



“The Reformation of the 21st Century?”

Church of England clergy
Experiences of Ministry during the
Covid-19 Pandemic

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Contents

Executive Summary	5
1 Introduction	10
1.1 Objectives of the Research as Pandemic Unfolded	11
1.2 Structure of the Report	11
2 Clergy and Parish Use of Digital Technologies and Changes to Practices During the Pandemic	13
2.1 Before the Pandemic.....	14
2.2 Initial Responses to the Pandemic	17
2.3 Continuing (Digital) Practices	20
2.4 Summary	22
3 Support	24
3.1 Support from Family Members	25
3.2 Support from Congregation	25
3.3 Support from Parish Administrators	27
3.4 Support from Local Clergy Team and Local Deanery Chapter	27
3.5 Support from Peers	28
3.6 Support from the diocese and Wider Church of England	29
3.7 Summary	32
4 Wellbeing	34
4.1 Pandemic Sources of Stress	35
4.2 Benefits to Wellbeing from Pandemic	38
4.3 Changes over Time in Well Being.....	39
4.4 Coping strategies.....	41
4.5 Summary	43
5 Impact on Meaningful Ministry	45
5.1 Authentic Connection and Engagement	46
5.2 Church Buildings: Belonging and Attachment	48
5.3 The Issue of Eucharist.....	49
5.4 Online as Performance	50
5.5 Identity as Priest.....	52

5.6 Valued New Skills and Practices	53
5.7 Summary	54
6 Impact on Congregation and Parish.....	55
6.1 Parish Context and Digital Familiarity	56
6.2 Loss, Pain and Trauma.....	58
6.3 Impact on Engagement with the Church	58
6.4 Impact on Congregation Numbers and Reach	60
6.5 Exclusion of Congregation.....	62
6.6 Parishioner Expectations.....	64
6.7 Summary	65
7 Pastoral Care	67
7.1 What is Pastoral Care?	68
7.2 Key Challenges of Pastoral Care in the Pandemic.....	69
7.3 New ways of detecting and prioritising need: a new intentionality	69
7.4 New types of pastoral care	71
7.5 Responsibility for Delivering Pastoral Care in the Pandemic.....	72
7.6 Delivering pastoral care in the pandemic	73
7.7 Limits of Pastoral Care.....	74
7.8 Impact of Pastoral Care	76
7.9 Summary	76
8 Reflections and Future Ministry	78
8.1 Preferences for the Church of England and its Leadership.....	79
8.2 Preferences for the Use of Technology: Hybrid Church	81
8.3 Preferences for Parishes	85
8.4 Preferences for a Sustainable Future.....	88
8.5 Summary	91
9 Recommendations.....	92
Appendix	98

Executive Summary



- The research reported here was conducted independently within the Diocese of Oxford by: Prof Gillian Symon, School of Business and Management, Royal Holloway University of London; Dr Rebecca Whiting, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck University of London; and Dr Rebecca Taylor, Department of Sociology, University of Southampton.
- The report is based on 40 open-ended interviews with clergy in the diocese which took place between June 2020 and October 2021. These interviews explored the experience of clergy as they delivered spiritual, psychological, and social care during the various stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the effects of the digitalisation of practice. The report summarises the perceptions and views of these participants.
- 50% of interviewees were women; 60% were in the age range 50-70 and 35% in the age range 30-50; 48% came from an urban parish, 33% from a rural parish and others covered a mixed parish. This distribution reflects a similar distribution of clergy within the Church of England as a whole according to available public statistics. 60% of the sample were team vicars or rectors and 28% were curates.
- Objectives of the research were:
 - To capture what changes clergy had had to make in light of new covid restrictions, especially as this concerned managing digital channels of communication;
 - To gather clergy views on these changes and, in particular, how it had affected their everyday work practices including delivery of church services, pastoral care and parish management;
 - To review with clergy the support available to them during this period from a range of sources;
 - To understand the effects of these changes and the general pandemic measures on clergy well-being and their experience of their ministry as meaningful;
 - To ascertain clergy views on the effects of pandemic-induced changes on congregations and potential future relationships with congregations;
 - To collect clergy recommendations for future ministry.
- Pre-pandemic digital experience was very varied, but the majority of interviewees would be considered novices, who had implemented only some limited digital innovations in their parish or benefice. They had to quickly find ways to communicate as a team and to provide services and support to their congregation as the pandemic took hold. Clergy had to develop technical skills rapidly and demonstrated much ingenuity in finding solutions as guidelines changed around them.

- In terms of support most immediate and practical help came from family and technical experts within congregations. Indeed, to some extent this experience brought congregations together as many rallied round their vicars to help. The pandemic also demonstrated the value of clergy teams and benefices taking a strategic communal approach to organization. The diocese and the Church of England informed clergy of current UK Government guidance and its interpretation and provided resources such as access to online services and sermons. However, interviewees were not necessarily aware of more specific or localised support or had any expectation that the diocese would provide this.
- There were three main issues that undermined clergy wellbeing during the pandemic: learning the technology; workload; and cumulative effects of supporting others in very difficult times. These latter two were issues pre-pandemic but exacerbated by the current circumstances. Intense commitment to their role may have encouraged clergy to overstretch and this could not be sustained over the prolonged period of the pandemic, leading some to become close to burnout. This was better managed where work was shared out within a benefice. At the same time, learning new ways of working or rediscovering a sense of purpose was a contributor to increasing wellbeing for some.
- The pandemic was an extraordinary transformation of clergy's normal practices, including raising some difficult theological and identity issues. We explored this as the implications of the pandemic measures for clergy experiencing 'meaningful ministry'. Two elements of meaningfulness seemed particularly important: authenticity and communion or connection. Both of these were severely compromised by the pandemic measures. Ministry was in many cases experienced as too individualistic, too distanced, and even somewhat paradoxical, leading for some to feelings of emptiness and questions over identity. Consequently, ministering during the pandemic became a time of reflection and an opportunity to consider the importance of mission. Returning to church buildings was recognised as alleviating many of these concerns.
- Clergy reflected on the impact they thought these new practices had had on their congregations and parishes. This differed depending on available resources with smaller rural churches or churches in areas of urban deprivation often finding change more difficult, underlining pre-existing inequalities. Clergy were able to monitor attendance more easily but over time grew sceptical of online metrics. It seemed that rather than attracting new congregation from far afield most 'new' congregation already had some ties with the church, and local congregations wanted localised, familiar services. Most clergy concluded that a distinct online congregation had not emerged. Digital services provided both improved access (e.g. for those with disabilities) and excluded others (e.g. those without digital access), although clergy worked hard to include the latter.

- Reflecting in the interviews on their overall experience, clergy provided many profound insights and preferences for the future. This latter included a desire for more strategic thinking from Church leadership on parish inequalities and the (core) role of digital technology. A need for further debate that would include a range of voices was expressed, with a specific desire that marginalisation be avoided. Clergy recognised the pandemic as a ‘teachable moment’ for congregations and wanted to be able to capitalise on technological gains and skills developed during the pandemic. More urgently, they required guidance on the immediate future in relation to developing and managing some form of hybrid church.
- As a response to the issues raised in the interviews, we formulated a number of recommendations:
 - Provide opportunities to acknowledge the profound changes clergy have been through and enable the sharing of those experiences, surfacing of different perspectives, and debate on future mission.
 - Elucidate strategic direction, led by senior colleagues in the diocese, informed by consultation and pursued as joint enterprise.
 - Adopt an equitable approach to resourcing digital implementation and innovation across the diocese, taking into account specific needs of specific locale.
 - Capitalise on the utility of the digital for communication and inclusion in a strategic way, while avoiding marginalisation.
 - Provide guidance on what hybrid church may look like, including what might best be provided digitally and what might best be provided face-to-face in the community, recognising that particular care must be taken to enhance inclusivity, to be adaptive to local needs and to consider a green agenda.
 - Share existing digital skills and know-how, consolidating learnt digital skills and integrating digital skills training into ordinands’ curriculum.
 - Explore in more detail what is particularly valued by clergy and their congregation: an opportunity for reflection on meaningful ministry and working out the role of the digital in this.
 - Commit to an increased focus on clergy and lay helpers’ wellbeing to explicitly formulate what constitutes a sustainable pattern of working and how clergy can be encouraged in self-care, bringing this to parish level.

- Review what constitutes pastoral care and what should be expected from clergy, particularly for the future, given current UK 'cost of living' and other crises, and learning from the positive innovations adopted during the pandemic.
- Emphasise sense of community and the importance of community action, encompassing community of clergy, local parish community and the diocese as community.

1 Introduction



This report has been produced for the Diocese of Oxford by university researchers: Prof Gillian Symon, School of Business and Management, Royal Holloway University of London; Dr Rebecca Whiting, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck University of London; and Dr Rebecca Taylor, Department of Sociology, University of Southampton. It is based on 40 interviews with clergy in the diocese which took place between June 2020 and October 2021. These interviews explored the experience of clergy as they delivered spiritual, psychological, and social care during the various stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the effects of the digitalisation of practice. The research was conducted and funded independently of the diocese or the Church of England.

The study's antecedents preceded the pandemic. We first approached the diocesan Communications Director with a proposal to examine clergy views on what were then gradual moves towards digitalisation of some aspects of Church work. Our particular focus was on the implications of digitalisation for experiencing work as meaningful. With the support of the Communications Director and after consultations with researchers at Church House in London, including a rigorous ethics review, the research was approved.

1.1 Objectives of the Research as Pandemic Unfolded

The pandemic lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister just as we were about to commence the research. Our research then seemed even more pertinent as the delivery of church services, pastoral care, discussion groups, spiritual nourishment and so much else, became largely dependent on the digital. Our focus expanded to encompass more generally how clergy were managing these difficult days, months and, as it turned out, years. Our objectives were:

- To capture what changes clergy had had to make in light of new covid restrictions, especially as this concerned managing digital channels of communication
- To gather clergy views on these changes and, in particular, how it had affected their everyday work practices including delivery of church services and parish management
- To review with clergy the support available to them during this period from a range of sources
- To understand the effects of these changes and the general pandemic measures on clergy wellbeing and their experience of their ministry as meaningful
- To ascertain clergy views on the effects of pandemic-induced changes on congregations, pastoral care and potential future relationships with congregations
- To collect clergy recommendations for future ministry.

The report summarises the perceptions and views of these participants on these topics.

1.2 Structure of the Report

A brief outline of the conduct of the research including a summary table of participants, research timescale and ethical procedures can be found in the Appendix

The report of our findings is then organised in seven sections:

- Parish use of digital technologies and related changes to practices during the pandemic (Section 2)

- Support provided to make required changes during the pandemic (Section 3)
- Impact of pandemic on clergy wellbeing (Section 4)
- Impact of pandemic on clergy's experience of ministry as meaningful (Section 5)
- Impact of pandemic on congregations (from clergy's viewpoint) (Section 6)
- Impact of pandemic on provision of pastoral care (Section 7)
- Clergy reflections and preferences for future ministry (Section 8)
- Conclusions and recommendations (Section 9)
- Appendix

2 Clergy and Parish Use of Digital Technologies and Changes to Practices During the Pandemic



In this section we examine the digital journey taken by our sample of 40 clergy. The journey begins in the period before the pandemic, follows their initial response to the lockdown announced in March 2020, and documents their strategies over the course of 2021 as the pandemic played out in a series of lockdowns, social distancing announcements and government and diocesan guidance on how churches could minister. The focus is on the engagement of clergy and their churches, parishes and deaneries with digital technologies, the way these were used and viewed before the pandemic and how perspectives and practices shifted over a 12-18 month period. This section introduces issues explored in more detail in later chapters.

2.1 Before the Pandemic

We asked our participants about their experience of using digital tools and social media before the pandemic, their awareness of digital ministry, and the wider context of their church or parish resources and priorities at that time. On all these questions there was considerable diversity of perspective and experience for the clergy in our sample. Engagement with digital tools ranged from those who were already confident and enthusiastic users of technologies - whether that was in the form of managing church websites, personal blogs or using social media platforms - to those who barely used technologies in any form in their ministry, in parish and church communication or in a personal capacity. Importantly, the confidence and engagement of individual clergy did not necessarily translate to what was offered by their church or parish. That was also shaped by the wider resources that were available including funds and staff expertise and commitment.

2.1.1 Digital experts

At one end of the digital engagement spectrum a small number of clergy were keen users of digital tools pre-pandemic and already committed to promoting online presence and ministry. This group described how before the pandemic they already had substantial experience of using digital tools and social media platforms. Often this was gained in their work experience before or outside their clerical role. For example, one interviewee was familiar with technological tools and marketing in his previous professional role, had redesigned the website in his previous trainee curacy post and pre-pandemic had been keen to improve the online presence of the church:

It's been a bit of a passion of mine anyway. At [Church] I redesigned the website because I was, 'you can't use this website, it's not fit for purpose'. Ten, fifteen years ago, even before I was ordained, I thought actually, the church needs a presence online. So, I was kind of experimenting with blogging and stuff, which I never made a lot of progress [with] because I was just somebody doing it in their spare time, but I'd done a lot of thinking about online stuff.

These participants were familiar with building and maintaining Websites and Facebook pages. They often had experience of a range of social media apps (WhatsApp, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, You Tube), that facilitated cross posting, and had knowledge of digital infrastructure such as email servers, and remote meeting platforms. Some were even pre-pandemic recording and posting sermons.

Churches that were running more professional charitable services were also more likely to be using digital tools. One church operating a food distribution trust before the pandemic had recognised “*the need to have an outward-facing digital presence*” as part of delivering this and had recruited a worker to manage it:

we engaged somebody who is, I’m trying to think what his actual role is, but graphic design, IT sort of stuff. So, he set up a basic website, with a different feel to it altogether. We started putting out slightly more regular posts on Facebook and Instagram, that could go to supporters and that sort of thing and produced one or two professionally edited videos for external publicity.

Amongst this group of digitally engaged clergy there was a nuanced understanding of the variety of roles digital technologies might play. Whilst most had seen the benefits of social media for reaching a wider congregation, their experience of using it in a personal capacity had created an awareness of how it might present challenges when used as a platform for digital ministry for their church or parish. For example, several of those we spoke to were wary of using it in the context of their congregations and churches:

I could do without all the endless Twitter arguments about things. And I feel that, actually, if people looked in and saw us all doing that, they would just think, ‘gosh, haven’t they got anything else better to do, think about or talk about.

Several of these expert clergy also described the challenges of introducing digital technologies in their church and upgrading the technical infrastructure in order to enable digital forms of ministry. One team vicar, who was keen to modernise, describes the significant financial investment their church had had to make to update their website:

So, just prior to the pandemic we had invested, hugely for us, several thousands of pounds in a new software package that would also automatically help us and upgrade and sort out our website.

Similarly, a vicar in a small church with few resources remembered feeling frustrated by the lack of progress in the pre-pandemic period. Despite much talk, “*nothing changed*”, it was “*business as usual*”. Even with support from the ministry team and the congregation, developing a digital presence entailed considerable work and resources and change was slow:

I spent the last year trying to get our website up to scratch, for example, because it was dreadful beforehand. So, that kind of thing, we had no social media presence and even our communication was pretty analogue.

2.1.2 Digital abstainers

At the other end of the spectrum there were clergy who prior to the pandemic had little experience of or interest in technical tools or social media, either in the context of their church or parish or in their personal life. Their churches often had no web presence and email or paper were used for publicising events and parish news. One vicar explained that, whilst they had friends involved in digital ministry and an “*awareness it was going on*”, “*I suppose I*

viewed it slightly as well outside my comfort zone and therefore didn't look more deeply into it. It certainly wasn't relevant to me at the time".

One or two had used social media in a very limited way, often because their family were using it, but did not feel comfortable using it in the context of their ministry. Another described stepping away from social media because they felt it was not healthy or had become a time sink: *it was just soaking up so much time. You get sucked in and it's an echo chamber*

For others the lack of engagement with digital ministry was partly a result of their theological beliefs about the nature of ministry. This vicar's strongly held principles about the importance of physical presence meant that they had never in the pre-pandemic context considered online services:

We have never had any intention of doing a service online, because the theology we have is, very much, we are a people gathered, and, actually, it's that solidarity with the people that you're sitting next to is very important to it. [...] So, it's not something that we were actively against, but just wasn't really on the radar too much. We were just too busy shaking hands and talking to people.

In [Section 5](#) we discuss in more detail the extent to which clergy felt that pandemic measures had affected the meaningfulness of their ministry and, in [Section 8](#), how they saw ministry unfolding in a post-pandemic future.

2.1.3 Digital novices

The majority of our sample fell between the two ends of this spectrum. Pre-pandemic they often used social media in a personal capacity and were aware of the wider agenda of the church to promote digital ministry. Many of the accounts of practices prior to the pandemic included elements of digital engagement for their church - a Facebook page and website - which were used mainly for advertising events. Often these were not necessarily consistently updated or maintained:

I was interested in [social media, being online]. We did have a website, but the person that operated it [...] moved away. It was completely out of date, nobody seemed to know who was responsible for putting things on and updating it, or even what it cost. I didn't want anything to do with it, because it was obviously somebody else had set it up, but it was pretty obvious that, ... pre-pandemic, we needed to do something.

Clergy who did not see themselves as very technical or social media savvy, described how they drew on the skills and expertise of their wider team. There was often a key lay or clerical person in the church who supported the website or maintained the social media presence. Sometimes, the one member of the team with digital skills ended up doing everything. However, where there were several individuals with digital skills, their collective actions encouraged more digital engagement for the church.

2.2 Initial Responses to the Pandemic

Given the diversity of views, experiences and engagement in digital tools and ministry before the pandemic it was surprising how much commonality of experience there was for the interviewees during the first lockdown. They described the various strategies adopted at speed to enable them to communicate amongst the team and the challenges of moving to some form of online delivery of services, prayer meetings and other forms of worship.

2.2.1 Team communications

For many clergy and their churches, the immediate issue they sought to address following the lockdown was how to communicate with their team, both clerical and lay staff. Most described a wholesale shift to Zoom in the period immediately following the announcement as a way to talk and meet:

We were all on Zoom within a week. I remember, it all seemed quite novel at first, didn't it? We can see each other. It was almost quite a jolly thing.

In the process of organising a response, one interviewee described a series of emergency meetings on Zoom to plan what to do *"we had a kind of, almost a church COBRA committee"*.

Setting up the technical infrastructure to enable meetings and communication entailed significant work for many of our clergy. Whilst some digitally engaged clergy already had the necessary expertise, most drew on the skills and resources of their wider team and congregation. One interviewee described how one member of the team with considerable digital expertise had set up the communication channels after the lockdown: *"He had a look at the different computer systems that we've each got in our studies and our Wi-Fi connections and all those sorts of things"*. Another, leading a group of six churches, described how when the first lockdown was announced *"four out of our six churches didn't have any kind of online provision"*. As a result, *"we kind of clubbed together, to provide something for the memberships of the four churches that didn't have something already up and running"*.

2.2.2 New ways of ministering

Clergy were also immediately concerned with how to communicate with their congregation and how to conduct services remotely. There was a palpable sense of urgency in the accounts of how clergy and churches managed this period: *"the big thing that we had to do was try to turn things around in a week, to go completely online"*. Participants described a steep learning curve as they acquired new skills *"we had to learn very quickly how to put out some service that people could interact with"*. In particular, this became a question about whether remote ministry would be done via live streaming or pre-recording and posting videos. In many cases this was a pragmatic choice based on what was possible to set up in the time available. The path taken depended to a great extent on the skills and resources of the wider team, congregation and friends and family.

The process involved building capacity among a wider parish team:

we learnt very quickly how to do Facebook Live. [...] So, it was me, and then I trained up the team vicar and one or two other people to produce services online that were a bit cheap and cheerful.

This support was a central aspect of the digital transformation in the early days of the lockdown. This was perhaps not surprising given the general lack of experience amongst clergy prior to the pandemic. In [Section 3](#) we discuss in more detail what forms of support were available to clergy and what they felt about that support.

In the months immediately following lockdown a diversity of strategies were adopted that included audio podcasts, live Facebook broadcasts, or recorded services often from a living room or study. Content was live streamed or uploaded to Church Facebook pages usually via YouTube.

For clergy in the first tranche of interviews conducted in the summer of 2020, there were concerns around the technical challenges of providing some form of service that was consistent with guidance. Some noted how the speed at which they sought to do this meant a relatively amateur use of the available technologies. The priority was to provide something meaningful to their congregation rather than a professional level of service: *“we did Sunday worship from our sofa with half a camera and a laptop and that was about it”*. Another recalled how *“it was basically my wife filming me in the dining room doing the communion service at home”*. Despite the amateur nature of the early attempts, several clergy felt that these offerings were some of the most important they made and often had the highest viewings. One interviewee had recorded a ‘thought for the day’ on YouTube just after the lockdown announcement, remembering how he did not even get dressed up:

I’d written a thing for our magazine, just a little thought for the day type thing, and I went downstairs, and I set up my phone and I read that thing and I posted it online. I had a YouTube account, but I’d not posted anything. There was no editing or anything but that broke the ice.

Like others, he described how despite this the importance of making contact in the early days of the lockdown meant they were very well watched: *“because it was the first partly, but also it hit people at a time of enormous uncertainty”*.

2.2.3 Successes and challenges

Interviewees from across the sample described a range of highlights and lowlights from their experiences of navigating the early pandemic period. Several described finding the initial live streaming or recording as a nerve-wracking experience that pushed them well outside their comfort zone:

I was so terrified, I don’t think I slept the night before. I was thinking, this whole thing of being on telly. That’s what it felt like. It felt like you were going to be on telly.

One interviewee recalled the struggle of getting to grips with Facebook and PowerPoint to provide the Easter service:

I spent hours trying to work out how to record a sermon with pictures using PowerPoint so I could put it on Facebook. And it's [was] awful, it's terrible, because I was so nervous about it all and we spent hours wrestling with bugs in PowerPoint and everything.

For most the nerves wore off and the process got easier over the following weeks:

once I got through it, through the initial online, 'okay, let's get stuff out there and see what happens', I don't notice it anymore. I don't care. It's interesting, you get over your ego when you have to.

One interviewee recognised that as most churches and clergy were in the same position and expectations were low it was quite a good way to start a shift to a digital ministry: *"We were all making mistakes, all fumbling through it, [which] actually meant that it was a very gentle place to start"*.

Others, particularly those who pre-pandemic had been keen users of digital technologies, noted that the context of the lockdown had enabled them to make changes they had wanted to make pre-pandemic but had not found an opportunity. Suddenly the changes had become a necessity. One described how many of the modifications that had been in the pipeline could be speeded up:

what I'd been thinking about, but I was able to change it more quickly, was a MailChimp online newsletter; making the church website look a bit more up-to-date and the possibility of filming services for people who weren't able to come.

For others the substantial changes in ministry brought about by the lockdown and shift to digital also encouraged reflection on theological priorities and the way they practised their faith.

I would describe it as the parochial, clerical rug being pulled out from underneath us and suddenly we were asked to be priests without any of the normal tools or opportunities at our disposal. And I think we've all had a lot of processing to do about what does my Christian faith mean to me in this situation.

In [Section 5](#) we explore in more detail the affects pandemic measures had on the experienced meaningfulness of ministry for clergy.

The substantial investment made by many clergy and church teams in the early days of the lockdown was not necessarily viewed positively. As one interviewee explained, they had made the decision to go 'all in' and *"make sure our congregation are really well looked after"* with the result that they *"put temporary structures in place, even if it's really bad quality"*. He felt this was at a cost to the sustainability of what was being offered both in terms of clergy health and technical infrastructure: *"very temporary structures. Very unhelpful in the long run"*. Thus, while initially thought suitable and even endearing, initial adaptations came to be problematic and troubling.

Most importantly whilst many churches provided some online ministry for their congregation a small number were not able to provide online services, at least initially. Smaller churches

with just one clergy and fewer financial resources adopted non-digital methods to ensure communication was possible with the more vulnerable congregation:

my first immediate instinct was to set up a proper good phone tree so that I made sure that nobody was sitting at home and not getting phoned by anyone.

We discuss the processes and procedures clergy devised to provide alternative ways of delivering pastoral care in [Section 7](#).

2.3 Continuing (Digital) Practices

In this final section we explore the longer-term practices that emerged following the initial lockdown as various government announcements gave rise to further periods of lock down, social distancing and church building closures. Drawing particularly on the tranche 2 interviews conducted in the summer of 2021 we show how clergy and church strategies developed, priorities shifted, and practices were innovated and refined.

At this stage whilst there was frustration about the shifting sands of government and church guidance on in person worship many were keen to continue using various digital tools. They felt that had developed new skills and new confidence for online ministry:

I think I'm in a nice pattern now which is worship on a Sunday is in person at church. Worship Monday to Thursday will be morning prayer led from here [home] it's online, available for you four mornings a week. I'm producing two hours of content every week of online stuff that you can join in with. And I do a little thought for the day based on the readings. ... I can't see me ever going back to sitting in church on my own.

As time went on, clergy use of digital tools evolved:

And then on Sundays I started recording a little sermonette on Facebook and putting it on there, kind of like a little thought for the day. ... I held it [mobile phone] in my hand and then just talked at it. Eventually after a couple of weeks I invested in this thing, it's just a little mini tripod that you can stick your phone in. And pretty much this has seen me through most of the pandemic. And then when I got really swish, I invested in a set of wireless microphones. And these were brilliant because then you could put the camera somewhere and it wasn't relying on the sound of the camera, but actually the microphone would pick me up if I moved away.

Overall there was a considerable amount of creativity and ingenuity exhibited (“we got very adept at pivoting the whole time”) and a variety of innovations introduced. Such innovations built on previous learning and experiences as clergy adapted to new guidelines.

Some of the materials generated in earlier stages of the pandemic could then be re-used:

So, when it came around to the second Easter, we knew that our Easter Sunday morning had to be different, and we knew that a couple of other things had to be different. But I must confess, we did reuse some of our meditative services because we thought people probably can't remember. And also, they were good. So, let's just redo them. And they weren't time-bound.

A year of trying various digital strategies had given clergy a more nuanced understanding of what the different technological tools offered in practice and what the longer-term sustainability or usefulness of those tools might be. For example, Zoom was found to be useful for certain things such as committee meetings and prayer meetings.

I think we've found, for a prayer meeting, it's (Zoom) actually quite a good way of gathering large numbers for a short time with a specific aim. Also, for doing committee work, you can get things done and you get a greater number of the group present because they know it's between this time and that time: 'I don't have to go out on a cold winter's night, I'll be there'.

The accessibility and the increased efficiency offered by platforms like Zoom was valued in enabling those with young children or with mobility issues to attend and participate. Environmental benefits were noted, and this is discussed further in [Section 8](#) in relation to future sustainability and a green agenda. By the second year of the pandemic, it was becoming apparent to many of the clergy that online forms of worship offered important forms of inclusiveness that they did not want to lose:

we've heard from people who are housebound, people who've got disabilities, single parents, all sorts of people for whom coming to church is really difficult who are loving the fact that they can watch it. And that's been a real wake-up call actually, that it is perfectly possible to do a service that people can access who can't come to church. And we should've learnt this ages ago. And so I definitely don't want to stop doing that.

In [Section 6](#), we provide more detail on issues around inclusion and how the digital may support congregation members who had always found it difficult to attend church.

From the above quote, we note the adoption of livestreaming as a specific (and common) solution. At a time when only clergy were allowed into the church buildings, livestreaming was viewed as a good option for congregations to experience familiarity and (real-time) communion:

we found it work better live streaming from a public space. So, when we were able to, we live streamed from within church. ... I think it felt inclusive when you were live streaming from the public building. Also, the culture of the congregation is that it loves its buildings. So, it feels more comfortable and it feels more like you're in the building if what you see on screen is the church, even though there are only two people in church.

However, livestreaming had its problems, and some struggled with the hybrid nature of this or with technical issues, particularly when this came to adapting church buildings:

Two of my colleagues did try live streaming a service from [one of the churches in the benefice], from one of our more modern buildings because they had an internet connection. That's been our other limiting factor, only two of our buildings have internet and that's the two modern ones. So, you could only live stream from

those two. And actually, those were the ones where people were less interested in that live streaming.

As congregations were allowed back into church and in person services were again possible, albeit in a rather restricted way, clergy grappled with new problems, such as adapting their church buildings for social distancing and continuing to manage perceived risk:

Well, it was very painful not being able to go into our churches at all. And then, of course, we were allowed in, and then we weren't allowed in and it was very confused. And two of our churches are very old churches, so it's quite difficult to maintain any kind of social distance with fixed pews, whereas the more modern church we have had chairs which we could move around.

the other thing that came about with the lack of restrictions, is suddenly we're not wearing masks anymore. Even though we've said, 'it's not compulsory, but if you would like to, if you feel more comfortable with it, then yes, please do', they're not [and] they're staying away because of that ... it's a bit of peer pressure, 'well, nobody else is, so I'm going to feel a bit of an idiot, if I want to wear a mask'... and I'm going to suggest that, actually, sides-people do. I think it's about modelling what is acceptable, so that others feel they're given permission to be not happy about things.

They were also concerned about the extent to which and in what form they would maintain online services now they were back in the building. Key concerns in this period included how to manage a more hybrid model of in person and virtual content, and finding the resources to support multiple types of provision. Those who had already invested in digital infrastructure were clear that online services were embedded in their ministry. Others facing financial problems and with small staff teams were more skeptical that they could maintain a digital presence. These concerns are discussed in more detail in [Section 8](#), where we provide an overview of clergy preferences for the future, particularly in relation to how digital technologies may feature in future visions of ministry.

2.4 Summary

This section has traced the journey taken by the clergy interviewed and their churches from the period before the lockdown to the Autumn of 2021. Initially, we explored level of digital sophistication for churches and clergy prior to the pandemic, which highlights their very different starting points. The majority had some form of limited digital engagement but no experience in more sophisticated and interactive technologies. So overall clergy in the diocese were quite digitally unprepared for the considerable change that engulfed them.

The interviews provided a vivid account of the immediate impact of the first lockdown on clergy practices and the various digital practices that were taken to enable continued ministry. Again, there was variation in the sophistication of strategies adopted and much of this was shaped by the extent of support from the parish, church team, and friends and family, which we explore in more detail in [Section 3](#). Clergy interviewed in the summer of 2021 illustrate how practices adopted at the start of the pandemic were developed and modified over the remainder of 2020 through to Autumn of 2021. Clergy changed the ways

in which they were delivering services as their skills and confidence grew. However, measures taken were also dependent on the nature of pandemic measures at the time and the resources available to them, including sources of support, which are summarised in [Section 3](#).

This constant process of innovation and refinement was ongoing and inevitably had implications for clergy wellbeing, particularly as the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic continued far longer than anyone had initially expected. These implications, from early stages to later retrospective reflection, are discussed in [Section 4](#). Additionally, clergy grappled with some quite profound questions around the meaningfulness of their ministry during this time, which is discussed in [Section 5](#). Whatever the current guidelines, clergy's continuing mission was to engage and support their congregation. We summarise and discuss how clergy felt the pandemic impacted congregation engagement and wellbeing, and the significant implications of the pandemic for access and inclusiveness, in [Section 6](#). How clergy sought to continue to provide pastoral care (at a time when this was even more crucial) is reviewed in [Section 7](#).

We encouraged interviewees to look forward and begin to consider a post-pandemic digital future. [Section 8](#) summarises clergy reflections on both the past pandemic context and on preferences for future ministry.

3 Support



In the previous section we outlined the kinds of changes that clergy made to their everyday practices, particularly in relation to the adoption of digital technologies. For most clergy this was an entirely novel enterprise with complex pressures and requirements, and impossible to attempt alone. Consequently, we asked our interviewees to describe what kind of support they received and from whom. In this section we present and discuss these sources of support. In general, smaller parishes struggled more with this than larger parishes, where there were fewer people available and where parishes were less wealthy. In this case, there are few tranche differences to highlight as Tranche 2 interviewees were often reflecting back on support over the entire period.

3.1 Support from Family Members

We often heard from clergy that they could not have managed without technology expertise in their own families, which, given lockdown, had the merit of always being on hand:

Two of our kids work in IT and are really switched on... and they've both been very helpful. When we call, 'help, how do we do this?', they come straight round and they tell us, 'yes, just do this, this, and this, and that's how you do it'. So, yes, we've been fortunate.

However, most often clergy relied on assistance from spouses, and particularly in relation to providing church services:

we'd go in and record, my husband would record on the phone. He would come back and splice in, and he did all the editing and the music and everything. He bought a new computer program, so that he could do all that. ... It took a long time, the preparation for that, I don't think people understood how many hours went into putting together a full Eucharist with hymns and with the words up and everything. But that's what we, after a few months, that's what we got into the habit of doing...

This reliance, as we see from the above quote, could be a big commitment to ask of family members.

3.2 Support from Congregation

As we noted in Section 2, clergy also relied very heavily on the support of members of their congregation or wider parish. Many clergy reported their good fortune that some parishioners were actual digital experts through their occupations or had good knowledge through regular use of a range of digital technologies:

I've got a [member of the congregation] ... [who] ... works in this world very much indeed. as soon as we went into lockdown, she gave me a ring ... and said 'we can do it, we can do it, come on. We can do it from this Sunday, I'm just going to drop a microphone round to your house and I'm going to drop a microphone around to the pianist's house. And we'll then chat and I'm going to show you how we'll do it'.

From this comment we see how such resource provided not just the technical skills (and indeed here equipment) but the enthusiasm and motivation to make it all seem feasible for

clergy who may have felt overwhelmed by the prospect. Indeed, this availability may have meant clergy did not explore other avenues of support (such as the diocese). The downside of this provision is that clergy recognised that the burden of work fell disproportionately on those members of the congregation with the skill and the enthusiasm to follow it through; this constrained the extent to which they felt they could ask for help. One Tranche 2 interviewee also reported they felt this enthusiasm had waned over time (as indeed parish engagement waned more generally, as we describe later in Section 6.3).

In relation to contributing to online services or livestreaming services from church, in many cases clergy reported a surge in support. While of course there was congregation participation in services pre-pandemic, clergy were pleased that the activities of the service could be shared around online, with congregation beaming in their own contributions from their own homes:

We had participants on Zoom in their own homes, and I believe quite strongly in every member ministry and that worked fine. ... encouraging people to take a risk. We did include some people who had never been happy to be at the front of church but were happy to lead the prayers for example on Zoom knowing that it was going out on YouTube. So that was quite encouraging. So we used it to get new people involved in every member ministry. Yes, it did work remarkably [well]

Some congregation took particular responsibility for the more social aspects of the service, greeting new congregation on Facebook as they signed in or organising social events after the service on Zoom. While this did give clergy some novel problems of coordination, overall it was felt that the congregation had grown closer to each other and now took more responsibility for upholding faith in collaboration with the vicar.

Clergy without this support did appear to struggle more, having to cover all new activities themselves. Sometimes they were additionally taking over activities previously the province of congregation members who were shielding or not confident with technology:

there was a chap that offered some help.... But because he's got family, and at the moment they don't want to take their children to church, so they've been relying on the livestream, because obviously they just want to give it a bit of time to see how things work. ... Because of social distancing, it's difficult to get the help that you need. We could do with some assistance, because I've got a clicker, so I'm operating the screen for the church, whilst my husband is operating the livestream. ... there's potentially a couple of families who could help, but I don't know that they've got that level of technical knowledge to be able to, say, even operate the livestream. ... But people are so reluctant. They're just so scared of something going wrong, and them not knowing what to do.

While wellbeing will be discussed in more detail in Section 4, some clergy reported gratitude for the care congregations expressed for them personally:

A couple of times, actually, [congregation] have babysat for us, and so we've actually managed to get out. There's two couples, and they're delightful, and

they're so helpful... not very often, partly because we don't want to burden them, because everyone's got their own problems. And just the ability to chat. And, actually, if you're feeling run down or you're looking tired, they'll actually ask you if everything's okay, which is lovely, because so many don't. And it's just nice, isn't it, a hand on the arm, and just go, 'are you alright?' And you go, 'yes, I'm fine, thanks'. That's enough, that's enough just to... it goes a long way.

3.3 Support from Parish Administrators

Another source of help for some clergy were parish administrators who often populated Facebook pages, ran toddler and youth groups or helped with parish visiting. Sometimes administrators were deployed from previous suspended activities to help with more digitally-mediated requirements. However only about one fifth of our interviewees reported this kind of assistance (three having obtained grants for this support) so it was not a widespread source of support. Mostly clergy relied on volunteers from the congregation or PCC. Indeed, some smaller and less well-funded parishes struggled with lack of professional help in this way, while aware of the resources other churches could draw on to make this work easier:

... the work that's involved with just putting together a service. There are churches who have IT departments and people who are paid, but that's not us.

3.4 Support from Local Clergy Team and Local Deanery Chapter

One major form of support during the pandemic were colleagues within clergy teams and benefices. Some benefices took the opportunity to share and rotate activities between churches in order to make the workload manageable:

right from the beginning it was felt that we should come together and do this as a shared offering to the whole of the parish for them to see. And I firmly believe also it took the stress off us because we weren't all having to do something every single week, and I think we needed that actually to cope with the shock of what was happening.

Interviewees also referred to supportive relationships between curates and incumbents, new team vicars quickly settling in during the pandemic through teamwork, and work spread through the group depending on capability. But perhaps the biggest support was simply having someone else to talk to:

in the ministry team that's what we always do. I think actually coming onto zoom and meeting every single week and really focussing on the things that were concerning us and the issues have really, really helped one another, so it's not been a lonely journey. I mean we could have said, 'well we will just produce our services for our individual churches' as we would do normally on a Sunday.

These regular meetings and shared work activities allowed some church teams to spot when members seemed not to be coping well and to intervene to support individual clergy, as well as encouraging each other and recognising everyone's contribution.

Of course, individual clergy contracting covid put strains on clergy teams. Some teams however struggled with members who were particularly badly affected by the lockdown or could not manage the technology, meaning that only one or two clergy were covering all the work required. We further discuss workload implications of the pandemic measures in Section 4. This was often attributed to having either much older team members or members with underlying health problems:

It's been strange for me, because I've been carrying on, I was the only one in the team able to do funerals, so all my others were in the vulnerable category, so none of them took funerals. So, that all fell to me, plus I help out, occasionally, at the hospice, I used to work at the hospice, so I picked up the odd funeral for that, because I could. So, all in all, I think my reserves are quite low, and it'll be a while before, I think, my associate priest feels entirely happy about coming back into weddings, funerals.

Supportive relationships also extended to the wider deanery. Several interviewees reported that deanery teams had actually come closer together, largely through using Zoom to enable more regular meetings:

our deanery has been really good, actually ... We've been meeting every week on a Zoom call with all the incumbents and sometimes the assistant clergy as well, and I think that's been good because there's been a lot of sharing of best practice, sharing of ideas. And it's cut across churchmanship in a really healthy way, so I think there's more mutual respect and appreciation of each other... we haven't got anyone who's a real guru for how the best way of doing this. We're all learning [but] there's been some good sharing.

Such regular meetings allowed exchange of information invaluable in a situation where few felt they either had the right skills or knowledge about addressing this unique situation most effectively. Many planned to continue with Zoom meetings post-pandemic as we see in Section 8. However, this mutual support only occurred where Deaneries had a healthy relationship pre-pandemic; Zoom did not repair relationships and in a few cases clergy struggled to use the technology effectively for communication: “people would try and talk at the same time”.

3.5 Support from Peers

Beyond local church teams and area deanery, a lot of support and advice came from peers, either clergy friends or from resources shared by particular churches outside the deanery or even the diocese. Here Heart-Edge/St Martin's in the Field and New Life Church Milton Keynes were particularly commended for the materials they supplied. Clergy watched other churches online and learnt techniques or contacted those churches for further advice, marking the “informal generosity” of fellow clergy. Examples of good practice were also spotted on Facebook and other social media and those posting were contacted directly for advice:

What I have noticed, and I've been tuning in more, I think it's on Facebook, we've got a few clergy forums, where clergy sound off, or put bits in and other people

reply, or you've got a query and will say, anybody had this, and somebody else would reply. So, although I don't contribute much to them, but I tune in and read them, and I think that's what lots of other people do, as well. So, there was that, and again, that's an online thing that you can do anytime, anywhere, so that's quite useful.

Similarly, Twitter could be a source of support as it allowed for identification of those “*able to be vulnerable [articulating problems publicly] and I'm feeling the same problem and so I've contacted them [directly]*”. Many clergy also referred to WhatsApp groups of peers (often stemming from present or past curacy groups) where they found “*safe places to ask silly questions*”. Clergy reported that these more informal channels were often quicker and more flexible ways of receiving support, although social media were also sometimes sources of anxiety as more advanced offerings fed into feelings of inadequacy.

3.6 Support from the Diocese and Wider Church of England

Going beyond local circumstances, in this section we examine provision for the wider diocese and Church of England more generally.

3.6.1 Resources and guidance

The main assistance clergy reported receiving from the diocese was access to resources, mostly online services and sermons, with guidance on legal issues being particularly valued. Clergy also noted the provision of webinars on various topics although these may not have been always sufficiently focused or basic:

Practical support [from the diocese]? I wouldn't say a great deal. ... [our situation is] 'We don't want to do Facebook Live. We don't want to do YouTube. We want to do a live Zoom link, and we've got one person. How do we link that up with what we've got? Is it possible?' So that kind of conversation, if we don't know it locally then that conversation would be helpful.

Some clergy remarked on the fact that some of these webinars (and some diocese services) were themselves not particularly professionally produced and, in the early days particularly, valued the sense of authenticity:

you could tell they were developing. You could tell this wasn't, 'well, this is just what we do, and we've got 1,000 cameras, and we've got endless budget and make it work'. You could tell it was authentic people with their webcams on, and the Bishop presiding, thinking, 'do I wear robes for this? Do I not?' Asking the same sort of questions, really, that we were all asking. 'We've run out of wafers. Do I use real bread?' All that sort of stuff.

Perhaps a requirement particularly felt by the diocese was to keep clergy up to date with the Church of England's interpretation of UK Government's (ever-changing) rules. While pleased to receive the guidance, many clergy did struggle with this in various ways, and here we see some tranche differences as Tranche 2 clergy reflected back on early and later provision of advice. Generally speaking, in the early days, some felt the guidance was too slow in arriving:

The diocese is always behind the power curve. I think that's true of the whole Church of England. ... It moves at a glacial pace. ... you'd have the government announcement on a Monday saying, you're now allowed to do this. We would wait a week for the dear old C of E to say, 'oh, we've read the government's update, and actually, we think it's okay to do X, Y and Z'.

When guidance was sent out, especially in the early days, it could be overwhelming, particularly at a time when clergy felt overwhelmed anyway:

when they [the diocese] did communicate early on it was done clumsily. So, they would issue a document and they wouldn't highlight where the updates were, so you had to re-read everything. It became cumulative and it added to our burden.

A few clergy felt strongly that in the initial stages, communication was too directive and that later on it became both less burdensome and emphasised clergy discretion more. This perception may have reflected UK Government's overall strategy and also, perhaps, clergy's growing confidence over time.

3.6.2 Access to technology

An oft-expressed concern was lack of resources to invest in necessary technology. Clergy were mostly using (and supplementing) their own, or sometimes they were able to release funds internally to invest in technology with PCC permission. Clergy recognised they could apply for grants from the diocese to purchase equipment and those who did were grateful for this. However, there was also a perception that this engendered too much form-filling in an already pressured life and that the opportunities to do this came too late:

money is always an issue and so I personally bought the digital editing software and haven't claimed it back from anywhere and just did it. Yes, my colleague bought the cameras and bought software for himself. We just got on with it and worked it out. ... if you need resourcing, you've got to go through such a long rigmarole to put together your business case and your documentation and evidence. We didn't have the time or the mental energy to do it. ... We could have done with churches being given two grand, 'use that how you need to, to get yourself set up to get through this and see what happens afterwards. And then tell us afterwards what you've done with it. Be accountable for what you've done with it, but just do it'. That would have been more helpful. But that's an ideal world and I don't expect it to be that.

Relatedly a few clergy wondered whether the diocese could have played more of a role in identifying churches that were already technically-savvy and enrolling them to provide help to others or even focusing on a few churches to provide online support rather than an expectation that all churches would provide this. Conversely, many vicars themselves were driven by a feeling of responsibility for their own parish and wanting to act locally.

3.6.3 Wellbeing support

Clergy wellbeing will be discussed in more detail in Section 4 but here we note mixed messages about the extent to which the diocese was providing this support. Some clergy felt this was a real positive from the diocese, particularly when it was specific:

And there was some quite wise advice early on I think from the diocese. It was saying if you've done two Zoom meetings in a morning, and you've spent 90 minutes face to face with people on a TV you might be best to go and sit in the garden with your coffee. And so, we have done that quite a lot.

Or when it was personal from the Bishop or Archdeacon:

The Bishop sent out email letters occasionally telling us all we were doing a jolly good job and well done, and that was nice. In his position, I don't know what I would have done quite frankly either. I'll tell you what was really appreciated, was towards the end of things, he sent us all out a personalised card. It was signed by all the Bishops, by all the dioceses and area Bishops, and we had a £20 Marks and Spencer voucher. That was a small thing, but my goodness it made a difference. That made a huge difference. Just a silly little gesture like that. I think I bought socks, but that made a difference in terms of feeling appreciated. It really did. So, I think those things are terribly important. And I know that he's sent out things to encourage us to take a break and have a holiday and things. It's not always easy to do that, but he has been more visible, I think, as a diocese and Bishop and I think that's been helpful.

However, some others did not seem to have had any pastoral support of this kind or else, in the early days, those kinds of messages had been overwhelmed by other communications:

the pastoral messages didn't come out as strongly as the legal ones. So, it was almost as if the Church was being instrumentalised by the government ... people wanted a warmer empathetic, pastoral messaging from the centre that wasn't really coming out at that time.

Some noted that messages from the diocese on wellbeing sometimes offered the wrong kind of help (“more should have been done about resilience”), or help that was too impersonal (referring clergy to unknown central resources) or even paradoxical:

we were constantly being told to prioritise what's most important and don't worry about the things you can't manage. And then the diocese send out a million emails with newer initiatives and 'the Bishop's done a new podcast' and 'come along to this'. It wasn't being modelled at the diocesan level, really, I don't think. And that makes it hard to follow.

Of course, help can be offered but not taken up. Interviewees spoke of not requiring support or feeling that support should be going to others in more distress. Additionally, however, a feeling was expressed that the diocese was not the first place they would necessarily seek that kind of support.

3.6.4 A distant entity?

A feeling of lack of support from the diocese was attributed to a (pre-pandemic) sense of distance. Some parishes felt this particularly because they were geographically distant: “[we are] so far from the centres of power”. Additionally, given the Diocese of Oxford is very large, clergy expressed the perception that the diocese did not really know what it was like ‘on the ground’ and that they felt generally ‘on their own’: “The diocese isn’t much help, but I don’t expect it from the diocese. They’re such a big entity”.

So, while many did not particularly expect assistance from the diocese, more personal contact would have been welcomed in the early days. Clergy acknowledged that the diocese seemed to recognise this later on and more personal communication was initiated, including deanery visits from Bishop Steven in 2022¹. This is discussed further in relation to wellbeing (Section 4) and in the penultimate section (Section 8).

There was also an understanding that the diocese and the Bishop were themselves over-stretched and that it was appropriate their time was spent with parishes that were struggling rather than try to cover all parishes:

I think different churches were in different places with their ability to adapt and I think, where we were at, I don’t feel that we needed a lot of help from the diocese. And it was tricky for them. I think they’ve got churches who just couldn’t do the online stuff, so you actually needed a Church at Home² from the diocese for people that were in those churches. But if you can do your own, it’s a bit like I want to push our church not the diocese, so it was a little bit separate.

In a similar fashion, one interviewee expressed the view that the response had to be local “because I am away from my Church building and I want to hold on to the sense of these people still being together”.

3.7 Summary

Across the UK, organizations, groups and individuals struggled to work out how necessary activities and communication could be delivered through digital means. Clergy were no exception. The extent to which novel solutions could be delivered depended very much on access to appropriate resources and support, and this section has summarised where this support came from and how clergy experienced that support.

In summary, most immediate and practical help came from family and technical experts within congregations, for those fortunate to have such individuals. The pandemic to some extent brought congregations together in a wider sense as many rallied round their vicars to help with providing online services. From a very difficult situation potentially new closer relationships between vicar and congregation were forged in many parishes. However, this came at a cost of fatigue and unbalanced responsibility. As we shall see in the next section, although wellbeing support may have been offered for clergy teams, there was less on offer for volunteers, unless from inside the parish itself.

¹ <https://oxford.anglican.org/deanery-visits.php>

² <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/news/media-centre/livestream/archive/>

The pandemic also demonstrated the value of clergy teams and benefices that can share work, meaning no one individual is over-burdened. This was not the case for those in smaller parishes or where team members were themselves vulnerable or lacking technical skills. In these cases, individual vicars often had to learn technical skills very quickly and pick up the bulk of the work themselves. We can see some of the implications of this in Section 4. In these circumstances in particular (but also in a more general sense) clergy also relied on friends, peers and social media to provide information and advice. There was praise for the generosity of others and this experience demonstrates the value of cross-church communication and learning.

So, there are some potentially positive outcomes of a coming together in shared adversity. However, what is more troubling about this situation is its happenstance nature. If clergy happened to have technical experts in their congregation, or happened to have children staying, or happened to have a wealthy congregation, then the situation was much more positive for them, at least in a practical sense. The interviewees did not give a sense of a concerted and organised network of support.

The more centralised diocese and the Church of England informed clergy of current UK Government guidance and its interpretation and provided helpful resources such as access to online services and sermons. However, our interviewees were not aware of a structure for providing information that was more specific to local and immediate need (e.g., a help line for technical queries and problems). There were mixed perceptions of the extent to which pastoral care was provided for clergy by the diocese and some clergy felt more one-to-one support early on would have been helpful. Of course the scale and speed of the pandemic meant that time and resources for setting up such structures was understandably limited.

We did not have the opportunity to speak to many senior members of the diocese but from our limited access, it is possible that there was something of a mismatch of expectation in the early days as the diocese sought to provide resources and high-level advice (*'encouraging local decision-making in a systematic manner'*) while clergy required digital equipment, tailored practical advice, and pastoral support.

4 Wellbeing



Some interviewees referred back to a pre-pandemic situation to note that being a priest has always been a somewhat isolating and pressurised role. For many this experience was accentuated during the pandemic and had implications for clergy wellbeing. We discuss here the sources of stress identified, how this changed over the period of the pandemic measures and what coping strategies clergy adopted. While related, we discuss how the pandemic measures affected clergy's experience of their work (as meaningful) in the next section, Section 5.

4.1 Pandemic Sources of Stress

4.1.1 Learning the technology

An immediate source of anxiety and stress for clergy was the need to move activities online, thus requiring a good knowledge of available technologies and how to implement and use them:

... in the annual [parish] report there's a photograph of the steep learning curve and it's a photograph of me sort of peering into my camera ... basically I was trying to set it up to record and I accidentally took a photograph of me. But I kind of feel like that's the photograph of every vicar, kind of accidentally photographing themselves trying to take a video of worship.

The impact of having to grapple with technology and pressure to 'do something' was viewed as a learning opportunity by some clergy: *"I bought software and I learned how to do it so that we could create videos and put them online. It was fun. It was great to upskill myself"*. However, mostly it had rather a negative impact on clergy wellbeing, particularly in the early days:

Some clergy are very technologically illiterate, and I think they've really, really struggled. This deanery is completely rural. I think it's got 35 churches in it. It's a large deanery. Nearly all of them are tiny churches. They see these all singing, all dancing services with great choirs and everything, and try and mimic that sort of thing. There are a lot of clergy that I've encountered who were completely exhausted in the process of trying to put all their stuff together. They didn't really understand the programmes, they didn't understand the techniques. Couldn't get Zoom to work or whatever medium they were doing and got really tired, and quite often, a little bit cross and angry about it.

Mainly this is about clergy with little background in technology and few resources on which to draw. From this quote in particular, however, we also note that clergy were trying to emulate the more 'professional' offerings they saw online. The need to do the best they could for their congregation and perhaps an assumption that this was what they should be delivering, drove anxiety and overwork. In this latter case, this was exacerbated when much effort was expended but problems still arose, and services were far from perfect:

Easter 2020, I just can't tell you how stressful that was. I set fire to the crown of thorns. We were recording for so many hours that I hadn't noticed the candle went down and then the crown of thorns set fire. It was one o'clock in the morning. I

was still going. My iPhones kept on running out of memory because these are big video files with an old iPhone ... It was absolutely awful. I wept at one point ... I took a picture of the high altar in church. We had that where the green background was, half the congregation thought I was in church. I had three people emailing me saying, 'how dare you break the law? We're dreaming of being in church and there you are breaking the law, being in church and then rubbing our noses in it'.

Learning new ways of working extended beyond virtual services to rather more prosaic activities (e.g. using Zoom for meetings). However, such skills had to be learnt in the doing of the work rather than as separate training, and we turn to the issue of increased workload next.

4.1.2 Workload

Stress was engendered by having to quickly learn new ways of working but also by the expansion of tasks to be done, partly because previous ways of coping with workload had been disrupted:

It makes my job more difficult because you have to go individually to people... You can't do the usual gathering together to minister and have a cup of coffee and chat ... It makes it more difficult and more time consuming because you have to deal with people individually, and they feel they need more because they get less.

While clergy are familiar with the rhythm of the ecumenical calendar and have a lot of experience of ministry, the pandemic situation threw this into disarray: *"it's that sense of reinventing everything... When we came up to Christmas, we know how to do Christmas, we don't know how to do this Christmas".*

A lot of the feeling of overwork was attributed to using technology, not just because of this being a new activity (as above) but also because simply sitting down at a screen everyday was experienced as draining:

I think it's all of us having to struggle with time, and an online world also requires you being on screens a lot more than you would otherwise be. That's quite tiring in itself. The kind of focus that one has when staring into a screen.

This was exacerbated by the 'relentless' nature of service production (*"as soon as you stop, you then need to be thinking about the next one"*) and greater opportunities for communication making clergy feel they were 'always present'. An added complication was that many clergy were using personal social media accounts which were difficult to share:

because I'm using my Pro Team account and we've got all the links set up, I am going to have to [a meeting] on Tuesday night; go early, get the person, make them host and then disappear.

Contributing to this feeling was the inability to plan ahead or, worse, to plan ahead and then for rules to change so that work expended then had to be re-thought:

... all the uncertainty, the number of times we planned how we're going to open up, and then we didn't open up. Or we planned opening up and then we did it for two weeks and then we went back into lockdown, that was quite draining.

... anything we have done, we've torn up three quarters of it before implementing it. So, it seems like it's a thankless task.

Unlike many other occupations, most clergy essentially live 'on the job' so accentuating the feeling of always working and not having a proper break. Many clergy reported that even if they took holiday, this was not necessarily refreshing because they did not go anywhere:

I do know clerics who have been poorly and who have struggled to recover and it's just difficult. Lots of clerics have said to me that they're very, very tired, like all the other people who haven't had a proper holiday, because whilst we might have had a few days off we haven't really gone anywhere, and we haven't been refreshed and renewed in the way that we would have been and it hasn't felt the same.

Additionally, as they were still around, parishioners felt clergy were still accessible, so they would still receive queries and requests for help.

4.1.3 Empathy and caring for others

Sadly, and inevitably, clergy found themselves officiating at more funerals. This was not just volume of work; funerals were difficult because it was not possible to be with the bereaved family in the same way and this experience had a cumulative effect:

you're holding that grief, and people haven't been able to express it.... I still get upset when I think about it, because you're face-to-face with people's grief, and they're sitting there, literally, on their own.... it would be really helpful to have a service where I could name them and light a candle ... I've probably done one too many funerals, if you know what I mean?

We see the effect here of being a receptacle for others' pain and this "carrying burdens for other people" was more generally a cumulative source of strain. This extended across parishioners but also lay helpers and other clergy. Additionally, of course, clergy had families themselves with their own problems, including shielding:

And then you're worried about your own family. I had an elderly father who was on his own and totally isolated two and a half hours drive away and not on the internet. So, yes, it's been incredibly hard. And we're having to deal with people's anxiety. And what we're now dealing with is people's anxiety and pressure for everything just to go back to normal and as it was pre-pandemic.

There was an element of 'emotional labour' involved in this caring for others. Emotional labour is when we project an emotion as part of our work when we are not really feeling that emotion:

on paper I wasn't doing more hours than I was before the pandemic, but you're giving a lot of yourself every time you go online. And now I've got a family and if

the family's having a rough time and I'm shutting the door and smiling to camera, that takes its toll.

Likely this is something clergy were doing pre-pandemic, however as we see from this quote, during the pandemic the boundary between family and parishioners was spatially much reduced, making this performance harder.

Several clergy referred to the fact that they were not good at giving themselves space and time to recover, partly because of their exposure to others' troubles:

And I'm no better or worse than anybody else, but, actually, I'm not brilliant at giving myself permission to say ... this is just awful. I keep saying, well, other people have it worse.

However, a few of our interviewees also reported that caring for others was helpful for their own wellbeing:

it's been helpful, for me, to go out and about and just talk to people on their doorsteps... if I feel as if I'm helping others, it gives me a boost. So, we're actually just in the process of me, pastorally, administering to people, it makes me feel as if I'm doing something useful, and then makes me feel better for it myself. It's not all altruistic

Later in this section, we return to considering how clergy coped with stress and wellbeing, and in Section 7 we consider the impact of the pandemic on pastoral care more generally.

4.2 Benefits to Wellbeing from Pandemic

Although a view expressed less often, several clergy highlighted the positive aspects they had found in the pandemic situation:

I found that my day was a lot more flexible, I was able to do a lot more things that I wanted to do. In some respects, I rather liked it. And we were fortunate last year because the weather was so nice and being in the garden day after day, sitting with the computer, doing the things that needed to be done, it was great. And it was a really special time, actually because I had my kids at home ... And we just enjoyed the simple life. I've always been a bit of a closet monastic fan, really, so it felt like being in a sort of monastic situation, so I was able to turn it into a spiritual positive

For some clergy, the consequence of the pandemic was actually cutting down on workload (e.g. meetings, church councils, church admin) when they felt they had “*been overworking for so long*”. In general, however, we conclude that overall, there were both costs and benefits in relation to the pandemic situation for most clergy:

'it's been exhausting, it's been confusing, it's been exhilarating. There've been some real brilliant plusses from it ... [e.g.] learning new skills... although I'm not a big one for social media, there's something really affirming about getting lots of likes, isn't there?' when something picks up and gets really popular, you go, 'man, this is great'. There's a real kind of dopamine rush, isn't there? And so, when we've

done things that have had a lot of response, a lot of engagement, you think, 'well this is it, this is great'. And then, of course, the following week, it all just drops away, and brings you crunching back down to earth.

4.3 Changes over Time in Well Being

This last quote draws attention to the long drawn-out nature of the pandemic experience. As we mentioned in the introduction to this section, we did note here some potential changes over time. While we did not re-interview the same people in our second round of interviews, our Tranche 2 interviewees were able to reflect back on their experience over time, and we summarise these perceptions here.

4.3.1 Changes over time

Looking back over the pandemic period from the perspective of Summer 2021, a clear theme was that no-one had expected the pandemic to last as long as it did:

this has been the hardest 18 months in ministry that I've ever had, and I've been ordained 23 years. The first year of the pandemic, there was no holiday, there was no time off, there were no breaks, there were 12-, 13-, 14-, 15-hour days ...

Consequently “an initial flurry of enthusiasm” became harder to maintain. While some clergy enjoyed the challenge and even the ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ of it all at the start, the constant changes in requirements and continual working long hours meant that “the novelty has worn off now”:

I found myself really, very flat, once we got to the second lockdown. And a lot of it was, also, I like to be planning for the next season, I like to be thinking about the new things that are coming up and the strategy, and, of course, it's been impossible to do that.

Generally speaking, the pandemic did not play out evenly, some periods were more stressful than others. Looking back over time, clergy could see when there had been particular low points and January 2021 was difficult for many:

January last year was really hard where it was dark and we hadn't had, really, any contact with people over Christmas. And it just felt like the end was not in sight. And I think that was the point which was hardest in terms of my own personal wellbeing. And picking up after Christmas to do things just felt really hard work.

Of course, many clergy became more proficient at using technology: “I'm much happier now posting [on Facebook] than I was when I first started during the first lockdown, I found it so stressful”. However, it was also felt that higher expectations of performance and increasingly complex technology meant that gains made in skill could not necessarily keep up:

The mission is now what I would call phygital, it's physical and digital. What we're grappling with is, a lot of what we do is hybrid, it's both online and physical. The whole online stuff is... Our production team on a Sunday, we used to have one guy on sound. We now have five people on production, two ... camera people. One controlling the live stream, one on sound and one on the words on the screen. It's

massively time consuming and we are struggling a little bit with people getting burnt out on this.

4.3.2 Retrospective realisation

For some, the constant demands and new activities meant that they were, in a sense, too busy to really reflect on how they were feeling: *"I'm only realising now that I'm really tired."* There was clearly a cumulative effect to this, made worse by the fact that nobody had expected or been prepared for it to last so long:

If I say, 'do you know what, I could do it for a few months, but I'm overwhelmed by this', they go, 'well you can't be, because you've done it all'. Whereas I think there's that build up, I've survived this one, I've survived that one, I've survived the next, and so on. And there comes a time to go, yes, I know I've survived, and you're supposed to be less anxious about it when you get through this many. But, actually, it's not like that, you get a number five of anxiety, on top of a number five of anxiety, and so on and so on. And I'm finding that it's a stressful situation that doesn't have an end in sight, all of a sudden. When we were beginning this, it was for a time, and there is an end in sight, it will all be over, 'we'll all meet again', and all this sort of thing. And lo, it was not so, now this is the new reality.

Ongoing tension and anxiety over a long period of time brings the danger that people suffer from burnout. And as we see from the above quote, for some – particularly those who had struggled with the technology – there was the concerned anticipation that ways of working were now unalterably changed. Several clergy said either they knew colleagues or were themselves close to burnout. One former psychotherapist remarked:

I think that how we look after our clergy and others is really important. My background is in psychotherapy, and I'm going back into training to refresh, so that I can offer that to clergy who have been burnt out and things going forward. I think we're in this for some time and so, I keep telling myself ... we are not in a sprint...

The gradual opening up in 2021 and the contrast between this and the previous restricted working, meant that many clergy in Tranche 2 recognised what they had been missing. Indeed, the long absence from 'normal' ways of doing things, brought insights and an enhanced appreciation of work pre-pandemic:

I really noticed the first Sunday when I was out of my seat, off Zoom, came back [to Church] and I was like, 'I'm absolutely tired out' ... I wasn't even doing anything in particular. I was just on my feet doing my job, rather than on my backside, in front of the screen, pressing the mouse button. Effectively, I'm doing the same thing, but I'm out and about, standing up, walking around, waving my hands about, doing an action song, actually standing up... And I thought, 'oh yes, basically church has meant just sitting in this seat, like this, for the last 70 weeks' and I'm like, 'oh, this feels good, to be able to move when I'm doing this'.

4.4 Coping strategies

In Section 3 we considered what (external) support clergy drew on to help them in this unprecedented situation. Here we consider, in detail, the individual coping strategies that clergy found helpful or would like to have adopted.

4.4.1 Time out and Time off

A common strategy, and one adopted in general by workers during the pandemic, was to take exercise and, particularly, spend time outside:

walking along the canal twice a week has been quite a good way to bring some balance to the intensity. I never take the phone with me ... So you meet people face to face, you have a conversation, even earlier on in the pandemic especially meeting people on the road was really helpful.

Clergy also recognised that it was important to take time off when they found themselves overwhelmed, irritable or excessively tired. Partly this was about self-care but also because “you can't care for other people when you're tired”:

I had a bit of [a reaction] ... when I had to make so many decisions that I wasn't really expecting to make, with good colleagues but it was me making the decisions ... After six weeks I was totally exhausted and just couldn't do anything. I thought if I don't stop, I'll have a break down or something. I'm sure other people hit that in the same kind of way, which is totally exhausting ... I took some time off quite carefully and sat down and watched some really terrible films for about a week, which was really good because you couldn't go anywhere either.

We note here the importance of having down time even if the pandemic meant it was impossible to physically get away: “just to be able to have a week to stop, just turn the phone off, and not do anything, was a very positive thing”. But as we have recognised in earlier in this section, many clergy found it difficult to be able to schedule time off, especially in the early days of the pandemic:

I want to go away on holiday ... have a bit of a break. And my curate who was going to be ordained a priest, that's been delayed so he's not been priested you see. And so, there are all those factors that you've got to work out what is actually possible and sustainable. And my two retired clergy are both, one's over 80 and the other one's just under 80. How sensible is it for them to be involved with public worship? So, we're just trying to work all that out as to then what is possible.

Consequently, although an important strategy, clergy recognised “a balance between having a week off and keeping the church going”. Additionally, the issue of not being able to leave the home meant clergy were still surrounded by work. Thus, when clergy were able to go away on holiday or go on retreat more recently, this was hugely appreciated:

I was supposed to be on sabbatical for three months last year, and that didn't happen, or at least, I was able to take a small amount of it, but it wasn't a refreshing resource, or whatever, in the way that sabbatical's ought to be, because

we were at home. My wife didn't take the full amount of time off, and so work was still going on around me ... This month, I've just finished a month's sabbatical, and for me, that has been, probably, a really important way of restoring something that, definitely, has been needed.

4.4.2 Explicit orientation to wellbeing

Some clergy teams explained that they were explicit about the need for self-care and encouraged specific interventions for their own clergy team or even parishioners as a whole:

[Our clergy team have] always been really careful to watch out for our own and each other's mental health, even before the pandemic ... our pastoral ministry leader, has always said in our staff meetings ... to ask of ourselves and each other, 'how is your mental health?' Just as a normal question ... So we'd been aware and sensitive to the fact that you can't just pretend that's not happening, and just get on with whatever you need to get on with at work. So we tried to give each other the space to process things, and we also tried not to make quick decisions, not to be rushed into decisions, in terms of suddenly these regulations have changed, so what do we need to do?

More fundamentally, some clergy teams built this concern with wellbeing into the way they approached organising for the pandemic:

right from the beginning it was felt that we should come together and do this as a shared offering to the whole of the parish for them to see. And I firmly believe also it took the stress off us because we weren't all having to do something every single week, and I think we needed that actually to cope with the shock of what was happening.

Here we see a benefice adopting a team mentality in how they approached the pandemic situation, allowing them to spread workload and consequently maintain wellbeing. In this case, they did not adopt particularly sophisticated technology solutions but only what they felt they could manage effectively. Similarly:

I'm not the Messiah. There are too many vicars who think they are. Fortunately, I leant early that road that only leads to ruin. I don't feel guilty about [cutting our coat to suit our cloth] to do that, and I hope we've done that sensibly and wisely.

We discuss this further in Section 7 when we address how clergy adapted their delivery of pastoral care to meet the needs of parishioners in the pandemic.

4.4.3 Personal characteristics

Interestingly a number of clergy attributed effective coping to personal characteristics such as whether one was introvert or extravert or particularly resilient in nature:

I know it's been harder for certain clergy than for others, particularly the extroverts who need the fuel of being with people all the time. It's been harder for them. I have a lot of people time, but as an introvert, it's not where I get my energy from.

So, don't get me wrong, I'm not a minister who hides away anyway, but I think I'm probably better equipped to deal with this in terms of personality than some of my colleagues.

I suppose I put myself, because other people tell me, in the category of those who have a fairly big work capacity. When pressure is on, I'm not quick to run into a corner and hide or just struggle. I'm a survivor and quite resilient. My capacity for work is pretty okay. I haven't found it overly demanding to cope with all that's going on.

This attribution – thinking of oneself as resilient – is in itself a coping strategy ('I am someone who can cope so I will cope') and may also have allowed an understanding of different clergy reactions to the difficult situation. However, while potentially useful for individuals, seeing coping as an intrinsic characteristic can be detrimental in the long term as it may encourage refusing to recognise problems or labelling others in unhelpful ways. When we think of coping as something one can or cannot do, then the possibilities for intervention are reduced and less attention is paid to environmental factors. Consequently, we see the clergy member who self-identified as a "survivor" going on to say:

But, having said that, I've been sensible, and the PCC and the Wardens with me have been sensible in saying, what can we reasonably do during this pandemic season to care for the congregation and go on encouraging and serving the wider community that is sustainable for all?

4.5 Summary

Above we have seen that there were many ways in which clergy's wellbeing could be compromised by the pandemic experience. We identified three in particular as most common, but of course, each individual clergy in their own situation had also specific stressors (e.g. absent colleagues, pre-existing illness, church schools and etc). Having to learn and deal with a sometimes recalcitrant technology was clearly a new potential source of stress, however a high workload and providing emotional support are intrinsic to the role. Both of these were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This serves to draw attention to already existing sources of stress and the need to have wellbeing of clergy and lay helpers always in mind.

Whether wellbeing was considered seemed to depend on the leadership of local benefices or individual clergy resources. While caring for others, individual clergy are not always good at caring for themselves; emphasised by their sense of being called to the work. This motivation may have encouraged clergy to strive too hard with technology and to orient entirely to others. Perhaps the potential positives of technology were over-emphasised, and then further underlined by watching well-resourced churches' online performances. The needs of parishioners were clear and concerning and may have become all-consuming. It was easy during the pandemic to think of this as a unique situation that meant self-sacrifice was required. This was not a position that could be maintained over time, and our interviewees reported dwindling enthusiasm as the pandemic dragged on. Consequently, while we hear a lot about sustainability in relation to the environment, we also have to consider sustainable

working. We return to these issues in Section 8.4 where we consider clergy preferences for a sustainable future.

We note that these sources of stress were also sometimes sources of wellbeing. While most found technology contributed to anxiety and overload, many also enjoyed learning new skills. That enjoyment may have increased if the situation had been less pressured. The emotional burden was lessened for some by the rediscovery of local pastoral care which we discuss in more detail in Section 7. While the majority of clergy felt overloaded and some close to burnout, a few felt the burden lifted somewhat or found new ways of working beneficial (using Zoom in particular). Of particular significance here, we felt, were those benefices who came together to work as a team, who agreed that complex technological performances were not necessary and who spread the workload amongst them. So there were opportunities for preserving wellbeing but this required a strategic approach.

5 Impact on Meaningful Ministry



In the previous section we discussed how the pandemic impacted clergy's sense of wellbeing. In this section we turn to contemplate, more specifically, how clergy felt the pandemic had impacted their connection with their work as meaningful ministry. This centres around the feeling of being present with others, both physically and spiritually, but also touches on a sense of identity as clergy. There were differences here between Tranche 1 and 2 interviewees in the sense of some of Tranche 1 only being online at that point, and Tranche 2 having the advantage of being back in Church and the possibility of hybrid church. Where significant these differences are noted below.

5.1 Authentic Connection and Engagement

As we noted in Section 2, there were theological reasons why clergy had resisted digital ministry pre-pandemic, such as the meaningfulness and authenticity of a sermon coming from its live context. So the pandemic raised significant questions around authentic connection and engagement:

you could say that the professional aspect to our work has been disrupted, and in a sense, traumatised. A lot of our work has been face-to-face, hands on. Because basically we believe in incarnational ministry. We believe in the importance of the physical, and the body, and being present to each other. And when that's taken away from us, yes we've got virtual presence of each other, but it's really not the same.... I think the clergy all over the world have suffered.

Many clergy struggled with the feeling of authentically 'being with' the congregation, especially during services. Although clergy could appreciate there was a virtual presence, it was felt that the important sense of 'togetherness' was difficult to recreate online:

I used to work [in a different field]. I didn't step out of [that field] ... in order to sit behind a camera and deliver something online, once a week. And I know that's not what it's been reduced to, but the pastoral engagement, or the personal engagement that comes with actually gathering people, when either leading a service of worship, or preaching. Having that sense of togetherness, you just don't get that at all online.

In the following extracts we see again this concern about missing aspects of communication but also a concern about authenticity and lacking an intangible feeling of connection:

going online, having the digital things, and the fact that in some ways it's harder to hold people's attention ... for a 20 minute sermon. That's forced me to be shorter, more precise. So in some ways that's good. But in other ways, you lose immediacy of the kind of response of being in front of your congregation. And seeing whether you're capturing them or not. So there's pluses and minuses... with the pre-recorded acts of worship, I felt it's terribly artificial... And no one in the building, no sense of being there as the body of Christ... I was relieved to be able to get back into church physically, with a congregation physically there.

I think there is a natural tendency for disassociation and fakeness online because I would often wear my clergy outfits and have my dog collar but have joggers underneath.

However, this second interviewee also went on to say that: “The situation that we were in, we don’t really have a choice because community and fellowship and connection are something that we fundamentally are created to have”. Indeed, several clergy noted this potential distance but saw that Zoom in particular might substitute for this because:

I think one element of Christian worship, is what you might call the interactive element. The element of being there with each other in real time and space, what you might call a fellowship, or personal dynamic sense. And Zoom gave us that.

So Zoom was often preferred to pre-recording because at least there was some interaction. One interviewee emphasised that an online capability meant that their overseas missions could directly interact with congregation, and in real time, making them feel much closer that they had pre-pandemic.

Curates, however, found it more difficult to build these important relationships:

Coming in during the pandemic was just the weirdest thing ... because we had such an online presence ... for a lot of people, we were such a pivotal part of their spiritual development, because ... they would see me during all of our streaming things ... but I would never see them ... And now ... walking through the shops, and people will come to me and have a conversation with myself or my wife [and], well, ‘I have no idea who you are’, but you are such a big part of their life, and they know you, and they know what’s going on in your life because we’ve got a very relational element of ministry ... I would say that it is one of those things that you have to grieve as a curate coming in because you’ve got those expectations of what you’re going to do. I think we did miss out on building a lot of relationships with a lot of people. That was really difficult.

Zoom was better than nothing; it undeniably enabled more engagement and connection for those who, pre-pandemic, would not have been able to connect at all. However, neither the physical co-presence in relationship building, nor the physical nature of comforting could be replaced by Zoom, as we explore further in Section 7 in relation to pastoral care. And clergy reported having to work very hard to try to replicate some sense of being present together as a community online, in a sense ‘being’ the community for their congregation:

I know that in this whole period of time [during online service], I must behave as if I am fully present and visible In a way that in church... I know that people ... look out the window and drop things on the floor and I can see all that happening. But actually, on screen it isn’t like that, there’s this very intense quite solitary sense of doing this on behalf of the community to enable the community to function ... But they’re not physically present.. all the comments we’ve had back have been very supportive and said how appreciative it is... But yes, I feel pretty whacked by the end of it.

Overall then some sort of engagement was possible with great efforts from clergy, as we see in Section 6, but something intangible was missing. Interviewees from Tranche 2, even when initially enthusiastic about the possibilities, found their enthusiasm waning and were left feeling bereft:

I feel a slight waning of energy when I'm at Zoom church, I have to be really honest. It was terribly novel when we started and now we've done it maybe 12 times or something ... I have to be honest, it's totally and utterly not the same. And, every Sunday morning I think, 'oh, I've got to go and sit in my lounge again in front of all these faces' and there's always this terrible sort of sadness when we all say goodbye because it was something but it was nothing, if you see what I mean, in comparison to what we used to have in the church building.

5.2 Church Buildings: Belonging and Attachment

This last comment reminds us that, in the early days particularly, clergy could not be in their churches at all and many felt this as a great loss: “the attachment to buildings is so, so big in the church, we love our buildings, so the sense that there could be any danger of losing those would be really difficult for people”. This sense of love is not just about the nature of the buildings themselves but as a “sanctuary” for those who feel vulnerable and, importantly, a community hub:

The buildings are ... they're the spiritual hub of the village. They're big churches, and not only are they physically dominant ... they have been available at all times for all people. Whether or not you went on a Sunday, the church door was open, and it's a big aspect of offering that hospitality. And that's why we would work so hard at keeping the buildings in a state, insured and heated, and in a state ready to be used by the village, because the churches are owned by the people. It's not to do with the ministry team, it's about being the spiritual hub of the community, that's how I see the Church. So, to actually close that, was dreadful. And when, right at the very beginning, we couldn't even go in for private prayer, and if I felt bad about that, I know that other people felt just as bad.

So as a physical manifestation of spirituality and community, many of our interviewees expressed sadness over the loss of this important space; we explore what this loss meant for the congregation more particularly in Section 6.5. Additionally, many clergy expressed the view there was something experientially quite different about holding services in the church building as opposed to online:

initially yes [we missed the building], and then not so much. And then when we got back we realised we had missed it. And then after a while it seems like you've never been away. So it's a weird thing, isn't it? Church is not the building. We all know that. But the building is really important.... I think there are all sorts of things, aren't there? There's the smell of a building. Ours is not a particularly incense-y, church-y smell, but every building has a smell, and the sound of the door opening, and the lock. But then also just the fact that you can be on site, in person, physically present with each other in a place which means something. We didn't have that.

From this tranche 2 interviewee, we see how this experience changed over time and some clergy mentioned that it was not until they were back in the building that they realised how much they had missed it. It also underlines the importance of the congregation being physically back together. There is a sense in which the physicality of the building and the physical interactions within it are important, however much we may emphasise a more intangible spirituality. This interviewee draws attention to the way in which what we miss is a 'place' as much as a 'space':

Two Sundays ago we did a Zoom link-up [from church] ... because ... it dawned on us that there was a small handful of people who would definitely consider themselves to belong to [our church] but who didn't actually have anywhere meaningful to connect in ... There are loads of churches doing stuff online. But people who belong to [our church] don't necessarily want to go to any old where. They want to join in with [our church].

Here we note that it is not just having a spiritual space in which to worship but a known place with which we identify and with which we feel a specific connection (even here where this was online). Once able to record inside churches (even without the congregation), some clergy made efforts to make sure they recorded within different churches of the benefice so that all the congregation could feel that sense of belonging and attachment.

The debate about closing the churches was much more intensive and political than we explored during the interviews or than we report here. We acknowledge that this grew to be quite a divisive issue, particularly online (with one interviewee claiming they withdrew from Twitter because of it). Here we are not engaging with the debate about 'high' versus 'low' church except to note that it became quite toxic online. This perhaps over-shadowed the complex and changing views clergy seemed to have about the church buildings.

5.3 The Issue of Eucharist

Again debated quite intensively within the Church during the pandemic was the giving and taking of Holy Communion. This was seen as particularly difficult given only a virtual presence. Our interviewees inevitably also discussed this:

We are a physical community. If we say the centre of our worship is Eucharist, it's a shared meal. What are we doing with people sitting in their homes? That's not Eucharist. That can't be Eucharist, by definition. And how can we really properly continue to build and grow relationships together if we're all staying in our homes?

There was a common view that Eucharist could not be (theologically) meaningful unless it was shared. However, most clergy felt it was important that they found some way to celebrate it with their congregations through modifications even if it was 'not the same'. Here the interviewee describes how he attempted to make 'spiritual communion' more meaningful:

On the screen, there's a prayer that I put up for them to read, to engage with. And it explains in a way why you're having spiritual communion, as opposed to the physical communion. And it's just helping people to understand that even though you're not receiving the physical sacrament, you're still receiving Jesus's body and

blood ... once you get into that atmosphere of it, you just let the spirit take control. But I much prefer being in the church ... because I think it's about the fellowship with other believers and being able to share that with people...

Others found that celebrating Eucharist online felt more intense:

there's a voice off stage which says 'and also with you'. But actually, I'm the only person that's occupying the screen and picking up the chalice and so on. It's just me that's the focus so for that 40 minutes during the service, I have a very, very intense commitment of intentionality.

Most found themselves more at ease celebrating Eucharist within the Church building, suggesting that different church services are more meaningful in different spaces:

... during Easter, Lent, I did Compline at home. That wasn't too bad, because .. it's a very quiet, contemplative service. But the Sunday Eucharist didn't, I don't think, really work at home. It was better recorded in church, but again, it's very strange, if it's just two of you in there, doing a Eucharist. But I was aware that it was helpful having just the image of the interior of the church and the familiar words being spoken and being broadcast ... It's not ideal, but it was something. At least I had somebody else [partner] there ... filming, so he took communion, so it wasn't just me, literally on my own, and I think some clergy probably were just on their own, which would have felt really quite peculiar

And there was definite relief when clergy could return to their churches for this particular aspect of ministry:

doing a communion service with just me and my wife actually in my room, and not actually giving anyone else the bread and wine, is okay to a point. But I think I cried the first time I was back in church giving communion to other people. I'm quite low church, but for me, to actually hand somebody the wafer of bread, it's a completely different level of connection. With online, I'm just talking to a camera, my wife's sitting there filming me on a camera. I imagine there are people who are engaging with this, live or as a recording, but I'm not actually physically interacting, and it's not as satisfying or as rewarding, really, as face-to-face, but it's better than nothing.

5.4 Online as Performance

This feeling of lacking connection or engagement is an ongoing theme of this section and here we consider further the impact of this, particularly in relation to clergy's experience of providing services as giving a 'performance'. Of course, any church service has always been a performance of some sort, with 'costumes' and 'props', but moving online provided a more complex and even a somewhat contradictory picture of how clergy experience this.

Not having the physical connection for some made providing a service more of a performance:

I didn't want to do online [services] I really didn't want to, my gut reaction was communion, I am only in communion with my congregation when I'm in

communion with you, otherwise it's a performance. This is not communion because I am not in communion with anyone. And so I felt really strongly on it, but it became quite clear that my congregation did not feel the same

Whether or not it was 'just' a performance was linked to focus and intentionality. For example, "[Livestreaming] feels like a performance, it's slightly voyeuristic [on YouTube]" whereas pre-recording is generated for a specific congregation and Zoom feels more like a direct conversation. So this seems to be related to whether one feels one has a known 'audience'. Some found this aspect in fact problematic with respect to pre-recordings: "preaching and leading services into a vacuum I found actually quite hard".

Recording a service, whether at home or in the Church building, drew attention to the 'performance' aspects of ministry:

And you're whole lot more conscious of what you might call the production aspects to something like that. So I'm looking at myself, at a screen, preaching. Trying to make sure the background is not too distracting or appropriate. Trying to make sure that I look fairly presentable. But very much aware of myself and my own face

Many clergy reported being now concerned over, as it were, 'production values' and the importance of visual elements: "choosing the pictures that go up for the screen share when we get there on the Sunday. I choose with quite a lot of care for the moment in the service". Some of this may have been considered quite differently pre-pandemic:

I cannot use the high altar because the sunlight is streaming through the stained glass behind ... [before] you'd never worry about that and in fact it'd be brilliant that the light was streaming through

Not being in the church building, some found difficult because "props [were] taken away" and consequently started to present services and the church in different ways specifically because of camera-presence: "we actually bought a monstrance which, even for our church, was a bit of a step".

Having to perform for camera interacted with a desire to provide a good experience for the congregation to make some clergy feel nervous about leading an online service: "at some level we are professionals and it's got to look good and be of a good quality".

However, we also found quite the opposite experience expressed, although less often:

I guess, although I can put on extrovert, I'm really quite introverted, as I think most clergy are, so in a way it was a relief and less draining to be not in direct face-to-face contact and having to perform for people all the time. This is a safe, comfortable space. I can do this in my own home, without loads of people there all the time, and the pressure. So, in some ways, it was less stressful. We'll get Sunday service ready. By Wednesday, I've recorded it. Thursday and Friday, I can take it easy.... There were pros and cons, and yes, I had some late nights trying to get something finished ... but then It's a great feeling when you do work it out and get it to work.

5.5 Identity as Priest

These changes to how clergy were performing their ministry led to some more fundamental questioning of what it meant to be a vicar during the pandemic and, also of course, what it might mean post-pandemic:

my Associate Priest was like ... 'What's my role? Who am I as a vicar, am I a priest now'?

I've had to learn how to be an online worship person, an evangelist and missionary. It's just bizarre.

In relation to the discussion about performance in Section 5.4, some found this had deep impacts, particularly when no interaction with the congregation was possible:

It did get better, but I went through a really bad ... I had an existential crisis ... My prayer journal was non-existent, which is always a good indicator [of crisis]. But then when eventually I had got round to praying and writing things down, it made me cry just remembering how utterly difficult things were. Mainly, I felt that I was no longer a priest, but I was a little mini Steven Spielberg. I felt like an actor. I didn't feel like I was really leading God's community in worship. I think this is because it was all pre-recording.

One interviewee equated online preaching with losing control in terms of “*who's logging in, who's inviting who [because] I have no physical recognition of these people. I only know they're watching if they post a comment*” and concluded that “*I think the whole accepting that you've lost control thing is a really interesting phenomenon*”.

This suggests an acceptance of some changes that might, indeed, feed forward into ongoing ministry. However, others were cautious about potential future implications of the period they had all gone through:

You have to work where people's strengths are. And I think this is where if we're not careful, particularly the Church of England, we end up making people feel the need to have these [digital] skillsets. That if they don't, or they can't, then it makes them feel inadequate ...

We will discuss potential visions of the future in Section 8. However, for now we note that for at least one of our interviewees the experience was very much a positive one, indeed a re-discovery of their proper and desired role, particularly in the early days:

I've recovered a lot of what I went into ministry for... mission, the gospel, feeding and caring for people ... it felt like I was being a 21st century version of a proper pastor again even if I was doing a lot of it online ... I've had so much more affirmation from the congregation ... in the last six months than I ever got before

While again the novelty wore off for this individual because of restrictions, generally clergy had found some way to realise their deeply-held identities even in such difficult times:

So, physically, I felt tired, but in many ways, I've just felt I'm in the right place and I'm doing the right thing. So, that's really invigorating in itself and helping.

5.6 Valued New Skills and Practices

It has been clear throughout this report, that the pandemic required clergy to learn new skills and many enjoyed the challenge of this, adding new creative capabilities to their repertoire:

it felt quite creative, though, and it felt stimulating to be learning new stuff. I've learnt how to upload a video onto this or that platform and put it out, and just overcoming the problem solving ... I actually found that quite stimulating and enjoyable

This new and unprecedented situation had even challenged some long-held preconceptions, with some give and take:

we've had to learn how to deal with videographers in church and at services, because I've always been rather anti-having intrusive photographers, but we're getting much more relaxed about that. To be honest, I think that the photographers and videographers have become much more discreet in the way they do it as well, so that's been good

New opportunities for learning from other clergy practice were also made possible by the greater dependence on recording services and posting on social media:

I've never been able to watch any of my members of my cell group preside at the Eucharist before because I get six Sundays off a year, that's it. Otherwise I am keeping the show on the road. So it's great to be able to be fed by the creativity of different types of worship.

More problematic for new curates was learning traditional practices. They “gained a lot of surprising skills over the last 18 months” but at the same time:

it was more than two years before I did a wedding or a baptism... schools ministry, for example, is another thing that's been really curtailed. And for my priesting as well, not celebrating the Eucharist.... For somebody at my stage in the curacy, you'd normally expect I would be much more familiar with that aspect of priestly ministry ... So, yes, it's affected my training, but not desperately badly. And it's also, of course, given me all sorts of other, I mean, the funeral ministry that I did last year was really quite wonderful and a real eye opener as to how we can, as a church, minister and offer hope to people

So there was much discussion about new skills that had to be learnt, sometimes too quickly - giving rise to anxiety - but also felt by some to be an opportunity for creativity and stimulation. A few saw the possibility to develop these skills in a more lasting fashion:

there's this genre on YouTube about your 'everyday carry' ... And I want to do something which is a bit of a rip-off of those and one would be a vicar's, what do I carry every day as a vicar. And I really want to put some time into it and try and make it interesting. ... It's me trying to say, look, I've learned now how to use

*YouTube, how to edit things and so on. Can we have a bit of an enduring presence?
.... That would be [for] the whole world and that's [not] because I'm pathetically
saying to them 'please come to our church' but it would almost be a matter of
establishing a little bit of a platform....*

From this we see how pursuing a sense of meaningful ministry may be extended by experiences during the pandemic. In Section 8 we come back to consider in more detail how clergy see the post-pandemic future of their ministry.

5.7 Summary

A recurrent theme through this chapter is the need for communion in order to authentically experience ministry. Although clergy worked hard to find this in the new practices of the pandemic, it proved impossible to completely replicate, leading to feelings of sadness and incompleteness. Again, we see here how initial enthusiasm through learning new skills carried clergy forward in the first months but that this wore off as the pandemic went on. This 'wearing down' and feelings of incompleteness were perhaps not thoroughly understood until they were back in physical interaction with their congregations.

Challenges to the experience of meaningful ministry included confusion over new roles and an increased orientation to individual performance, as opposed to a more community-based interaction. Clergy were not completely bereft of meaningful ministry but it seemed as if particular services were more suited to meaningful communion and different types of digital media offered differing levels of support for the experience of meaningfulness.

The pandemic has been important for clergy reflection and identification of what really matters to them in their ministry, as well as the possibility of extending that ministry in new meaningful directions. In Section 8 we consider in more detail clergy reflections on their experiences and how this relates to potential future ministry.

6 Impact on Congregation and Parish



In Section 3, we outlined the kind of support that clergy received and discussed how and from whom this had been provided. We noted how parishioners often rallied around to help their clergy with new roles and responsibilities taken on and potentially closer relationships between clergy and their congregations forged. Consequently, we asked our interviewees to describe the impact of the pandemic on their congregations. Parish context and resources were often relevant though this played out in a range of ways. Greater skills and resources did in some respects minimise the worst effects of the pandemic for some congregations through being able to access online offerings but so did being in geographically smaller close-knit communities. However, all clergy reported how the pandemic had profoundly impacted their parishioners and those in Tranche 2 were able to reflect more fully on its longer-term impacts.

6.1 Parish Context and Digital Familiarity

Clergy reported how a variety of parish characteristics influenced the impact of the pandemic on their congregations. Key factors were the demographic profile of the parish and its level of resources, including socio-economic context; personal characteristics; and access to material resources.

6.1.1 Socio-economic context

Many clergy described how the socio-economic context of their parish was a determining factor in how their congregation had been impacted by the pandemic. Clergy reported widely varying financial resources: those well-provided for in terms of parish income and capital were able to utilise funds to provide enhanced digital set-ups and online provision. Others, however, explained the link between their parish's socio-economic deprivation, lack of parish funds and the demographic profile of their parishioners and digital poverty (where parishioners lack devices and technological know-how). In some cases, the ethnic profile of parishioners raised a cultural consideration that added to the likelihood of digital poverty, requiring clergy to find non-digital solutions to their outreach and ministry:

We're based in an area of deprivation, one of the top 10 areas of deprivation in the UK. So, there will be ... cultural considerations... the UKME people, are quite often subject to digital poverty... it's very difficult to meet and engage UKME people via a website. They need the face-to-face contact, they need to be able to ask questions, they need a flyer or poster that they can pop into their pockets.

6.1.2 Personal characteristics

In addition to socio-economic profile, the personal characteristics of parishioners was another factor that clergy mentioned as relevant to pandemic impact. They cited differences in parishioner attitudes and skills in respect of digital technology and also in levels of personal agency. Older congregations and those living on benefits were particularly identified as lacking digital know-how and the organizational skills that could have been utilised. This put additional pressure on clergy to undertake more tasks themselves in the absence of others to whom they could delegate, whilst recognising the importance of their ministry to these very populations:

We're woefully under skilled at a parish level ... I'm lucky actually that I finally managed to get a church warden to help with the video editing every week.

here in these little country parishes, with small elderly congregations in a typical Church of England fashion, the digital world just didn't feature.

a lot of them are single parents with children who benefit a lot from coming but who live somewhat chaotic lives.

Overall, pre-pandemic, clergy were well-versed in navigating and accommodating differences both within and between parishes and congregations:

when I first came here, because the two churches were quite different, and they made it very clear that they were different. ... they kept repeating ... 'we're very different churches'.

Clergy sensitivity to preferred forms of worship (contemporary vs. traditional), and attitudes to digital platforms (digitally engaged vs. non-users), had shaped their ability to introduce technology into their ministry:

what I find is that people want to separate technology from church. So, for them, church is somewhere where we come, it's all very traditional. We have our worship. We have our quiet time. And technology does not belong here.

Congregation lack of interest in, or active resistance to, digital technology, added a layer of complexity to the impact of the pandemic. However, as noted in Section 3.2, other parishioners were important sources of technological support during the pandemic, matching or surpassing clergy's own technological abilities and sometimes actively encouraging the parish to embrace the opportunities of digitalisation. Digital technology thus provided the context for a dynamic relationship between parish and clergy rather than the parish as an entity solely 'impacted' by the pandemic.

6.1.3 Material resources

The material resources of the parish were also a factor. These were often determined by the wider infrastructure of the geographical area, with some rural parishes experiencing very limited broadband coverage, and by the condition of the church buildings. Clergy also reported on how material digital resources were closely linked to the financial resources of the parish, so that those with available parish funds were able to purchase the necessary digital equipment.

We're lucky because, where we are, it's well provided with technology... the 4G mobile signal's great... If you're in the middle of nowhere you can't even get enough to make a phone call, let alone be able to stream data.

we upgraded our laptops because we realised that the old ones weren't quick enough or new enough.... the church has got plenty of money to deal with it. ... If we needed the latest phone or computer, we could easily get that.

6.2 Loss, Pain and Trauma

Clergy reported the primary impact of the pandemic was on the wellbeing of their congregations. They recognised that parishioners experienced loss, pain and trauma both collectively and individually as a result of the pandemic itself and through the restrictions that it brought. Some parishioners suffered bereavements or were ill, but nearly all lost the familiarity of daily routines and in-person social contact. Clergy experienced much of the same trauma themselves. The closure of church buildings, for many a significant communal and spiritual place, was an added loss: *"we had to close [the churches] and lock the doors. That felt dreadful for me, as a minister, but the impact on the wider community was awful, and I think a lot of people felt as though it was an added bereavement, they'd lost"*.

The first lockdown (with no support bubbles) later permitted meant some people were entirely on their own and was a particularly traumatic period. The second national lockdown, after the lifting of some restrictions, and the sudden re-introduction of restrictions at Christmas 2020, were also low points for many parishioners (and indeed clergy).

many people have found lockdown really hard, many members of the congregation have been alone, haven't had hugs and it's really hard

I sense frustration from elsewhere that we haven't got back to normal yet. So, I feel that pain for other people.... in the parish. They all know that we can't, but they'd just love to, and they really miss it and that's the pain I feel for them.

A key focus for clergy was therefore the provision of pastoral care to address the impact of the pandemic, which we discuss in detail in Section 7 below. Here we outline clergy views on the wider effects of the pandemic on their congregations.

6.3 Impact on Engagement with the Church

Clergy reported how engagement by their congregations was affected by the closure of church buildings and the move to online services and ministry more generally. Many described a similar broad trajectory. This started with initial enthusiasm and appreciation, often waned over time as other opportunities for activities arose and became more fractured as services became more hybrid in their delivery. Parishioners who were vulnerable or shielding others, however, were grateful for continued online services where these were provided.

In the early days of the pandemic, many clergy reported increased and enthusiastic engagement by parishioners with their online ministry, including from those who were not regular churchgoers, as well as tolerance of it being *"a bit rough and ready at times"*:

at the beginning, there was a huge amount of interest, and a huge amount of uptake, and people would bear with me. And we did things like VE Day out on my lawn, and we videoed the bugler... people responded extremely well to that.

Some clergy mentioned explicit theological engagement by congregation members, who valued their “theological clarity” about the pandemic (and lockdown and social distancing) and said their services helped them through difficult times:

I was getting lots more people emailing me afterwards and asking questions. And they were getting family members to log on as well, so they would have a discussion. ... during the week, we had a coffee morning on Zoom, so people would have the opportunity to discuss the service or the sermon. ...There were a few people who hadn't been to church for a while, who had been on the fringe, and suddenly they came back.... to say as well that the service had helped them.

Some clergy reported how initially the disruption of normality and routine as a result of the pandemic created reflexive space and led parishioners to adopt a change mindset. This openness included older parishioners with little or no IT experience. Parishioners were willing to embrace new ways of engaging, for example, using third party created online materials which gave clergy a chance to provide low risk tasters of what was on offer from the church beyond their own parish:

I think it's been easy to do because everyone's in the mood of doing new things. There is a different mindset now... at the moment we're in a world where it's “let's do the music different, let's do the children different... I can just say “let's just try that” and they know it's not forever.

Clergy based their evaluation of engagement on verbal comments and emails, though a few parishes used surveys to collect feedback. Many were struck by the polarisation of views. Some parishioners were appreciative and said they loved the intimacy of an online service they felt was delivered into their home just for them, while others, although appreciating the effort, were much less keen: “Occasionally, you get a snidey email from someone who hates it”. Clergy observed that context played a role here: it was sometimes hard to separate out parishioners’ feelings towards the online services from their more general sentiments about the pandemic and the restrictions lived under.

A few clergy ran a formal consultation to elicit views specifically about the online ministry which were useful in capturing congregation feelings:

We did do a survey quite early on... asking people what they were accessing online and whether they felt what they were getting was meeting their spiritual needs and what were they missing or what more could we do. Most people were really positive... Lots of people said they were really missing Holy Communion... [they] are used to a more sacramental theology so receiving bread and wine is really important to their spirituality.

Over time parish engagement became more fractured. More sophisticated users of digital technology shopped around to try online services from outside their parish; others developed

'Zoom fatigue'. Clergy noted a waning sense of engagement as well as higher expectations around the online content they were providing. They observed differences between congregations where some were more accepting and others more reflexive about what had been lost.

At [church name] they've totally accepted it.... there's a lady, she's 89, and she said to me on Sunday, that service was beautiful ... they can't sing, they just have to sit, and I've got songs that they listen to, but they're really enjoying it. Whereas at [other church] I think they're a little bit more looking back and thinking, if only we could have the organ again.

One of the features of delivering services via digital platforms was that these provided the tools to record and analyse the metrics of engagement, as we discuss next.

6.4 Impact on Congregation Numbers and Reach

Many clergy acknowledged their concern pre-pandemic with how many parishioners attended their services: *"It's very easy for clergy to feel a bit paranoid about 'I'm not quite hitting all my numbers'"*. However, these numbers also operated as shorthand for 'engagement' as well as much more existential concerns: did the congregation numbers justify the continuation of the parish church? This continued to be the case in the pandemic.

Whilst some clergy could give quite precise figures for how many would typically attend particular services pre-pandemic, the move to online delivery provided new ways of engaging and monitoring. Where services were recorded and made available for later viewing, for example, via YouTube, this could increase numbers considerably as the time shift enabled people to engage also at later times that suited them better (*the 'Netflix church'*). Clergy could monitor congregation numbers recorded on the digital platform. This led to a new focus on metrics and clergy conversations in which numbers were shared and compared:

One of my colleagues is aware that his pre-recorded services were over time reaching maybe four or five times as many people as would have been in church previously

However, clergy also questioned the validity of these numbers as data. For example, live digital engagement via Zoom appears to provide a tally of participants for each online event but many clergy were quick to point out that this could be deceptive (a family of four might watch a service together via a single device; the same person might log on and off multiple times during a service and appear as multiple different participants):

One of those people who's seen your service might only have been there... by accident, they watched it for a few minutes, got bored and went away...I'd say it's hard to get accurate statistics.

Whilst many clergy were able to cite viewing or attendance figures for their online services or other events (such as prayer meetings or 'coffee with the vicar' on Zoom), they also recognised that the quality of attendance and participation was hard to gauge in the online sphere, especially when cameras were turned off. Some felt this impacted their ability to detect issues where pastoral care might be required (as further developed in section 7).

In terms of reach, online services offered almost limitless potential viewers, though a few took steps to limit access to their parish digital content by making participation invitation-only. Those who did not restrict access often reported the presence of those from outside their parish boundaries: a potentially exciting new congregation. On reflection, many clergy acknowledged that this often included those who had some connection with the parish: the extended family of parishioners who lived elsewhere including overseas and those with historic (e.g. ancestral) or more contemporary connections to the parish (e.g. recently moved away):

We have had one or two people from around the world joining in. So, somebody's cousin now joins in on a Sunday morning. People who haven't been there for a long time join on a Sunday morning. And there's somebody from Australia who fairly regularly joins us for morning prayer because they came from [parish town] when they were younger.

New joiners were also those in the UK and beyond who 'shopped around' for online provision that appealed to them. For example, those whose churches and/or parish setting were particularly aesthetically pleasing felt this definitely played a role:

Our foreign viewers were the ones that were mostly... done live from the rectory or outside in the rectory garden... quite an idyllic sort of setting for morning prayer

This also included those whose own local church did not have any online provision but who preferred parish rather than diocesan content: *"Everybody who's joined us, joins because they have some kind of emotional connection with the parish"*.

Whilst clergy seemed broadly happy to welcome new members of congregation, they also worried that their attendance was at the expense of their local parish, such that they were not participating in building that congregation and community:

Do we prioritise the local church having a relationship with the people who live immediately around us, or do we capitalise on the fact that now it's possible for people to choose any kind of church that they want?

This was linked to new existential concerns for clergy particularly in Tranche 1: 'who is my congregation?' and 'who are we church for?'. The parish has traditionally been the organizing principle around which the major structures of the Church are designed. The move to online threatens this by dissolving physical parish boundaries. We discuss this concern further in Section 8.

In fact, many clergy in Tranche 2 concluded that a distinct online congregation drawn from outside the parish had not materialised:

I know some churches have developed a separate online congregation, and we haven't...it didn't really work in terms of evangelism, but probably what we were posting wasn't geared for that either

The online congregation from elsewhere were more akin to short term visitors and that perhaps also reflected the nature of the online content created under pandemic conditions.

Many reported numbers of online congregation falling over time, initially seen as “*fatigue*” or people being ‘*Zoomed out*’ but then a more definite shift in behaviour towards a return to in-person worship once that was permitted. The existential concern of “*who are we church for?*” remained to some extent at this later time point; clergy reflected on the shift in power with the congregation taking on a consumer role enabled by the pandemic arrangements. They also faced a small percentage of parishioners who were content to remain online in contrast to a majority who had been happy to return to worship in church buildings, which meant either accommodating them or taking the decision to end parish services online.

A few clergy talked about how a move to online church had the potential to be positive and empowering (“*Online church is entirely on your terms*”) but were disappointed by how the central Church continued to position it as second-best and temporary. This view was mainly from those whose parish church experiences had been negative, such as through feeling marginalised or excluded. We develop this further in the next sub section.

6.5 Exclusion of Congregation

Collectively, clergy identified three key mechanisms of exclusion in relation to congregations: lack of trust/respect particularly for those in minority groups; church buildings and related spaces; and digital technology. The first two were identified as operating pre-pandemic (see below). The third was described a significant source of exclusion during lockdown. The pandemic illustrated the extent to which these mechanisms of exclusion were both socialised and institutionalised, as evidenced by the amount of work clergy undertook in seeking to minimise exclusion and build inclusion where they could.

Pre-pandemic, certain populations were seen as excluded from the church through physical barriers (e.g., non-accessible church buildings that prevented some with physical disabilities from attending) and barriers involving lack of trust/respect (e.g., perceived racism or ableism meant some felt unwelcome and thus excluded from attending). Many clergy reported making regular visits to care home residents to deliver services or pastoral care, indicating some limited institutionalised accommodation of those unable to attend church in person. Likewise, the diocese had appointed clergy with specific responsibility for groups perceived as marginalised or excluded³. Such appointments were welcomed as long as this did not replace central responsibility for making changes.

6.5.1 Digital technology

The pandemic created new ways in which these mechanisms excluded congregations and introduced digital technology as a new and major source of exclusion. As outlined earlier, parish context was a significant factor in how the pandemic impacted congregations, not least its level of skill, resources and engagement with digital technology. Digital poverty and rejection of digital technology (both could operate at any age) were cited as key reasons why some parishioners were excluded:

we did Zoom coffee after... morning prayer.... Yes, there have been people left who don't have any internet access... One of them in particular feels bitter about it, but

³ oxford.anglican.org/disability-and-church

it's like, okay, we can't do anything about your bitterness.

Many anticipated that older parishioners would be most affected (and some were) but many reported 'success stories' in which age-technology stereotypes were challenged. The context of a global pandemic was seen as significant in motivating many who had previously not engaged with tablets and smart phones to do so and motivated those who had used them in very limited ways to extend their use:

the surprise was that quite a lot of people, who they would have thought would never get around to using any kind of complicated technology, found it really straightforward and very simple.

I've had a 90-year-old who went on Facebook and she's learnt how to use it and she's done really well and she's learnt how to use Zoom. She had to get her carer to set it up for her to start with, but she's using it.

Clergy worked hard to overcome the skills and engagement barriers of parishioners to enable more of them to access online services and other church offerings. Addressing these was generally seen as more achievable than addressing digital poverty or outright technological rejection. This enabled people to participate and to feel useful. One cited an example of a parishioner (also a lay preacher) who had refused to use any technology "*no, it's not for me*" but a month into lockdown agreed to video record a sermon:

Being in your house, locked in your house, and not being able to do any of the things you did before, is quite dull. And I think she realised that unless she did something... Her personality changed. In the month when we went into lockdown, she was very down and a bit miserable. And the moment I said, can you do a sermon? She changed. She was happier. Now she was feeling useful. I can do this again. I can preach. I can do the prayers.

As we discuss in Section 7 below, clergy worked hard in many cases to minimise the exclusion of those who were unable or unwilling to use technology; they delivered material by hand, used phones to keep parishioners connected and found ways to meet up when safe and able to do so. But this was also an opportunity to integrate digital technology in ways that enhanced inclusion within church buildings; churches with the resources to do so, installed wi-fi, Bluetooth speakers and projectors to enable hymns to be displayed on screens and links to hearing aids.

6.5.2 Buildings and related church spaces

At the start of the pandemic, everyone was physically excluded from church buildings. Many reported the profoundly negative effect this had on them and their parishioners, though some were more accepting of the measure. Clergy explained the centrality of the physical church for many parishioners: as a spiritual hub, a sacred space, a place in which they gathered; a representation of their community and its history; and a precious and beautiful building.

the building is very beautiful and it's very precious to people in the parish, which is why I was really keen on us opening, because it has meaning and significance to people who don't even come to church. So, a building is still really precious.

As we noted in Section 5.2, clergy recognised that being prevented from accessing these buildings in person was for many parishioners a source of loss, and, for some, anguish. Sometimes this was theologically linked such as being unable to participate in the Eucharist but for others it was more intangible loss:

the services pick up the moods of people, so that when you go in to preach and you're aware that in the congregation something has happened, it sets the tone, not just for that interaction with particular people, but the whole thing. And you lose all that subtlety over the Internet. And if people aren't caught up in all that, then they will feel very disconnected from it all, and isolated. Instead of feeling part of the body of Christ, if you want to put it in theological terms, they will feel dismembered. And I think that's something that has to be taken very seriously.

For those such as the disabled, who had been physically excluded from church buildings through lack of access and who - pre-pandemic - had turned to online church, the focus on the trauma of being excluded from church buildings because of lockdown and on online being second best was particularly hurtful:

The language of being left behind is very prevalent amongst people who are already online, who were already trying to be disciples online because church buildings were not accessible. Not just church buildings. You could have the best church building in the world, but the attitude of the people was appalling. Anecdotes of guide dog users being turned away at the door with the words 'no pets allowed in a service'.

This was most clearly articulated in relation to the way in which the Church was perceived not to seek advice from those who had been engaged in online church pre-pandemic and whose voices and expertise were thus excluded. This was reinforced by the positioning of online provision as second best and temporary until such time as normal services could be resumed, that is, the resumption of in person services in church buildings:

the language of exile was singly unhelpful because it said to those pre-existent online communities, you don't have any value.

6.6 Parishioner Expectations

In terms of online services, clergy (particularly in Tranche 2) reported that what their parishioners wanted was primarily local provision. Whilst some, as noted above, said their parishioners were at least initially receptive to trying out new ways of engaging, many said that expectations were for online provision from their local church:

We say to them, you can listen to the stuff the central C of E is producing, or the diocese, but they like to hear the local voices of people they're familiar with, and that's been important, I think. It's personal contact...they want us because they know us, and they know we actually know them and care about them... For some,

it's been a lifeline

The desire for local content was associated with a tolerance of less than perfect online provision.

In contrast to this, clergy with experience of, or responsibilities for, those in minority groups, reported that parishioners had taken the opportunity to move between churches during the pandemic. This might involve re-connecting with one where they used to live, one which they felt was a better 'fit' (perhaps after safeguarding issues at a previous church) or because their local church hadn't managed to offer anything online. This has created "*an enriched community*" and put the parishioner in the driving seat in terms of where they select to worship and how "*online church is entirely on your terms*".

6.7 Summary

The pandemic had profound and far-reaching effects across the UK and clergy were on the frontline in terms of observing its often traumatic impact on their parishioners. Parish context and resources to some extent affected the scale of the pandemic's effect but no parish in the diocese was unaffected. Parishioners experienced loss, pain and trauma; raising the question of whether parishes will see an increase in congregation with mental health issues and how these might be supported. As we see in the section on pastoral care below, clergy were often in the front line of addressing social issues, stepping in when other service providers could not. This raises the question for the wider Church as to whether this is realistic, sustainable or even appropriate.

Some parishes were better prepared for adapting to a move to online ministry through greater IT equipment and skills on the part of individual parishioners and within parish teams; those in areas of urban deprivation, with parishioners who lacked IT skills and resources, whose parishioners included minority groups and older congregations were less well placed to accommodate this change (see Section 3). Ironically, accommodations by clergy pre-pandemic to local preferences for resisting the introduction of technology into their ministry left some parishes less well prepared for the pandemic-induced changes. These inequalities of parish resources look likely to continue but left unaddressed raise concerns about the widening gulf, where some parishes are significantly under-resourced and unable to capitalise on the opportunities that digital technology may bring to ministry.

For their congregations the move online was also new territory. Clergy reported that initial appreciation, even enthusiasm, by parishioners for these often rough and ready online offerings overtime gave way to more mixed responses. While some continued to embrace new ways of engaging with the church and found new opportunities to acquire and use digital skills, the willingness of other parishioners to do so waned over time, particularly as restrictions lifted and other opportunities for interaction presented themselves. Nevertheless, many clergy reported success stories of parishioners, particularly in older age groups, who embraced digital technology for the first time in their lives and were able to participate in online services and other digital church related activities. Again, differential parish resources will mean some are unable to capitalise on this learning.

Monitoring engagement in some ways became easier for clergy when interaction took place online with integrated tools in different social media platforms enabling apparently easy to obtain metrics around parishioner attendance. Greater familiarity however led clergy to question their validity. Nevertheless, these figures enabled clergy to monitor attendance at online services and to observe new members of their congregation, including those from outside their parish and indeed outside the UK. Closer examination revealed that most new joiners had some tangential relationship with the parish or were seeking a temporary church home whilst theirs was not available. Clergy reported that what their parishioners wanted during the pandemic was local online provision where they could see familiar faces and feel that they were interacting with each other. Most clergy concluded that a distinct online congregation had not emerged. Nevertheless, the pandemic loosened the ties between the physical parish and the congregation. This gave rise to quite profound questioning as to who the church is for and whether the pandemic had given rise to a shifting power towards a more consumer-orientated churchgoer.

Clergy identified three mechanisms of exclusion in relation to congregations: a lack of trust or respect; church buildings; and digital technology. The disabled and other minority groups were recognised as having been excluded pre-pandemic through, for example, discriminatory attitudes and barriers to access. Digital technology during the pandemic became a significant mechanism of exclusion though clergy worked hard to overcome such barriers and to enable more parishioners to access online services and other church offerings. However, some clergy were eloquent in pointing out the shortcomings of church narratives around online church, which positioned it as temporary and second-best, thus reinforcing feelings of marginalisation by those who had already embraced online church prior to the pandemic as a result of exclusionary practices and attitudes.

7 Pastoral Care



In the previous section we outlined how clergy reported the impact of the pandemic on their congregations. We consequently asked our interviewees to describe the arrangements for pastoral care in the pandemic. All noted how lockdown and social distancing presented a significant challenge to this core area of responsibility. Many reported that the pandemic had greatly challenged them in relation to all aspects of pastoral care: reflecting on what it was (pre-pandemic); what it now needed to be (in the pandemic); their responsibilities for it; who needed it; and how and by whom it could be delivered. They also reflected on the impact of their pastoral care in the pandemic, including who and what was neglected.

7.1 What is Pastoral Care?

For some, pastoral care was the most important aspect of ministry that clergy can offer their parishioners, *“a huge part of the Church... foundational to our work as clergy”*. It was defined as *“getting alongside someone”* and achieved by *“the accumulation of lots of little interactions that will lead every now and then to something which is also really important”*. Seeing the need for pastoral care was closely linked to the close relationship between clergy and parishioners:

Often the pastoral stuff is stuff that you notice from having a pre-existing relationship with people that you see that something's up with them... or you...realise what it looks like for individuals to be low functioning.

Pre-pandemic, clergy felt that they broadly had the means to find out when pastoral care was most needed and that they would have delivered it face to face:

If there was anything...that had happened that was particularly traumatic, or that meant that people couldn't come to church, then we would have been straight round there in person.

There were different expectations across parishes in terms of pastoral care, with those in more rural parishes often reporting a greater burden of responsibility. In urban settings, with a mix of different religious beliefs and none, and a younger demographic, clergy said that parish visiting *“wouldn't be so appropriate... it's not an expectation that I've picked up”*. However, clergy in parishes with areas of deprivation also reported a growing reliance on the church over recent years to help *“people who are struggling”* where the local authorities *“haven't been able to provide”* wellbeing and other support services.

Pastoral care activities would normally have included: listening, encouraging, visiting, hospitality, giving practical help, prayer and comfort. Clergy reflected on how pastoral care relied on routines, everyday conversations and unscheduled contact with parishioners as a source of detecting issues of concern. For some groups within a parish, pastoral care pre-pandemic was routinised: *“home communions are a priority, and hospital visiting...I will prioritise a residential home visit as well, especially if there are no family nearby”*.

Ultimately, however, pastoral care was seen as never ending and therefore always imperfect. There was always more than clergy felt could have been done:

Pastoral ministry is always unending. No matter how many conversations and visits you make, there is always another one you can make. There is always one

who slips through the net. We just do everything we can to mitigate and reach out... but... people are always invisible.

7.2 Key Challenges of Pastoral Care in the Pandemic

7.2.1 Greater need for pastoral care

Clergy recognised the greater need for pastoral care as a result of the pandemic and that being able to deliver this was more significant than ever:

[Its importance has] been highlighted even more sharply. And I've heard it described as collective trauma, for the whole world... a disruption of life... And, of course, that creates a huge amount of uncertainty, anxiety, and I think folks are really suffering from that. So, to offer ... an understanding and articulation of ... what's happening to us... also some kind of emotional and spiritual support, reassurance. Going back to the fundamentals and basics of our faith, to see what it tells us...

7.2.2 How to detect and deliver pastoral care

As we noted above, clergy had traditionally relied on relationships and interactions with parishioners to help them determine those in particular need of pastoral care. Lockdown and social distancing therefore presented a significant challenge to both detecting those in need and delivering this core area of pastoral responsibility:

there's an interesting tension about the fact that every major pandemic of the past, the church's responsibility was to get involved and serve the sick and the poor. And now we're told to stay away from them to keep them safe because we understand more about virus transmission.

Part of the challenge of delivering pastoral care was not just the restriction around social contact, it was the scale of the responsibility itself during the pandemic raising concern about whether clergy alone would be able to address need on this scale; this was felt particularly acutely by those in rural parishes:

One of my big stressors was just the feeling, all of a sudden, that I'm responsible for 48 or 50, 60 or more households. My pastoral kind of anxiety went up quite a bit.

In the next sub-sections, we outline the ways in which clergy rose to these challenges and how they delivered pastoral care in the pandemic.

7.3 New ways of detecting and prioritising need: a new intentionality

Recognising that there will always be some people who are 'invisible', clergy were mindful of how lockdown and social distancing threatened to disrupt their opportunities for identifying individuals in need of pastoral care. Some clergy felt that online meetings such as prayer groups were of limited use in terms of detecting needs and providing pastoral care since *"that only helps the people who sign up for it... but [nothing] can replace ... human to human contact because body language, everything about it is so important"*.

In parishes with widespread community use of social media, WhatsApp was a common tool for both identifying needs and delivering them, with the advantage of pooling resources for the latter across the community:

One of the first things we did was to set up a WhatsApp group, which is if you wanted a prescription collected or you wanted some prayers said, so it's both church related and village community related. And it was just wonderful the way people have stepped forward and helped.

A few clergy said that they used social media to monitor what parishioners were sharing about their lives so that they could follow up with pastoral care as needed:

from a pastoral perspective, if you see that Joe Bloggs is having a really bad day, you can message and say, is everything all right? If you know that Mrs [name] has just lost their cat, you go to ring her. It's a really good way of being able to just check and see how the congregation is doing.

In others, where few parishioners were online, clergy relied on physical prompts to detect needs, such as in this creative example:

We had a system here of putting in a red card and a green card in windows. So, the green card was if everything was ok, a red card was if you needed help... in each village we had a little group that kept an eye on people but that was all footwork, it wasn't [initially] connected to social media.

Having created new ways of detecting need, clergy realised they would need to prioritise to whom they were able to provide pastoral care. In some ways, this was a continuation of pre-pandemic sensibility that clergy could never meet all needs all the time. As one participant said: *"In a parish of 18,000 people, you have to prioritise... and I prioritise the poor...a friendly face around the corner is much more important to them"*.

The pandemic meant that clergy missed out on building and maintaining relationships through traditional mechanisms which were limited through lockdown and social distancing. Although clergy found new ways to deliver 'regular' pastoral care in line with pre-pandemic traditions (as we describe below), many described how their pastoral care became more intentional in the pandemic. This primarily involved prioritising pastoral care for those they perceived to be in greatest need, for example, with targeted calls to *"individuals who are maybe on the outside"* or on *"the fringe"* as in the following example:

It does create the need for intentionality where before you'd be meeting a lot of people, now it's about following up with the fringe. Otherwise, you're only going to meet the core...For us that meant... a lot of phone calls...just checking up on people [and]... a lot of prayer.

Clergy identified key groups whose needs they prioritised: those particularly adversely affected by the pandemic; those who were shielding; the dying or bereaved; and minority groups.

There is the pastoral care of people who themselves are frightened, unnerved, isolated. Some a long way from family or have no family... we all regularly telephoned all our congregation members

For many clergy, pastoral care was for the dying and the bereaved was the most difficult; here the absence of physical connection was particularly challenging:

What was really tough was people grieving and not being able to be with them face to face and not being able to touch them even if you did see them.

Minority groups, recognised as already marginalised, were seen as doubly disadvantaged in the pandemic with challenging needs for pastoral care. Clergy recognised the importance of personal relationships in building the trust essential to pastoral care. This was a particular conundrum in the pandemic when so much in-person activity was not possible, and for one participant, addressing this was so critical they were prepared to do so in their own time:

with minority ethnic communities, relationships are key. ... For whatever reason, you're in a minority, whether it's because of a disability because of your ethnicity, because of your sexuality, if you're in a minority, the element of trust is key to making the change that needs to come. And so, I tend to do what I do best and build relationships, even if I have to do it in my own time.

Addressing these groups' special needs was also made more difficult by the pandemic, for example, in relation to the deaf community:

they're not online...What they could all access, mostly, was a printed sheet, a little booklet posted out every fortnight, that had daily readings with a short reflection and prayer and a Sunday service that you could slot in the Sunday readings to... [and] in uncluttered English because English is not a first or second language if you're purely a BSL user.

7.4 New types of Pastoral Care

The intentionality that clergy reported in respect of prioritising pastoral care needs was also present in the types of care during the pandemic. Much of this involved addressing what were seen as the most immediate and pressing needs.

Clergy in economically deprived communities reported that, even before Covid-19, pastoral care was part of a wider strategy for missional activity in the parish to address gaps in service provision by local authorities. The economic effects of the pandemic intensified this. In some parishes, addressing immediate needs, such as practical help with food, was a key priority:

my focus has been much more on the community angle during COVID-19...I've taken a particular lead on the... the community work... just making sure that the hungry are fed and things like that ... it's more what I felt ordained to do

Some clergy positioned the delivery of services online as a form of pastoral care (rather than missional). For some, a new intentionality in pastoral care was evidenced through how online ministry was designed:

I'm thinking a lot about [pastoral ministry], thinking a lot about the services we're putting out, and how we're devising them, and what we want to do liturgically online.

This focus included targeting those at risk of emotional and spiritual isolation (through not being digitally connected) and/or by anticipating needs such as resources to support wellbeing:

We ran the Wellbeing Journey...I wouldn't say we've had many people coming to us in crisis, but I do think that we may have pre-empted that by being intentional

Many clergy reported a creative form of pastoral care that they and their teams delivered under lockdown or social distancing regulations. In communities where many had no access to digital technology, this typically involved physically moving around the parish to see and be seen, which was regarded as part of pastoral care.

I spend quite a lot of time in particular on my bicycle in the parish and so people that are out on their walk, it was quite easy to stop my bike and to be distanced but talk to them on my bike.... I felt like I was 1952 priest...like Father Brown.

we'd make an effort to walk around with the dogs at least twice, three times a week, in the village, just to wave at people, or knock on windows and just put a nod in.

I would deliver [the newsletter] and stand outside and chat through the window to people.

Clergy explained how this went some way to replace the physical connection of meeting in church but also how it created opportunities to identify pastoral care needs in the absence of usual social routines.

Another new form of pastoral care was upskilling parishioners in the IT skills they needed in order to be able to participate online. Again, this was part of a more intentional approach, since through helping parishioners to navigate digital spaces, they were able to access support from a wider range of places and people (with potentially less reliance on local pastoral care):

[if they weren't] able to attend online... we would ruthlessly pursue their family. 'Can you buy them an iPad? We will set it up for them'...we had some remarkable success.

7.5 Responsibility for Delivering Pastoral Care in the Pandemic

Some clergy reflected on how parishioners sometimes saw pastoral care as a clergy responsibility and were less satisfied by visits from associate staff:

My associate priest and I take home communion where we can... the loose agreement was that she would continue with more of the pastoral care, but of course, you have got a faction of parishioners who think that if the vicar doesn't call, then nobody's called.

More commonly however, clergy acknowledged the role played by others in the wider team in providing pastoral care in the pandemic, such as lay leaders who particularly led the provision of telephone networks:

My lay pastor that I work with, has taken it on herself to keep in telephone contact with our oldest age group of members. And she has been assiduous really in her pastoral care of those folks.

My wife and the other lay minister have headed up a brilliant pastoral care system and been keeping in touch with everyone, so no one falls through the net.

Many clergy reported how pastoral care was rolled up into wider initiatives that addressed practical as well as spiritual and emotional needs, and how delivering it was undertaken not just by clergy and lay teams but others in the community and, in some cases, is a whole community affair:

This is one of the times I was proud of my benefice, from the moment lockdown started we had a community group who coordinated other voluntary organisations into making sure we had well over 50, 60 people who could do shopping, walk dogs, visit a home, collect prescriptions.... And off the back of that we had a Phone a Friend scheme... we made sure that every house in the benefice had notes through the door saying the Serve Team is here to help you with anything practical and the Phone a Friend team is here to help you with anything emotional or spiritual.

Clergy reported how having a role in organising pastoral care helped parishioners through the pandemic, giving them a sense of purpose, through helping those in greater need.

7.6 Delivering Pastoral Care in the Pandemic

Many clergy reported being sceptical at first to how effectively they and their teams could deliver pastoral care when in-person contact was prohibited or subject to social distancing:

I just think nothing beats a human, one-to-one experience.

Some clergy, particularly in Tranche 2, reflected on how online platforms had in many ways worked well. Many clergy used social media to organise pastoral care with parish WhatsApp groups proving popular as a means of reaching the community quickly and easily. Church groups that would have normally met face to face were often relocated to an online platform such as Zoom:

We'd just started a partnership-wide youth group pre-pandemic...we took [this] online, and so they met via Zoom.

Online pastoral care through initiatives like 'coffee with the vicar' were also seen as time efficient compared to in-person provision such as private prayer in the church but clergy were rather wistful at having to think in these terms, because they recognised its value to parishioners at a time of need:

we've only opened twice for private prayer, but we only had, the first session... I had four people come over two hours, so that wasn't a good use of time. And it was really important to those four people, don't get me wrong, we had tears, it was really important that they came.... So, you just think, wow, when I was having a coffee morning on Zoom and I had only ten people I was thinking "is this worth doing, it's only ten people?". But actually, you know, that was half an hour coffee and chat on Zoom with ten people. And I'm opening for two hours and only... So, it's really interesting.

However, some clergy reported that a significant part of delivering pastoral care was still carried out in person or using old technology rather than online. One commented that *"pastoral care was hardly at all done through technology"* which was described as *"inadequate...the fact that you can't go in and have someone offer you a cup of tea"* This tended to be those in rural parishes and where a significant portion of the parish did not have the digital technology or skills to be able to participate in online offerings.

Telephone trees were a commonly reported technique to identify all those who would benefit from a regular point of contact with the church coupled with using a parish team (not just clergy) to deliver pastoral care via, for example, weekly phone calls. These phone calls usually had no agenda beyond contacting parishioners who might otherwise have missed out on interaction but was seen as a key element of pastoral care:

I've spent hours on the phone over the pandemic talking about absolutely nothing for half an hour just to make contact with people, and I've prayed with them and given them a blessing.

Clergy reflected that having created new temporal spaces for pastoral work over the phone had its upsides, in terms of getting to know parishioners better:

I've done masses of pastoral work on the phone. It's been great. I've got to know some of my parishioners better in the last ten weeks than I have in 17 years of being here because it's just been me phoning them up to see how they are and they've just talked. And it's been wonderful.

Over time, it became possible to meet up outside so clergy in Tranche 2 reported using local spaces:

if people actually wanted to talk. The whole time that I've been here it has been legal to meet one person outside at a time. That was always the preference. So, spend quite a lot of time meeting up with people, however that's been possible. Lots of meeting people in parks.

7.7 Limits of Pastoral Care

Many clergy acknowledged the limitations of delivering pastoral care in the pandemic, with one describing it as *"probably the biggest hole that the online services have missed... I feel the Church is going to focus on mental health for at least the next decade and pick up the pieces of this pandemic"*. This was echoed by others who reported how difficult it had been to provide pastoral care to those with mental health issues. Of particular concern were those

with whom the church did outreach work such as community meals but who had “*no religious element to their affiliation with the church*” so were less interested in scaled-back offerings such as coffee groups with no refreshments because of pandemic restrictions.

There were several explanations for these limitations. Some clergy reported how hard it had been to reach parishioners who did not use digital technology, either through choice or because their age was associated with a lack of IT skills and equipment:

There are a number of people who, despite our best attempts and best efforts, just haven't had that pastoral engagement at all, for some months... it has been really, deeply impacted.

For those in advanced old age, the pandemic worsened an already bleak situation with known vulnerability to isolation and loneliness:

they weren't just in danger, they were left out. And we picked them up on the telephone tree, but it was one or two or were in their 80s or 90s, and they really suffered because they couldn't get out, and they couldn't see people. And while there was the best will in the world to help them, it wasn't enough. So, yes, there was suffering and certainly, loneliness among the elderly is seen as being the big social need in [town]. And it was before, but now it's worse.

For others, it was a matter of raising awareness that the pandemic regulations affected some minority and disabled communities disproportionately, for example, because they do not engage digitally so were unable to access online services or pastoral care or because restrictions on size of gatherings meant a loss of an important cultural tradition, such as community funerals within Caribbean communities:

Minority ethnic culture is very, very much community culture in a way that is not the same in Western culture... community funerals... have [singing]... loud, lively choruses, ... filling [the grave], and then ... create[ing] a garden. And that's the last mark of respect. Imagine 18 months of not being allowed to do that...

Indeed, more broadly speaking there may be cultural variation in the extent to which particular communities are prepared to engage with digital forms of worship:

But there is an assumption, I believe, that everybody uses websites, and everybody goes online ... And no matter how much you say, well, actually, there are groups of communities where that is not the way to reach them. And often that isn't heard.

Some clergy in Tranche 2 reported a waning of their ability to deliver pastoral care as time went on over the pandemic, with time for phoning parishioners “*dropping away*”. Others reported how previously well-established pastoral care routines had been lost:

We couldn't go into care homes... that whole side just died, we didn't manage to do a Zoom service into the homes like some people did.

On the other hand, some reflected that they had parishioners who had not been regular church attenders and were not on email *'got more contact [via phone] than they would have done normally'*.

7.8 Impact of Pastoral Care

Despite the limitations of pastoral care provision, clergy described its impact based on feedback from parishioners who were *"hugely grateful for a phone call or for any kind of connection"*. Clergy reflected how even using a phone or online platform they still:

tapped into something for those people...the pastoral care had as much meaningful sense as it would have done beforehand... [and in] some senses...was enhanced.

This sometimes came as a surprise to clergy as delivering pastoral care at a distance (e.g., over the phone or Zoom) might not have felt as meaningful an activity to them as *"sitting at the desk and doing stuff"* but *"it was amazing how meaningful it did seem [to parishioners] in lots of circumstances"*.

They also observed some of the by-products of pastoral care in the pandemic such as a greater facility for conversation, both online and in person:

The pandemic has had its silver lining because it meant that people know each other by name and have talked to each other in a way that they've never done it before, and they're very supportive.

Some clergy felt that *"some good came out of"* their intentional approach to pastoral care, with targeted calls to those who might be outsiders, as this had built *"more solid relationships than fleeting, superficial"*.

7.9 Summary

The pandemic created a major requirement for pastoral care whilst simultaneously, through lockdown and social distancing, presented a significant challenge to the delivery by clergy of one of the most important parts of their ministry. Circumstances made it harder to rely on traditional means to detect need but most clergy felt that the move online, combined with some creative use of old-fashioned techniques and technology, allowed them to identify need and deliver pastoral care.

Pastoral care had in some areas already begun to address shortcomings in provision by local authorities in areas such as food banks and wellbeing support. The pandemic shifted pastoral care further in this direction, with many clergy making their pastoral care more intentional: prioritising those in greatest need, addressing immediate needs (such as hunger), and focusing on those most in danger of exclusion and isolation. This trend is likely to continue with the cost-of-living crisis raising issues for the Church in terms of the sustainability of clergy providing this care, and the support and resources they would need to do so.

New forms of pastoral care included upskilling parishioners to enable them to use digital devices and access online church offerings. Minority ethnic groups and the disabled were also

seen as needing specific pastoral care to mitigate against the disproportionate effect on them of the pandemic. Other key groups were those shielding and the dying or bereaved.

In rising to this challenge, clergy worked alongside their teams as well as their wider parish communities. Whilst some parishioners saw pastoral care as a clergy responsibility, most clergy reported very positive impact by lay teams in delivering pastoral care. Old-fashioned telephone trees were used alongside more up-to-date digital means to keep clergy connected to their parishioners. Clergy found that they welcomed the new space for pastoral work over the telephone. But for many, the easing of lockdown restrictions saw a return to in-person, albeit socially distanced, meeting up with parishioners which for many was a more optimum method of delivering pastoral care.

Parishioners were reported as appreciative of the pastoral care they received; for many this was much more meaningful than clergy had assumed. A key concern for the Church, however, is the existence of groups that pastoral care struggled to reach: those with mental health issues, some of those without IT access, the very old in care homes, and minority ethnic and disabled groups. Some clergy warned that the fall-out from these exclusions could be of lasting impact.

8 Reflections and Future Ministry



In the previous sections, we have highlighted a variety of issues that clergy raised with us during interview. We also asked all clergy to reflect on their experiences so far and to articulate what they thought might be a post-pandemic future. In this section, we report on the preferences that clergy expressed for the future including for their ministry, their parishes and the wider Church. Whilst some (particularly those in Tranche 1 who were experiencing the intense challenges of lockdown) identified fairly short-term visions and preferences, most articulated ideas for the longer term. Almost without exception, clergy saw the pandemic as an opportunity for quite deep contemplation across many aspects of Church life:

If this is handled well and the energy remains, we'll look back on this time in years to come, clever people will write things in time to come, this was the reformation of the 21st century.

Clergy explained their preferences for future ministry across a number of dimensions: for the Church of England and its leadership; for the use of technology; for parishes; and for a sustainable future.

8.1 Preferences for the Church of England and its Leadership

Clergy vision was that the Church of England should take the opportunity to reflect on pandemic-induced challenges and what these mean for the future of the Church. Clergy saw the pandemic as a chance for a radical re-think of the Church's purpose and future. Covid-19 had forced changes to be made across all aspects of ministry, some of which were positive, but all of which could be useful so long as time was taken for reflection and learning. This was also seen as a time for recognising enduring principles and integrating these into the new normal, as part of a re-assessment of priorities:

I think we've got some pretty tough times ahead. I think, in the Church, nationally, certainly I've seen it in places that we've not done very well, and, actually, I think we've got a few years of soul-searching and reflecting ahead of us.

There was a perception that senior management of the wider Church was not sufficiently engaged with such radical reflection. The pandemic had forced many unresolved issues into the open including, but not limited to, the use of social media and digital technology. Many clergy saw the technological issues that had come to the fore during the pandemic as symptomatic of the need for improved leadership on Church strategy in areas such as its core purpose within society and the big issues that society faces (such as inequalities and climate change):

none of the problems I've mentioned, leaving aside digital, none of the other problems are new, they're absolutely the elephant in the room which the Church of England is ignoring ... the work that you're doing around social media technology, and the other questions you've asked, has to be in lockstep with questions about identity, questions about society, and questions about mission. They're all really, really connected, and if we miss some of those links, we could potentially be making suboptimal decisions.

Clergy vision was for strategic ‘big thinking’ around the Church’s mission in terms of how it communicates, addressing inclusivity through its treatment of minority traditionally excluded groups, the viability of the parish model, and its financial sustainability amid loss of congregation. Clergy reflected on how these issues informed their own vision for their parishes (see below) but made the point that the limitation of considering these issues only at a local level was that they were in danger of missing strategic links. They wanted the strategic thinking to be theologically informed and linked to the Church’s core mission.

8.1.1 Involving a wider range of voices in discussions about the future

There was a preference by many clergy for discussions about the future of the Church to involve a wider range of voices, including those from groups who might traditionally have been marginalised or excluded. This also include those who worshipped outside of a typical parish model such as those who only engage with the Church online:

we’ve heard from people who are housebound, people who’ve got disabilities, single parents, all sorts of people for whom coming to church is really difficult who are loving the fact that they can watch it. And that’s been a real wake-up call actually, that it is perfectly possible to do a service that people can access who can’t come to church. And we should’ve learnt this ages ago. And so I definitely don’t want to stop doing that.

8.1.2 Focusing more on the relational rather than the transactional and ceremonial

Clergy said they would prefer a more relational approach to Church communications, reflecting that communications had often become very transactional, adopting the language of business rather than people, such as its use of metrics (e.g. online view per sermon on YouTube) as some form of meaningful measure. Moving online was viewed as potentially encouraging an emphasis on ‘production values’ (a slick and professional visual presentation) and as something to guard against. Engagement with internal community-building was crucial:

I think we have a lot to learn from that very authentic community building, that’s not focused on, ‘what’s the product we’re trying to sell here’? ... How do we gather, and how do we worship, and how do we learn more about our faith and catechise online in a way that’s authentic and builds community? And I think ... much of what has come out from the Church of England has ... been ‘it’s got to have high production values’ because it’s kind of selling the product of Christianity to try to make it look appealing. But there’s something really significant about the kind of authentic offering that comes from a community who really need it ...

While understandable in this extreme and fast-moving situation, some felt that the Church had become too transactional in its messages during the pandemic, with a focus on simply relaying information without a more relational component.

8.1.3 Recognising and integrating the contribution of local activism and expertise

There was a preference for greater recognition by the Church of local activism, as well as a call for disadvantaged groups to be brought into the mainstream. For example, those involved with disability groups, many of whom had engaged with the church online pre-pandemic due to lack of physical access to buildings, felt the advice of these groups was not always actively sought when resources were being devised on moving ministry online (here in relation to materials produced by the Church Pastoral Aid Society, CPAS):

It would have helped if they'd have some disability advisors alongside them to help them write [Everybody Welcome Online], but they didn't because "they know what they're talking about" ... you can say welcome but actually, it means nothing if there's nothing to back it up.... Disability activists took it to shreds, those who got hold of it.

8.2 Preferences for the Use of Technology: Hybrid Church

Nearly all clergy envisioned the future of the Church of England as hybrid or 'mixed economy', that is, involving both in-person and digital/online modes in its ministry. Within this, however, there were a range of preferences for how this would work within their own parish. Some clergy said they would prefer not to be hybrid as they felt that they only had the resources to do one mode of delivery well and that this was in-person. Others, a minority, said that their preference would be to focus on online delivery. The majority accepted that some form of hybrid delivery pattern would emerge both locally and nationally:

we're continuing to both livestream and support in other ways digitally. But, I think, my sense is, that's probably a long-term thing, that we'll continue that ... unless we see ... people, effectively, choosing to be less committed ... I don't want to be a part of just watering down discipleship, if that is the consequence. But I don't have visions of doom and gloom, on that front, I think that it's going to be a mixed mode thing that we do.

From the above there is still a sense of 'experimentation': this is the 'likely' future, but churches need to continue to experiment to see what congregations want and what the longer-term effects are of hybrid church. Overall, the pandemic had reinforced the role of digital technology as core not peripheral to contemporary life and the challenge was how to position this within a wider vision for the Church, at both a central and local level. Much of the technology use in lockdown had been reactive, focused on finding ways to hold existing congregations and communities together. Many clergy felt that technology could be used more strategically. For example, most acknowledged the need for at least a basic online presence for every church and that this was essentially the 'front door' through which to bring in new people, a central part of the Church's mission.

I think the Church needs to engage with technology, because so much of what goes on in church is about communication. And if it's already become a mainstream form of communication, then the Church needs to engage with it. But I think it also needs to reflect on it at all levels, including theologically, about how it uses it. And I'm not sure that a lot of that reflection has really gone on.

Clergy felt that technology use had raised wider moral and theological issues which had not been properly debated and where leadership was required⁴. These issues included how the Church should position itself in relation to social media in the face of the rise of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter:

Also uncomfortable with the church pronouncements about what they can and can't say on SM [social media] I've also been slightly intimidated by the official pronouncements about social media. There's been a real "thou shalt not if thy wants to keep thy job" kind of attitude. And it's difficult because I do see part of my role ... I think there needs to be a prophetic role and a commentary role.

Other issues raised by clergy also included concerns around celebrating the Eucharist on their own during lockdown as part of online services, and the dilemma of new congregations of people joining a church's online services when they were geographically based outside of the parish:

Do we prioritise the local church having a relationship with the people who live immediately around us, or do we capitalise on the fact that now it's possible for people to choose any kind of church that they want?

Clergy ambitions for technology were often constrained by parish resources and local preferences of congregations (and clergy themselves). Some clergy (e.g. in Tranche 1) were planning quite basic technological advances such as the installation of Wi-Fi in their churches, whilst others had much more sophisticated and ambitious programmes with staff teams dedicated to digital production.

8.2.1 Capitalise on the technological gains achieved

Clergy were keen to capitalise on the technological gains and positive initiatives that had been introduced in the pandemic, including new ways of delivering pastoral care, local digital infrastructure and skills and the use of creative and efficient digital improvements in delivering ministry. Many reported how the pandemic had been a teachable moment in respect of both technology and theology and clergy were keen to sustain a change mindset in their congregation. This had been an opportunity for parishioners to learn new skills, especially around digital technology, showcase existing ones in new roles, and try new ways of engaging with the church and their faith but clergy recognised the possibility that this might be lost:

I'm hoping and praying and working that we don't lose the good things that have come through the pandemic... that people can know that there are different ways of being in touch with other people. So, I think capitalising on what we've learnt through the pandemic will be really important. And to use the different media that we've started using.

My concern with the congregation has been that they've just gone back to what

⁴ However see Bishop Steven's re-worked Beatitudes for Social Media, July 2019 <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/lets-make-social-media-kinder/>

they know and there hasn't been enough challenge.

Clergy acknowledged that technological investments to cover the pandemic was driving a motivation to retain at least some form of digital engagement. Tranche 1 interviewees talked about having to invest in laptops and other digital kit when lockdown commenced and Tranche 2 interviewees recognised that there were going to be ongoing costs (e.g. Wi-Fi connection) that needed to be added to PCC budgets: *"I think we will stay online forever, we've built the tech into the building now, so I think that will stay forever"*. Another consideration was that church users now know that online is possible:

weddings want to have live-streaming, and, certainly, I was asked, for next week, if it's possible to do a Zoom burial of ashes. So, I've said, we pretty much can't ... but people want it, they now know it's available.

The pandemic was seen by some as having offered an opportunity to put into practice changes that they had been wanting to make for some time but had been held back by parish attitudes, lack of technology, resources or skills:

[saying to congregation] "we don't need three services because we all fit in [to one church]. We're used to meeting together, you've broken your habit, let's do one service at 10:00 every Sunday". And that's something we would've loved to have done before the pandemic, but you wouldn't do that politically, it would've been a career ender for the person that tried to do that, but because of the pandemic we could.

In addition, Tranche 2 clergy had begun to appreciate that pandemic measures had brought increased focus on contemplative praying and specifically morning/evening prayer (including for small groups online):

By going online and putting these things there when people can dip their toes in a lot of it. Especially with the videos, they can dip their toe in anonymously and give it a go. That's opened a number of people's eyes to contemplative prayer, to meditation, to being more creative in one's prayer life. That prayer doesn't just have to be saying, 'Dear God, please will you...'. And the regular night prayer that we put on now has introduced people to the idea of this regularity of the office, of saying the daily office.

Clergy also wanted to be able to curate the online materials they and others (including beyond the parish or diocese) had produced as much of this was not time-bound but rather a resource that people could go back to and use. But curating this took time and effort.

Clergy's strong preference was to be able to build on and develop from their new technological base. This included having access to training, not just specific technological skills (such as how to get the best use of databases etc) but more meta skills such as dealing with uncertainty:

I do think, potentially, for training purposes, online stuff would be a good thing, long-term, a good strategy for ordinands to be involved in, because, I think, in the

future, more and more, it could well be something that is an integral part of the planning and structure of how parishes are covered for ministry.

8.2.2 Accommodating local technological preferences and needs

Clergy expressed a strong preference for retaining the scope to be able to build and integrate digital technology into their ministry in ways that reflected parish (and their own) preferences and needs. They recognised differences between the situation of urban and rural churches. To some extent rural churches were equated with being also poorer churches and so some of the need for recognition of differences overlaps with that outlined above (e.g. some rural churches do not have ready access to 4G, never mind 5G). However, there were also other concerns:

until we see [Church of England strategy], I don't know. It might be that I feel as though I have to go against something that's being suggested ... What might be important in Central London, isn't necessarily what people are feeling here, so to have a one size fits all bit of guidance, I'm hoping that the Church will be more nuanced than that.

It was suggested there were also opportunities here for smaller, rural churches. Digital broadcast potentially gives access to wider audiences and also gives the potential to put on an array of different kinds of services (that more resource-rich churches were already able to do). Of course, this latter possibility is affected by number of clergy available to deliver such services.

As above, digital piggybacking may be a solution however there is a trade-off recognised here, and some doubts over whether this could work:

[Thinking about it] is there something we can do to cooperate with each other so that we're not all individually doing online stuff that's really incredibly amateurish ... But what people respond to is seeing your face. And because they know you, they have a relationship with you... And it isn't just about hearing a sermon and all of that...I do send them the diocesan one, which is well done, it's very good. There's music for singing, and it's good quality. But I don't particularly think people are responding to it, because what they respond to is their community and their family.

This 'globalisation' of provision then may sit uneasily with a feeling of local community which is so important to individual parishes and congregations. As one interviewee put it, this is an important debate that needs to be tackled internally:

Do we prioritise the local church having a relationship with the people who live immediately around us, or do we capitalise on the fact that now it's possible for people to choose any kind of church that they want? I live in a city and really the reality is people can choose a physical church in the flavour they want very easily ... But for those who live in more rural places, if their local church isn't doing what they would like it to do, it's now possible to be a member of a church that's miles

away or in a different country. And how do we feel about that and what does that mean for us?

8.2.3 Enabling efficient ways of learning from others and sharing good practice

Many expressed a preference for better systems that would enable clergy teams to learn from others in the wider Church who had particularly good skills and had demonstrated examples of good practice in other churches:

sharing wisdom and learning from these experiences is probably what will lead to the mixed economy happening and listening to groups who are already doing a lot of this. I mean, Sanctum have been a great resource. And also, just friends and colleagues that have got broadcasting experience, for example, just saying things like, 'stick your notes on Post-its next to the camera' rather than having a script or whatever

Ideally, this could be integrated through having access to centralised technological resources curated by the Church as part of a proper system of content management. That is, useful content and learning generated by parishes and dioceses could be brought together centrally to enable local churches to select material relevant to their own context, avoiding potentially wasting all this laboriously gathered knowledge. Individual churches have little capacity to engage in this project themselves. Clergy preference was strongly in favour of individual churches not needing to provide all their own online content but rather being able to share the load with other churches. This strategy felt more collegial, at a time when many felt that competing for online parishioners with other churches was inappropriate. The practice of people attending from miles away was a threat to building local Christian communities where they live:

That said, we opened up as soon as we could, when we were allowed, and actually, we have had quite a few people from other churches, who've started coming to us. But that's just cannibalising, which we're not entirely comfortable with, but people appreciate the effort, I think.

8.3 Preferences for Parishes

Clergy expressed individual visions for their own parish, often one informed by the pandemic but also the wider Church and societal context. Many reflected on how the pandemic had delayed engaging with other issues affecting local concerns; this lent a degree of urgency to their views.

8.3.1 Addressing loss of congregation

Clergy recognised that the Church of England is on a downward trajectory in terms of size and will likely shrink further and that this will likely involve 'doing church in a different way'. The pandemic had fuelled perceptions that the Church is now seen by parishioners as just another leisure option competing with other Sunday activities:

I think the Church will shrink, I think it has already shrunk, and I do not think it will recover to where it was. I think there are people who are too afraid to come back, there are people who have just wandered off and decided to do something else,

and there will be a financial implication of that. So, I can see the Church of England as an economic entity having to shrink somewhat. What that's going to look like I don't know. Quite frankly, I'm at that stage of ministry thinking will it survive and will there be a slot for me to get through. I've always worried about finances with the Church of England because the trajectory has been down for at least 150 years, so it's nothing we're doing wrong.

At a local level, clergy grappled with how to address a fall in attendance numbers and what this meant for their parish. Many recognised that some degree of parish re-organization would be inevitable either for financial reasons (often flowing from declining numbers) or because individual clergy would not be able to continue. For some, the vision involved an existential crisis (would the parish even exist in the future?):

It's about whether we still have faith in the parish system, and the idea of mega churches and resource churches. And that the little ones don't really matter and are going to naturally die a death anyway.

Loss of congregation was discussed in terms of both quantity and quality. Some in Tranche 2 reported a fall in congregation numbers over the course of the pandemic.

A lot of people haven't come back [since return to onsite services] ... They're just saying "you know what, I'm really actually enjoying spending Sunday morning with my family".

I fear that a lot of people will have fallen out of the habit of church, and I fear that electronically delivered services make it so much easier for people to browse, to have a sort of virtual commitment.

Others reported what they saw as a dilution of participation where they felt that online attendance had been a poor substitute for more meaningful engagement. One spoke to wanting "*pilgrims not tourists*", another of the "*dose of consumerism*" motivating some to channel-hop churches rather than fulfilling 'a sense of service' to one. These clergy hoped that parishioners would be induced back as churches re-opened for in-person activities and that this would be an opportunity to shift the focus away from the day-to-day challenges of managing the impact of Covid-19 and towards God:

And now is the time when we need to focus on God, not on the stuff around us. How are we going to cope with that?... That was a welcomed opportunity to help people to refocus on who we are and who we serve.... this was an opportunity for people to refocus their attention.

This was felt to be particularly critical at a time when many clergy had parishioners facing huge life challenges. The vision for the parish was focused on how the church could be part of helping them through these hard times.

8.3.2 Incorporating the digital into the vision

Much of the clergy vision for their parish involved reflecting on the possibilities and challenges of digital technology.

We're having a rethink of the church's vision over the next six months, and that's one of the things we're thinking about, is, how should we use social media and the online presence in the future? And I don't know what the answers are yet. ... we're thinking about it and praying. I want to know what other people in the church actually think. I don't want it to just be me deciding what I'd like to do. It's interesting times, isn't it?

Many felt that a distinct online community had not developed during the move online in the pandemic. The focus of their ministry remained their ability to listen and to engage meaningfully in people's lives, whilst adding 'media-related ministries' to their role. Their vision acknowledged the central role that the physical church buildings in their parishes play as the 'spiritual heart' of community whilst contemplating how online can also play a part in this. Clergy were keen to ensure that any existing tensions in parishes were not further reinforced through new splits reflecting a digital divide. Some congregation members who might never be able to participate digitally, and their marginalisation "*would be a travesty of the Church's ministry*". Similarly, while training could help with encouraging clergy confidence in new digital tools, "*how do we cater for those who will never make that journey? How do we make sure that they don't become the people on the margin?*"

8.3.3 The Church to address parish inequalities in resources

Clergy expressed a strong preference for being able to secure the resources (time, skills and money) to be able to address the previous issues of loss and marginalisation of congregation and to integrate the digital, for example, making sure that parishioners remain digitally skilled and not excluded from online ministry. There can be important differences across parishes in their ability to access resources for any digital offerings. Indeed, some churches had been significantly financially impacted by the pandemic:

We've got a massive financial problem, we've been losing £3,000 a month ... we can't pay our share, we've had to have it reduced. We've got reserves, but it got to a real cash flow problem, at one point we had to make an appeal. So that has coloured actually, because we could have done much better livestreaming if we could have upgraded our internet connections, but there was no energy from the church, or money to do it.

As we see, some churches were simply not in a position to invest in the necessary digital infrastructure, whereas:

[The decline in numbers is] for the leadership team, it's like, "okay, here's an opportunity". We are very resource rich for the sort of parish that we are, for the number of people and so forth. Hugely blessed. So, we say, 'right, we're in a good place. Now, how can we build...'

Any ongoing digital strategy would therefore have to consider the ability of churches to invest in the necessary technologies. While apprehending that this cost was likely to fall on individual PCCs, there was a call for financial or other support from the diocese in recognition of these differences:

We are all independent but we are all part of the established Church ... The Church of England have the capacity to do it properly and they just haven't. It's frustrating. The basic thing is that you've got a rich church and you've got lots of people who can do it. They've got the capacity. Whereas those who are poorer churches ... have just been left on their own.

One suggestion was digital 'piggybacking' off local resourcing churches:

if [local resourcing church] get the go-ahead to redo their tech stuff, the quality and accessibility of what they're going to be able to put out is something that we're going to align with quite, quite heavily. The youth ministry, the community work, all of that is something we're going to piggyback off of for a while, until we're able to establish some stuff within ourselves ... taking [the] resourcing church title really seriously and saying, "a lot of churches are really, really struggling. How can we take the burden off of them so that they can look after those people within their parishes?" ... We need clergy listening, but offering all of these services ...? "Don't worry about your Wednesday Communion. Why don't you just stream what [resource church] are doing, and you can be there as a priest and consecrate what you're doing and hand that out?" ... Because I think people don't see that as a cop-out anymore. I think with hybrid and online stuff, people see there's a legitimate form of ministry.... to share resources, but also to engage in an online platform.

This better resourcing included being able to make better use of expertise in areas such as digital technology and use of social media; they wanted to hear from experts who can advise and see the bigger picture and who could support particularly the lower profile and less well-resourced churches.

8.4 Preferences for a Sustainable Future

Clergy vision for a sustainable future covered: the sustainability of their own careers through the development of an appropriate skill set; a manageable workload and adequate support for wellbeing; the sustainability of their parish through proper resourcing (as discussed above); and the sustainability of the planet in times of climate change.

The pandemic had highlighted obvious gaps in digital training. Clergy could see that it was important to keep hold of, and build on, skills acquired in pandemic as they might need them again, even where for some this presented them with a challenge:

Our lovely area dean didn't have a clue about how to operate as a Zoom host. It was very difficult and eventually, somebody else had to take over. That's embarrassing for [them] and it meant the meeting was inefficient. As far as I'm aware, there was no training or help offered in that.

Some envisioned quite radical new training requirements both for new incumbents and existing clergy in order for them to be up to date with technical skills, with a focus on the academic and pedagogical aspects of how to deliver material online or in a hybrid context:

There will be [a need for training to be a digital vicar]. It will require a little bit

about what's appropriate. What level, how best to deliver it, when do you deliver it? Do you do it before ordination? Do you do it after ordination? All of those kinds of things. I think getting people technologically literate and there'd be lots of ways of doing that. You can get them to do online presentations and things like that, which is all the same techniques and technology, will probably be something we will develop, and we will use much more into the future. That would affect assessment. We could get their presentations, instead of doing them live, one could get them to produce a video, a film or an annotated PowerPoint with all the audio visual. They would have to develop some techniques in media for that. Everybody gets Office 365 when they're a student, so they can't claim they haven't got the programmes to do it.

Equally clergy could see that not all clergy may want to engage digitally (and that this variation in preference should be celebrated) nor would all have the time to do so. Some skills could be provided by others, e.g. the use of lay preachers to take some services, though these arrangements present their own challenges such as a lack of continuity and reliance on goodwill.

Clergy envisioned a continuation of being asked (or at least implicitly expected) to do more with less resource. They were concerned at the ongoing lack of resources and being spread too thinly. They felt that current workloads were unsustainable, especially as they struggled to work out what to retain online and what to go back to doing in person:

The problem we have, the debate we have here, is there isn't the time, I haven't got the time or energy to continue with all the online stuff, as well as the face-to-face stuff now. And without somebody else stepping in, and saying, well, I'll take over the live morning prayers, so that you can go off and get on with other things, it's got to be either-or, instead of both-and.

Many could see how the two modes could be successfully integrated and efficiently delivered (e.g. Zoom bible study) and certain technologies were also extremely useful (e.g. WhatsApp for setting up and running groups) online so that people did not have to travel. However this still generated additional work and clergy vision was for a more devolved model where work could be pooled and shared within and, if necessary, beyond traditional parish boundaries.

Given all the uncertainties in the future, many clergy foresaw a time ahead of anxiety (for themselves, their staff and their parishioners) which could exacerbate the already negative impact on mental health of the pandemic. This was also set against a context of balancing tensions arising from the greater use of digital technology. The latter was seen as offering some greener solutions to clergy/Church work and clergy vision included being able to use technological solutions where these enabled meetings to be more time and fuel efficient as well as being more flexible and thus allowing a wider range of people to participate.

8.4.1 Supporting clergy wellbeing

There was some concern expressed that there was an over-emphasis on the positive in the wider Church, when less positive issues also had to be recognised and discussed:

I think what really grates is when senior clergy do this eternal positive gloss on everything ... [For example], one of the Bishops saying how many hits he'd had online for his online sermons ... It's ... spin-doctoring and it's horrible, and I really, really hate that.

This included the potentially huge fallout of the pandemic in terms of mental health:

The wellbeing side is probably the thing that will hit us. I don't know whether it'll create illnesses or mental health issues, but I imagine it already is, in some quarters. Whether that will be something that clergy will experience. In a sense, going through the crisis, you have to kind of keep going but once you hit the other side, whether there will be a lot of people leaving ministry. That's probably where the real clergy care needs to be focused on, is helping people rebuild afterwards, when we're getting back to normal. Some people thrive in a crisis but normality's quite hard and that could be quite problematic.

It was therefore seen as essential to have professional support in place for clergy.

8.4.2 Implementing a sustainable workload with clear guidance around expectations

A widely expressed concern was how a hybrid church would work, particularly as churches began to come out of lockdown. This prompted questions around what digital practices should be abandoned, which should be continued and where might be the online/offline boundaries in future in terms of parish work: *"the wisdom is to know which is which"*.

There were also concerns such as we have reviewed earlier about workload and overwork. Clergy wanted more support and clearer guidance on workloads, especially those working in small teams. They were clear that they could not do everything and especially not both in-person and online yet were often made to feel as if they should:

Sometimes people started things and didn't know how to stop them. When things had returned to some degree of normality, keeping the whole of the pattern going that they developed, wasn't needed any longer but stopping something is quite hard to do. I've had quite a few people saying "I don't want to be doing this anymore. I haven't got time to do it any longer, yet I've still got to do it. You kind of think, "have you really got to do it? Talk to your PCC and get on with it".

8.4.3 Supporting a green agenda

One of the benefits of online platforms for communication and meetings was the reduction in travel, especially by car which, for those in rural parishes, was otherwise the only feasible means of transport:

it uses petrol resources. It uses time resources. And of course, you multiply that by the members of the committee.

Clergy welcomed the opportunity to pursue a green agenda by not travelling especially for short meetings and using Zoom instead to support such meetings. They wanted green issues to be reflected in the Church's decision-making.

8.5 Summary

The material in this section raises several issues for the diocese and the wider Church to address. There are clergy calls for strategic thinking by the Church leadership around the Church's purpose and mission in light of the pandemic⁵. Many of the matters needing attention (parish inequalities, role of digital technology) had existing prior to the arrival of Covid-19 but the pandemic had forced these unresolved issues into the open. In this section we identified the specific preferences expressed by clergy around how this reflection and strategic 'big thinking' by the Church leaders should proceed: with the incorporation of a wider range of voices in the debate and the integration of local activism and expertise.

One of the specific areas where clergy called for strategic leadership was around the use of digital technology, reflecting its core (not peripheral) role in contemporary life. Clergy recognised that the future of the Church was hybrid though with strong preferences for being able to decide at a local level how this was implemented. They did not want to be excluded from this process through lack of resources, nor did they want existing disparity between parishes to be further exacerbated. Having observed the impact of the pandemic on their congregations, clergy recognised the pandemic's potential as a teachable moment, hence their frustration at these parish inequalities (which can be seen to mirror growing societal inequalities). They were concerned at being unable to capitalise on technological gains of the pandemic. With increased workloads, the prospect of not even being able to build on the work of the pandemic was dismaying.

Clergy reported how they had used the pandemic as an opportunity for their own deeper reflection on the future of their parishes and the wider Church. They saw the pandemic as a wake-up call for the Church more broadly, with significant - even existential - issues to address. This was against a backdrop of falling attendance numbers but also what some perceived to be the diminishing quality of engagement by their congregations. Some felt that attitudes to minorities and not just technical infrastructure of churches needed to change. Here, the need to address inequality of resources between parishes was seen as critical to being more inclusive and addressing the needs of excluded groups.

⁵ See <https://d3hgrrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/61f2fd86f0ee5/content/pages/documents/20211028-doc-coronavirus-five-marks-planning-tool-v01.pdf> as a potential first step towards this

9 Recommendations



Looking across the seven sections of commentary and analysis in this report we can see that pandemic-induced disruption entailed a considerable amount of reflection and learning. This did not just concern the use of digital technologies but has revealed bigger questions about identity and mission. This learning should not be lost. Additionally, many of the matters needing attention had existed prior to the pandemic but this unique situation forced many unresolved issues into the open. As things return to normal and new difficulties raise their heads, there is an understandable temptation to ‘put it behind us’. However, this may leave many important insights and surfaced debates undiscussed.

Consequently, in this section we gather together those insights to suggest potential ways forward for the diocese. We acknowledge, however, that this report has arrived 18 months after we completed the interviews and that the context is now very different. We suspect that many issues will have already been confronted and it is likely there are already initiatives in place to capitalise on changes and to confront emergent difficulties. Our commentary below therefore has to be seen in this context. However, we do believe that the views summarised in this report and the recommendations below are still very important. It has been an opportunity for clergy to voice their experiences and the implications of these experiences for future ministry are profound. We gave an advance copy of the report to the diocese and, as a result of their feedback, we have added a few footnotes that clarify or update details that appear in the text. We very much welcome comments and feedback on the report content.

9.1 Provide opportunities to acknowledge the profound changes clergy have been through and enable the sharing of those experiences, surfacing of different perspectives, and debate on future mission.

Even with all the associated challenges, the pandemic has provided the opportunity for deep contemplation and re-assessment. Clergy often said taking part in the interview gave them an opportunity to pause, to reflect on their experiences and start to understand these better. All clergy need an opportunity to make sense of what has happened and to come to terms with it. As we have seen in the report, there are many issues that are not clear-cut; there are a variety of views held and different perspectives on the way forward. Sharing these disparate views and experiences would not just be cathartic but also informative and allows the diocese to benefit from the expertise and insight now held within the community.

9.2 Elucidate strategic direction, led by senior colleagues in the diocese, informed by consultation and pursued as joint enterprise.

The adoption of digital means of providing ministry triggered by pandemic measures, was of course unexpected and unplanned, leading, at least initially, to an under-resourced, uncoordinated, individualised proliferation of practices. Strategic thinking, driven from the centre but involving multiple voices would be beneficial after this previous reactivity.

Indeed it was common in the interviews for clergy to call for strategic thinking by the Church leadership beyond the digital and around the Church's purpose and mission in light of the pandemic⁶.

9.3 Adopt an equitable approach to resourcing digital implementation and innovation across the diocese, taking into account specific needs of specific locales.

It was clear from the interviews that there were differences across parishes in the ability to fund and support digital innovations. Clergy were seemingly dependent on chance as to whether they had immediate support for the changes required. There were tensions between felt expectations of provision, regardless of size of parish, yet an unequal distribution of resources between parishes to enable this to happen. These inequalities of parish resources of course existed before the pandemic. However, if left unaddressed these raise concerns about the widening gulf, where some parishes are under-resourced and unable to capitalise on the opportunities that digital technology may bring to ministry, including successful innovations they had already implemented but might not be able to continue.

9.4 Capitalise on the utility of the digital for communication and inclusion in a strategic way, while avoiding marginalisation.

Despite the steep learning curve and difficulties experienced in a rapid ramping up of the use of digital technologies during the pandemic, it is also clear that such technologies provided wider reach - including helping with outreach and inclusion - and is an important form of communication in the 21st century. Given goals of inclusion, it is important that digital means of interaction are not treated as 'second best' as this then serves to marginalise those who can only take part through digital means. It is also the case that attention needs to be paid to those who find it difficult to adapt to the digital and how they can be supported. Consultation with those who need help in this way (including local activists and specialists) would produce a purposeful design of effective forms of digital interaction that enable participation of the whole community.

9.5 Provide guidance on what hybrid church may look like, including what might be best provided digitally and what might be best provided face-to-face in the community, recognising that particular care must be taken to enhance inclusivity, to be adaptive to local needs and to consider a green agenda.

As above, through digital means, accessibility can be extended and this is potentially an excellent outcome. However no clergy in our sample reported the emergence of a specific online congregation during the pandemic. Many congregations may have become more

⁶ See <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/seven-disciplines-eight-qualities/> for some recent thinking on this in the Diocese of Oxford

receptive to digital innovations during the pandemic, but they were also keen to go back to physical interaction. However, this is not an either/or situation. There is no reason why the digital and the physical cannot live together and an anticipation of an ongoing 'hybrid church' was expressed by most clergy. Indeed, clergy were keen to exploit positive digital initiatives from the pandemic including infrastructure investment and curated digital content.

The really crucial issue facing clergy at the end of our project was what they should continue online and what should be provided face-to-face. Our small sample indicated that Zoom PCC meetings are both environmentally and personally sustainable and that contemplative prayer may be enhanced by online interaction, whereas services, particularly Eucharist, may be better provided in church. However, in general they were keen to have some guidance on this, with the caveat that any recommendations should vary depending on parish context with contingencies and focused recommendations for different groups (e.g. rural vs urban contexts).

9.6 Share existing digital skills and know-how, consolidating learnt digital skills and integrating digital skills training into ordinands' curriculum.

There was a feeling that the diocese could capitalise on the surge of digital know-how generated by the pandemic, through either the coordination of knowledge sharing events or through providing 'digital gurus' or 'super-users' as a resource to parishes that have less in the way of internal expertise. With a likely hybrid future, training in digital skills and the sharing of digital expertise is essential. In the rapid changing context of the pandemic this was not possible but a more strategic approach to this could help now. Pressure of time may have detracted from any potential enjoyment obtained from learning new skills but this could be consolidated now. For the future, training in digital skills needs to be a fundamental part of ordinands' education.

9.7 Explore in more detail what is particularly valued by clergy and their congregation: an opportunity for reflection on meaningful ministry and working out the role of the digital in this.

The pandemic was an existential challenge for both clergy and congregation, asking themselves what does it mean to be a vicar now? And what does it mean to be a congregation now? For some clergy this was not just about lack of skills and lack of time, but a more fundamental feeling that digital interaction is an activity outside ministry. Ministry was positioned in the interviews as fundamentally about personal contact, building relationships and community; that clergy are, at heart, concerned with personal engagement. During the pandemic digital interaction was tolerated because it was better than nothing and provided some form of connection and community, however, to what extent can it contribute to these fundamental values in the longer term? How can the digital extend that valued form of ministry in new meaningful directions? [Importantly, we

note that there are differing views on this and for those engaged in more evangelical ministry, this may be less of an issue.]

9.8 Commit to an increased focus on clergy and lay helpers' wellbeing to explicitly formulate what constitutes a sustainable pattern of working and how clergy can be encouraged in self-care, bringing this to parish level⁷.

The pandemic accentuated stressors already felt and introduced new ones. An already fraught workload with an emphasis on emotional involvement was extended by an increase in novel and unknown tasks, plus a general context of increased anxiety. It is well-known that accumulative stress can lead to burnout and it is insufficient to rely on clergy's own framing of resilience. Indeed, our interviewees shared their concern that there may be a mental health 'time bomb' in the months and years following the pandemic as stored up tensions and griefs become unmanageable. Those benefices who came together to work as a team and spread the workload amongst them may have avoided the worst of these potential problems. So there were opportunities for preserving wellbeing but this required a strategic approach.

9.9 Review what constitutes pastoral care and what should be expected from clergy, particularly for the future, given current UK 'cost of living' and other crises, and learning from the positive innovations adopted during the pandemic.

The pandemic meant that pastoral care became more intentional and clergy and lay helpers exhibited much resourcefulness in devising new forms of care given pandemic constraints. Social needs intensified during the pandemic and the clergy (as before the pandemic) were often undertaking provision usually supplied by public welfare, including specialist measures required for disproportionately affected minority groups with different needs. This trend is likely to continue with the current UK cost-of-living crisis, which raises issues for the Church in terms of the sustainability of clergy providing this care, and the support and resources they would need to do so. To some extent the pandemic re-shaped pastoral care to be seen as a whole community enterprise and this may inform future developments. However, a key concern for the Church is the existence of groups that pastoral care struggled to reach: those with mental health issues, those without IT access, the very old in care homes, and minority ethnic and disabled groups. Some clergy warned that the fall-out from these exclusions could be of lasting impact, including lasting mental health issues for the congregation and withdrawal from the parish family.

9.10 Emphasise the sense of community and the importance of community action, encompassing community of clergy, local parish community and the diocese as community.

⁷ For more general national discussion of clergy well-being, see Graveling, L. (2020) *How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry* Church House Publishing

The importance of a community of clergy became very apparent through the pandemic as clergy turned to peers for advice, information and wellbeing support. Additionally, as in 9.8, those benefices that came together in joint provision of services probably fared best in terms of workload and support. Clergy also sought out resources and ideas from other church communities. This positive experience suggests some value in providing a strategic emphasis on team working across churches, parishes and benefices.

Clergy felt that online interaction tended to focus ministry too much on the priest as individual rather than community interaction in the celebration of faith and looked forward to returning to their churches where there would be more of an obvious sense of worship as a community enterprise. However, it was also the case that lay helpers and the congregation did come together to provide content for online services, support for digital provision and for pastoral care. Indeed, there was some perception that community became closer in their joint experience of adversity. It is clearly important not to lose this development and some thought to be given to how can it be maintained.

There is a debate here about the future of congregation: potentially becoming relatively invisible consumers (online from anywhere) or alternatively more overtly community-oriented (in church from somewhere). This is closely aligned with the issue of the viability of the parish model already in discussion within the Church of England. Financial considerations and digital possibilities point towards a move away from parish model, while an increased sense of community and lack of an emergent distinct online community during the pandemic points towards a renewed focus on the local parish. Our interviewees seemed to suggest that the latter was the more likely as community ties were strengthened and physical interaction became more cherished through its absence. However, strategic direction is required, based on clearly articulated principles and values.

Finally, there were calls for the Church to become more internally-focused at this time; to be building more of a community internally within dioceses through dialogue and discussion, a shift away from a focus on external audiences.

Appendix: The Conduct of the Research Project

A1 General Process

We conducted all the interviews on a one-to-one basis over Zoom, each lasting approximately one hour. The same topics were covered with all participants (time permitting) as indicated by the research objectives. We conducted the interviews in two tranches:

- June – October 2020
- June – October 2021

Half our participants took part in the first tranche and half in the second. We briefly describe the key events and circumstances of each time tranche below.

A2 Research Timescale⁸

Tranche 1 (June to October 2020): On 17 March 2020, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York published a joint letter to parishes calling on Church of England churches to put public worship on hold in response to Covid-19. Church buildings and other places of worship were then closed. National lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, coming into legal effect 3 days later. Data collection for this tranche began in June 2020 when national lockdown was still in place. This was lifted in stages over June to August 2020, starting with the phased re-opening of schools and non-essential shops in England in June. By the end of that month, the Government had announced a relaxation of restrictions and the 2m social distancing rule.

Churches also began to re-open in June and July 2020. From 15 June 2020, they could host individual prayer and funerals with public worship were allowed to resume in England on 4 July. However, certain restrictions remained in place: group singing was not allowed inside places of worship and certain ceremonies, including weddings and funerals, were limited to 30 people.

Some lockdown restrictions then began to be re-introduced in September 2020 leading to a three-tier system of restrictions in October and then a return to national lockdown at the end of that month.

⁸ HM Government (2021) COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship>

House of Lords Library (2020) Covid-19: Reopening church buildings and the financial impact of closure
<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-reopening-church-buildings-and-the-financial-impact-of-closure/>

Institute for Government analysis (2021) Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and measures, March 2020 to December 2021 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-coronavirus-lockdown-december-2021.pdf>

Tranche 2 (June – October 2021): At the start of this period the lockdown ‘stay at home’ order had already ended, schools had re-opened, as well as non-essential retail, hairdressers, and public buildings such as libraries and museums. Outdoor venues, including pubs and restaurants, were also open, as well as indoor leisure. Wider social contact rules had just been relaxed allowing up to 30 people to mix outdoors, with the ‘Rule of six’ or two households allowed for indoor social gatherings.

In mid-June 2021 restrictions on weddings and funerals were abolished and the following month most of the remaining legal limits on social contact were removed in England.

In July 2021 guidance was published for people attending a place of worship and for those who are responsible for these venues. This explained that wearing a face mask was no longer a legal requirement and that social distancing in a place of worship was now a personal choice. There was advice on sanitising objects and the importance of ventilation. There were now no limits on the number of people who could sing or perform indoors or outdoors.

In September 2021, the Government unveiled England’s winter plan for Covid (‘Plan B’) to be used if the NHS came under ‘unsustainable pressure’ and included measures such as face masks. Plan B was not implemented, however, until December by which time the Tranche 2 data collection had been completed.

A3 Ethics

Suitable ethical procedures were agreed with the ethics review team of Church House before the research commenced. Changes due to the pandemic did not materially affect the procedures agreed. All participants were provided with an information sheet that outlined the purposes, processes and implications of participating in the study. All participants signed a consent form allowing us to use their comments from the interviews in anonymised form in reports such as this.

A4 Participants in the Interviews

In describing who took part in the study, we are seeking to retain the confidentiality of the interviews and the anonymity of our participants (as above). 40 clergy took part in the interviews, the majority being stipendiary clergy or curates. Only clergy from the diocese took part in the study. As the Diocese of Oxford is large and project resources small, we sought to draw from a subset of deaneries and parishes. This subset was selected to provide a representative cross-section of parish types. In particular we aimed to include both rural and urban participants. We also aimed to include clergy from different roles within the church, of different ages and representing both men and women. Inevitably our group of participants was also limited by availability.

Table 1 describes the range of participants who kindly provided their time for this project. In relation to broad Ministry Statistics published in 2021⁹, the table indicates that

- Higher percentage of women than in CoE ministry more generally (50% as opposed to 33%)
- The age range broadly reflects the age profile of stipendiary clergy in the CoE (with majority in age range 40s to early 60s).
- As our category of place is three-way, including clergy with a mixture of town and rural churches, it is not directly comparable to the 2020 statistics, however, as the recorded general split between urban and rural is 67/33, it is roughly similar, with slightly more rural churches represented, reflecting the particular nature of the Diocese of Oxford.

Table 1: Participants in the Interviews

Gender	
Female	20
Male	20
Age	
20-29	1
30-39	6
40-49	8
50-59	12
60-69	12
70+	1
Type of Benefice/Parish	
Rural	13
Urban	19
Both	7
Role	
Curate	11
Team Vicar	13
Team Rector	11
Area Dean, Archdeacon etc	2
Other	3

9

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/202107/Ministry%20Statistics%202020%20report%20FINAL.pdf>

