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Assessing the Fragile Rural Church Hypothesis within The Episcopal Church (USA)

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ABSTRACT

A series of qualitative and quantitative studies among clergy and laity within the Church of England has documented five marks of fragility (including erosion of financial and human resources) that are more evident in rural churches. New data generated by the *Covid-19 & Church-21* survey conducted both in the Church of England and in The Episcopal Church (USA) among clergy and laity indicate that in the USA rural Anglican churches are perceived as less fragile than in England.

Keywords: fragile churches; rural churches; Anglican churches; USA; empirical theology

Introduction

Building on earlier work by Brewster (2012a, 2012b) and Francis, Laycock, and Brewster (2015) the fragile rural church hypothesis has its origins in the research of Lawson (2018), arising from her analysis of three focus groups conducted among clergy serving in rural ministry within one diocese in the church of England. The thesis was further refined by Lawson (2019), drawing on semi-structured interviews with nine clergy holding responsibility for between four and 13 churches within another diocese in the Church of England. Drawing on these interviews, Lawson crystallised her conceptualisation of fragile

churches as involving five major marks: financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources; inability to replace churchwardens and other officers and volunteers, or fear of that being the case; lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them; lack of time and energy among clergy to start new things; and tiny congregations consisting of single figures with a rising age profile of seventy-five plus. In a third study, Lawson (2020) concluded that:

while there are considerable stresses upon the clergy who have responsibility for ‘fragile rural churches’, which should give those in senior leadership positions cause for thought, reflection and action, the rural church is by no means without hope, even where it is small and ‘fragile’. (Lawson, 2020, p. 27)

Commenting on and critiquing Lawson’s fragile rural church hypothesis, two clergy with wide experience in rural ministry contributed to the debate by drawing on their personal accounts of positive signs of flourishing (Mynors, 2019; Wilson, 2019). These accounts provided further substance to Lawson’s view that the rural church is by no means without hope, even when it is small and fragile.

Lawson’s three studies were published before the Covid pandemic struck. When the pandemic struck the Church of England faced an unprecedented challenge. On 23 March 2020 the UK Government imposed a lockdown on the nation. On the following day, the Church of England closed all its churches, except for essential ‘services’ like the provision of foodbanks (McGowan, 2020). Churches were closed for public worship and for private prayer. Churches were closed both to their laity and to their clergy.

In order to map the impact of the pandemic on clergy and laity we designed the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey. This survey included a set of questions concerning ‘how the crisis might affect the Church in the long term’. Within this section of the survey we shaped two questions to test the fragile church hypothesis:

- Our church building will not be financially viable
- Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace

Our intention was to learn two things from these two questions. First, we wanted to be able to assess how prevalent these fears were among rural clergy and among rural laity. Second, we wanted to test whether these fears were as strong in other geographical contexts or whether the rural church was really different. The *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey was launched on 8 May 2020 in collaboration with the *Church Times* and with the active support of a number of dioceses. The survey was closed 23 July 2020, by which time there had been over 7,000 replies, including 5,347 from Anglicans living in England.

By the time that the third national lockdown was imposed in England on 6 January 2021, we decided to launch a second survey, *Covid-19 & Church-21*. This second survey included some new questions, but also retained some old questions (including the two fragile church questions) in order to test the extent to which opinions were changing. In terms of the fragile church hypothesis we framed two opposing theories. The first theory suggested that by 2021 the Church had adapted well to a new *modus operandi* and that clergy and laity alike would be embracing a new future for the Church with optimism. The second theory suggested that local experience may have been less positive and that clergy and laity alike would be increasingly fearful about the longer term future and sustainability of local churches.

From the first survey we learned two main things (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021a). First, rural clergy were more pessimistic about the future than rural laity. Thus, 34% of rural clergy considered that our church buildings will not be financially viable, compared with 22% of rural laity; 29% of rural clergy considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, compared with 23% of rural laity. Second, both rural clergy and rural laity were more pessimistic about the future than their colleagues in other geographical

environments. For example, while 34% of rural clergy considered our church buildings will not be financially viable, the proportions stood at 24% in inner city parishes, 20% in town parishes, and 18% in suburban parishes. While 23% of rural laity considered key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, the proportions stood at 18% in inner city parishes, 17% in suburban parishes, and 16% in town parishes.

From comparison between the first survey and the second survey, we also learned two main things (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2021b). First both rural clergy and rural laity had become more pessimistic about lay volunteers. The proportion of rural clergy who considered that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace rose from 29% to 49%. At the same time, the proportion of rural laity who took that view rose from 22% to 32%. Second, the same trend applied among non-rural clergy and non-rural laity. Among non-rural clergy the proportion rose from 23% to 33% and among non-rural laity the proportion rose from 16% to 25%. On the other hand, the proportions of rural and non-rural clergy and laity who were pessimistic about the financial viability of church buildings remained constant between the two surveys.

Research questions

The opportunity to replicate the *Covid-19 & Church-21* survey within The Episcopal Church in the USA allows us to focus three research questions. The first two research questions draw on the quantitative component of the survey. The first research question tests the extent to which the pandemic has focused a similar concern with the fragile church thesis and whether the rural experience in The Episcopal Church matches that within the Church of England. The second research question tests whether in The Episcopal Church the rural experience is different from the experience in other geographical areas. This quantitative approach will be used to replicate the analyses of Francis, Village, and Lawson (2020, 2021b). The third research question draws on the qualitative component of the survey. Since the quantitative

data only embrace two of the marks of the fragile church, the qualitative approach will be used to explore evidence for each of the five marks of the fragile church discussed by Lawson (2019).

Method

Procedure

The *Covid-19 & Church-21* survey was originally designed in association with the *Church Times* to explore the impact of the pandemic on Anglican clergy and laity in England. It was opened on the Qualtrics XM platform on 22 January and closed on 23 July 2021. This survey was slightly shortened and adapted to suit the USA context of the Episcopal Church. There it was publicised and distributed through Virginia Theological Seminary, was live from 1 June to 23 August 2021 and attracted over 5,000 responses from across the USA. An overview of the responses from laity and clergy from the Episcopal Church were published by Village and Francis (2021). Alongside a range of quantitative measures, the *Covid-19 & Church 21* survey concluded with the following open-ended invitation:

If you would like to write about your experiences in your own words, you can do so here, or include anything that we had not asked that you think we should have included.

Measures

Geographical location was explored by the question ‘Which of these best describes the area in which you live?’ followed by four options: rural, town, suburban/exurban, and inner city. For the present analyses these four options have been collapsed into two: rural and non-rural.

Impact of Covid-19 was explored by a set of 15 Likert-type items inviting participants to assess ‘how the crisis might affect the Church in the long term’. This section included the two fragile church items, ‘Our church building will not be financially viable’ and ‘Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace’. Each item was rated on a five-point scale:

ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). For this analysis, categories were collapsed into agree/strongly agree (1) and other (0). Differences between clergy and lay and between locations were tested with contingency tables.

Participants

Full data on the two fragile church questions were provided by: 2,870 lay people (368 rural, 824 town, 1,336 suburban/exurban, and 342 inner city) and 412 clergy (49 rural, 125 town, 189, suburban/exurban, and 49 inner city).

Quantitative results

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 presents the responses of clergy and laity to the two fragile church questions by geographical location. Three main conclusions can be drawn from these data regarding the difference in the relevance of the fragile rural church hypothesis within The Episcopal Church. The first conclusion is that the level of anxiety about the financial viability of church buildings is much lower in the USA. Just 6% of Episcopal rural clergy fear for the financial viability of their churches, compared with 30-34% in England; just 10% of Episcopal rural laity fear for the financial viability of their churches, compared with 22-24% in England. The second conclusion is that the level of anxiety about replacing key lay people is closer in the USA to the position in England: 27% of Episcopal rural clergy fear that key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace, compared with 29-49% in England; 24% of Episcopal rural laity take this position, compared with 22-32% in England. The third conclusion is that in the USA the situation for rural churches is not worse than the situation elsewhere. If anything, Episcopal clergy serving in inner-city, suburban/exurban and town parishes were slightly more likely than rural clergy to agree that lay people will be difficult to replace (39% versus 27%), though the difference was not quite statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .09$).

Qualitative results

Lay people

Within the *Covid-19 and Church-21 Survey* (USA) there were 368 lay people who self-identified as either living in rural areas or worshipping in rural churches. Of these 368 people, 159 (29% male and 71% female) responded to the open invitation to write about their experience of the pandemic in their own words (43% participation rate). Initial thematic analysis of these open responses identified several categories: deeply personal reflections on the challenges faced and the coping mechanisms employed, assessment of online worship and service provision, judgements about local and national responses including the actions of individuals, and exploration of the potential impact on the Church going forward. Some of these initial categories were then subjected to further iterations of analysis and sub-themes were identified. Responses commenting on the challenges and benefits of online worship have been reported elsewhere (McKenna, under review). Closer examination of the category exploring the potential impact of the pandemic on the Church revealed that there were 19 TEC rural lay people who wrote specifically about issues that mapped onto and illustrated what Lawson (2018, 2019) has identified within the Church of England as markers of the fragile rural church. Within this group of 19 rural lay people, four identified as male, fourteen as female, and there was one of undisclosed sex; four participants were aged under fifty, five were in their sixties, six were in their seventies, and four were aged eighty or over.

Financial pressure and dwindling resources

While three TEC rural lay people mentioned financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources two of these comments were in relation to the added expense associated with providing online services. The other response suggested that the church building might be no longer financially viable because the loss of a physically present congregation had led to a drop in donations.

As the parish's webmaster ... I'm also concerned about the added expense of producing an online service. (12, Male, 70s)

Not been able to be in the building has taken a huge tow in my church finances to the point of almost closing as we cannot afford the priest, sad to have lost so many people, angry to those that keep pretending nothing is happening.... (121, Female, 50s)

Our small rural church erupted when faced with complying with guidelines developed by Vestry and approved by Diocese. More than a year later very few of those who were formerly regular in attendance are still not present for services. We have a new supply minister who is doing very well with what is here and we are beginning to see a few more people in the pews. Fortunately, we have enough money in savings to assist and we are being careful with how we spend what we have. We have hope. (129, Virginia, 80s+)

In contrast, there were also three TEC rural lay people who noted that their church was either managing to cope with the increased financial pressures or indeed was thriving due to having adapted quickly and successfully to online provision. One person mentioned their parish having had its 'best year ever' in terms of the increased giving received.

Our priest intends to continue our virtual service indefinitely and has secured a grant to install more permanent equipment to make it possible. Some of our parishioners are also exceptionally 'tech-savy' and are strongly supporting this addition. The pandemic forced us to try new things and, fortunately I was able to learn how to use new methods to remain active in my church. I'm very grateful for all of the extensions that have been unleashed and pray that our parish will grow & thrive with these additional services. (127, Female, 80s+)

We are stronger financially than we were before the pandemic ... and I am very grateful that we were as ready as we could possibly have been for this to happen [the provision of high-quality online worship], and we have done well as a parish as a result. We financially have had our best year ever and are about five years ahead of where we were on major capital items, like refurbishing the stained-glass windows - I am convinced that we CAN keep this up, post COVID. Other parishes will close;

they were not ready, did not react with decisiveness, cannot cope with change - that is something really important that we have been able to do. (149, Male, 70s)

Inability to replace staff

Some TEC rural lay people mentioned that their church currently relied on either supply clergy or lay leadership suggesting the inability to replace staff. Another rural lay person noted the number of positions held and multiple tasks increasingly being placed upon him. He expressed concern that there was currently no-one else available to take on some of these roles.

My local church is rural and very small. It has not had a Rector or Vicar in many years and depends on supply clergy. There is not another Episcopal church within 40 or more miles. (112, Female, 70s)

It has been difficult because we are looking for a Priest. It's been hard keeping our congregation together and keep our church going with just lay leadership. (96, Female, 40s)

We are a small parish.... Since the pandemic I've found myself seemingly taken more seriously.... Instead of being the editor of the newsletter who also does social media, I've been recognized as Communications Director. As Verger, I've come to realize that I have far-reaching responsibility for all aspects of our worship and ancillary activities. I'm not a Warden, but our two Wardens are basically place-holders this year, and I find myself acting as a Warden and more than I would like, Parish Administrator. It's not great because I'm now 80 years old and I don't have anyone to pass this along to. (58, Male, 80s+)

Lack of children

The decreasing numbers of young people either attending church services or getting involved as either participants or volunteers in church-led activities was noted by some TEC rural lay people. While there is some evidence (McKenna, 2022, under review) that the increasing availability of online provision can improve accessibility to church services and offer convenience for busy family life, that it can make churches more available, and provide

opportunities for worshippers to connect with other congregations and communities, these rural lay people identified that there was still work to do to encourage younger families to engage with church life, whether in-person or online.

I have missed the multi-generational atmosphere of parish life and based on Zoom attendance, fear that is gone for ever. I don't see the younger families 'coming along' growing in faith and community to give the parish a life beyond the next few years. I like the mix of working on worship and parish activities on a multigenerational basis. Frankly, the church is feeling old to me. If I wanted old, I would have moved into group living by now! (63, Female, 70s)

We have seen a substantial drop in attendance particularly our children. (48, Female, 80s+)

[What] about the impact of COVID on our Sunday School and young people coming up in the church - this has been an ongoing interest of mine for half a century or more - and I have never been so worried that we have lost a generation. (58, Male, 80s+)

the only loss has been to our programs for kids/youth. I've tried there, having our tweens and teens read in our online worship, but it's been difficult.... (149, Male, 70s)

Small and ageing congregations

The issue of small congregations along with a rising age profile was highlighted. This issue was seen to overlap with the lack of younger church members and the challenge of getting the younger generation involved with the church.

I miss my church family immensely and I am afraid we have lost some key members. Our congregation is elderly and many are now out of the habit of going to church, they have found other ways of getting their 'church. (10, Female, 60s)

I am a clergy widow, 78, attending a VERY small church in a rural village. As a rule, there are six of us, and we live spread across three counties. We all worry what will happen to this church when we are gone (we are all in our seventies and eighties). We do have a priest who comes once a month to give us Holy Communion. Otherwise, four of us take turns leading Morning Prayer. (29, Female, 70s)

My commitment and giving of time and talent have not wavered, but I cannot say the same for the rest of our small ageing congregation. What happens next is in God's hands. I remain at peace and will continue unless God speaks to me otherwise. (97, Female, 60s)

We have an interim priest since October.... Our congregation is probably average age above 60 and we have lost at least 10 during the last 15 months. I'm grateful to be back worshipping ... but it's harder to get my 14- and 8-year-old grandchildren to go with me. (128, Female, 60s)

One young male TEC member in his twenties noted that it was not the ageing population *per se* that was leading to the decline of rural parishes but the lack of consultation with younger church members about the church and the importance of religion itself. He suggests the need for younger lay ministries but doesn't say where these might come from if there is no pool of younger church members to select from. These issues (ageing congregations, inability to replace staff, lack of children) are all interrelated.

Rural parishes are dying not because of aging generations only but because they are deemed irrelevant to young people. There is no effort to actually consult young people about religion and why they see it as unnecessary to their lives. Lay ministries are filled with people age 50 and above and somehow they are supposed to be able to outreach to young people? This is not to discount the elderly because they are important, but their lived experiences are vastly different from today's young people. Some thoughts to consider. (30, Male, 20s)

Relentlessness and staff energy

Lawson (2018) identified a lack of time and energy for clergy and lay staff to start new initiatives as one of five markers of the fragile rural church. In 2019 she added an additional marker noted as the relentless nature of keeping going. Here, comments from this group of TEC rural lay people combine these two markers. It is not surprising that considering the inability to replace staff, with small and ageing congregations, and with a lack of younger church members, that lay leaders were starting to feel burnt out from the excessive workload

and stresses of their roles. For some this had resulted in giving up leadership roles along with a reluctance to return to such roles. Moreover, for one rural lay person this burnout had resulted in them wanting to take a break from their parish and they had considered joining an online community elsewhere.

I was senior warden a couple of years ago and it was difficult because of the many interpersonal problems one becomes aware of from that position. I love my church and I value my faith and spirituality, but I would not want to serve on the Vestry again or be a church warden. This, too, is a part of the deep exhaustion I experienced during the pandemic. (24, Female, 60s)

... a sense of burnout; a sense that I know what must be done and lacking anyone else to do it, I must do it myself to the best of my ability. Clergy have vacations and sabbaticals and retreats oriented toward self-care. Lay volunteers have nothing like any of that and it is clearly not an interest of the church in any way to provide such; simply a path of service that extends into the future until health eventually makes us stop. I don't begrudge clergy the support structures they have; however, I sense no awareness or concern that lay people have only the support structures they have been able to improvise for their own survival. Covid has emphasized that in boldface type. I wish I were better at mobilizing people to take responsibility. (58, Male, 80s+)

My 'home church' has found this a particularly trying time since we have been without a priest for 6 months. This, of course, overflows to all of us, especially the Vestry who agreed to serve at a time without the pandemic and with a priest. (104, Female, 70s)

Ours is a very small parish without a Vicar through much of the pandemic. As a person in leadership, it was beyond EXHAUSTING trying to figure how to remain church when we couldn't gather & many of our folks did not have technology access. ... I'm tired. My faith is as strong as it was pre-pandemic ... I think I'm continuing 'attending' online elsewhere for a while. (130, no sex, 50s)

Clergy

Within the *Covid-19 and Church-21 Survey* (USA) there were 49 participants who self-identified as rural clergy. Of these 49 rural clergy, 18 (8 males and 10 females) responded to

the open invitation to write about their experience of the pandemic in their own words (37% participation rate). Here 5 clergy were aged 50 or under and 13 were 60 and over. Thematic analysis of these open responses identified five themes: reflections on how they had dealt with the personal health challenges of Covid, procedural issues in organising church services, the technological changes they had embraced and mastered at speed in order to deliver online worship, concerns around the response of church leadership, and examples of how they were now engaging with their faith in new ways. Only one female cleric in her 60s responded in a way that mapped onto one of the identified markers of the fragile church when she alluded to her depleting energy. She noted that during the pandemic, ‘it was exciting (and exhausting) rising to the occasion’. She had enjoyed the opportunity to exercise creativity but combined with the recent loss of family members (non-Covid related) she was ‘going to retire earlier than initially planned’. From within this sample of 18 rural clergy there were no other comments that mapped onto Lawson’s markers of the fragile rural church. In contrast, there were responses from two clerics that suggested the possibility that the rural church might be less fragile moving forward because of changes made during the pandemic.

It was, of course, and remains an interesting time.... We have had to find new and creative ways to carry out mission and outreach and the people have really done a great job.... This is what gives me hope for the future as we find new ways to serve in the coming years. (12, Male, 60s)

This has been a challenging time but has also offered glimpses of amazing possibilities for spiritual renewal and growth. I feel as though the pandemic has offered us a ‘reset’ button and an opportunity to decide what is really important, to re-evaluate, and go in directions that may be different and less hectic. (20, Female, 70s)

Conclusion

The fragile rural church hypothesis was advanced by Lawson (2018, 2019, 2020) in a series of three qualitative studies conducted among Church of England clergy and refined in terms of five major marks of fragility: financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources;

inability to replace churchwardens and other officers and volunteers, or fear of that being the case; lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them; lack of time and energy among clergy to start new things; and tiny congregations consisting of single figures with a rising age profile of seventy-five plus. The fragile rural church hypothesis was further tested and developed on data generated by the two surveys, *Coronavirus, Church & You* and *Covid-19 & Church-21* conducted in 2020 and 2021 across the Church of England. These two surveys were designed to generate both qualitative and quantitative data and included two items concerned with specific aspects of the fragile church hypothesis: financial fragility and human resources fragility. Data from these two surveys complemented and extended Lawson's original qualitative data in three ways. These new data brought in the voices of rural laity alongside rural clergy. These new data brought in comparative perspectives from clergy and laity residing in town, suburban, and inner-city locations. These new data offered insight into how perceptions were changing between the first national lockdown in 2020 and the third national lockdown in 2021.

The second of the two Covid surveys conducted among clergy and laity in the Church of England, *Covid-19 & Church-21* was also conducted among clergy and laity in The Episcopal Church in the USA. Having the same survey running in both countries focused the research questions. The first research question, drawing on quantitative data, tested the extent to which the pandemic focused a similar concern with the fragile rural church thesis as was the case in England and whether the rural experience in The Episcopal Church matches that within the Church of England. The data demonstrated that the level of anxiety about the financial viability of rural church buildings was much lower in the USA, although the level of anxiety about replacing key lay people is closer in the USA to the position in England.

The second research question, also drawing on the quantitative data, tested whether in The Episcopal Church the rural experience is different from the experience in other areas. In

the Church of England the level of anxiety is higher among rural clergy and rural laity than is the case in other geographical areas. In The Episcopal Church, however, the data demonstrated that in the USA the situation for rural churches is not worse than the situation elsewhere. Indeed, Episcopal clergy serving in inner-city, suburban/exurban, and town parishes were slightly more likely than rural clergy to agree that lay people will step down and be difficult to replace.

The third research question, drawing on the qualitative data, was employed to explore evidence for each of the five marks of the fragile church discussed by Lawson (2019), given that the quantitative data only embraced two of the five marks. While only 18 of the 49 rural clergy participants responded to the open invitation to write about their experience of the pandemic in their own words, 159 of the 368 rural lay participants responded to this invitation, and 19 of them offered comments relevant to the fragile church hypothesis. The narrative emerging from these 19 lay participants supports and extends the conclusion emerging from the quantitative data. While some concern is expressed about *financial pressure*, more voices spoke about financial stability or growth. Concern was expressed about dwindling *human resource* and the inability to recruit replacements for those stepping down. Concern was also expressed about the failure to engage with *children and young people*, about *small and ageing congregations*, and about the *relentless nature of keeping going*. Lay people spoke of exhaustion and burnout. The 18 clergy participants appeared less worried than the lay participants about the fragility of the Church, with only one cleric offering a comment relevant to the fragile church hypothesis and two others proposing that the Church might emerge less fragile post pandemic.

The present study has provided a snapshot of responses to the fragile church hypothesis with The Episcopal Church (USA) at one point in time. These data could now become a reference point or bench mark against which future studies could be placed.

There are three clear limitations with the present study. The first limitation concerns the inadequacy of the measure employed to differentiate among four geographical areas, namely the forced-choice among: rural, town, suburban/exurban, and inner city. Differences within rurality itself are highly nuanced. However, given the number of participants within the current survey it is unlikely that more carefully nuanced descriptors would have been operationally useful. The second limitation concerns the low number of rural clergy participating in the survey: 49 rural clergy responded to the quantitative component of the survey and just 18 to the qualitative component. The third limitation concerns the way in which the quantitative component of the survey gave voice to only two of the five marks of fragility. In spite of these limitations, the present study has demonstrated the value of running the same survey at roughly the same time among Anglican clergy and laity on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy at York St John University (approval code: HRP-RS-AV-0240-01). All participants had to affirm they were 18 or over and given their informed consent by ticking a box that gave access to the rest of the survey.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1

Assessing the fragile church hypothesis in the USA

	Rural %	Town %	Sub/Ex %	Inner %
<i>Clergy</i>				
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	6	11	11	22
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	27	37	40	41
<i>Laity</i>				
Our church buildings will not be financially viable	10	10	12	10
Key lay people will step down and be difficult to replace	24	20	23	17

Note: Clergy = 412; Laity = 2,870