.

> "I won't go back to the church building for worship until I feel confident it's safe to do so. I don't need to be in the building to worship and engage with other Christians"

It was mentioned that offers of safe transport to church would be appreciated when the time to return arrived, especially for the vulnerable or those only able to travel by public transport.

In terms of the confidence that respondents need with regards to their local church and COVID-19, it was revealed that a desire exists that local churches give parishioners confidence in the safety measures put in place, that buildings attended are thoroughly cleaned prior to attendance, and that the risk of infection is low. Confidence in leadership was also revealed as being important to several of the survey participants. In addition to this, a need for confidence in other church attendees and their understanding of the risks and necessary associated behaviours was mentioned, including confidence that these peers will 'stick to the rules'.

Members of the clergy revealed that they too require clearer messages coming from 'the top', i.e. the government or senior members of the church. Some also expressed anxiety at what future engagement might look like and hoped that parishioners would remain positive, optimistic and flexible.

A sense of nervousness about physically returning to the church existed among respondents, especially among older or more vulnerable members. For some, this means not returning at all until an effective vaccine is in place.

> "Help [is needed] for the churches to purchase equipment to make us COVID-secure. Many are afraid to return"

"I would need to feel safe! Probably not until there is a vaccine or cure. I definitely won't go back while social distancing is a thing"

However, others suggested outdoor congregations or a mix of socially distanced congregations and a continuation of online activities. Such a mixture of online and outdoor or normal services are also considered to be more inclusive for those normally unable to attend.

"Mix of online and in person, creative use of technology, resumption of services, engagement with community action"

"Being confident that the activities are being made as safe as possible (e.g. outdoor services) and also as inclusive as possible"

At the opposing end of the spectrum, restrictions and rules were regarded as an imposition by some, especially with regards to the ability to sing and to socialise.

"The only reason to turn up to church masked, unable to sing, respond or chat after the service over a coffee, is to show solidarity with the vicar"

"A service for only 30 people (normally 120+ people at a service) where I have to sit 2m away, wear a mask and can't sing sounds dreadful! I would rather stay online and keep my distance at home!"

The ability to sing on return was referred to by 7 per cent of respondents. While only a small proportion overall, for those who mentioned it, it proved very important as an activity.

"The ban on singing is particularly difficult"

A number of respondents perceive the move towards reengagement as an opportunity for change. Such changes suggested were as simple as changing the times of a service, while others included reconfiguring the entire church service model due to it's 'exclusivity', instead working in ways to connect more with the wider community, including those of other or no faiths.

Some participants interpreted the question in terms of more direct means to encourage re-engagement. A personal invitation, a phone call from a member of the local clergy, some form of 'personal contact from the minister or other church member', pastoral visits by senior clergy, a booking system, or a 'welcome back' event were all ideas provided to thought to be likely to inspire reengagement.

"To be contacted by a member of the church. Not simply having to rely on finding info on Facebook"

4 per cent of those who responded to this particular question revealed that they have decided to leave their current church to attend a different one, as a result of lockdown. Reasons given for this included the desire to return to their 'old church', a desire to 'step back and feel refreshed', and, as one respondent reported, 'lockdown has made me see how my church has changed since our new minister came and it's not where I'm at'.

Overall, the sense is that people would prefer a holistic and inclusive approach to future engagement, more immediately but also into the future. Although a number of respondents are keen to return to business as usual as soon as possible, believing that their church has been 'overly

cautious', many perceive a 'new' normal to present opportunities previously unrecognised. Such opportunities might allow for greater community integration, including with non-religious community members, to avoid "a preoccupation with getting inside a building and cutting church off from everyone again", more interfaith engagement, and creativity in ensuring that all needs are met - such as continuing the use of online services.

> "Online (& other) church provision during the pandemic has finally made church inclusive for people who are housebound through disability, chronic illness, fragility"

> "I was inspired by my minister's sermons on line but to spend a Sunday morning in Church Is not so inspiring! Online is great, small groups are great! Interfaith groups I would love! Could learn so much from each other's faiths ... a once a month worship with local churches would also be great! Looking at what's going on to help our communities and joining in ... this would be church for me .... God is doing so much in our communities with folks who wouldn't profess to being Christians yet are joining in with God's continuing work to bring heaven to earth .... us Christians do not have the monopoly on good works!"

At the same time, it is recommended that further research be implemented specifically targeting individuals who are unlikely to have sought interaction or connection online to ensure no sections of the community are ignored in future analyses of responses to crises such as pandemics.