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Assessing the Personal Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Retired Clergy:

Listening to Their Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Like stipendiary and self-supporting clergy, retired clergy faced personal and professional challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to illuminate the personal impact of the pandemic, the project *Through the eyes of retired clergy* invited 30 retired Church of England clergy to document their experiences of the pandemic, and 24 accepted the invitation. The present paper analyses their responses and highlights five areas: the impact of the pandemic on physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and spiritual wellbeing; opportunities during the pandemic to exercise Christian ministry; Christian ministry received from others during the pandemic; things missed most during the pandemic; and gains during the pandemic. These findings lead to two main conclusions: concerning the significant contribution made to the ministry and mission of the Church by retired clergy during the pandemic; and concerning how retired clergy could have benefitted from greater recognition and support during the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19; retired clergy; wellbeing; pastoral care; mission and ministry

Introduction

According to the Research and Statistics report, *Ministry Statistics 2020* (Church of England, 2021), 'At the end of 2020 there were nearly 20,000 active clergy serving in the Church of England, around 7,000 of whom are likely retired clergy continuing to serve' (p. 2).

According to these headline figures retired clergy may be thought to comprise 35% of the parochial workforce. The precise figure is precarious for two reasons. First, the Church of England has no precise count of active retired clergy (a clear indication of their relative invisibility) and works on the assumption that most of the clergy identified as holding permission to officiate are 'retired clergy continuing to serve'. Second, the figure of 20,000 active clergy is a slight inflation on the precise total of 19,770, of which 2,010 clergy serve in extra-parochial appointments. The total of the parochial workforce is thus reduced to 17,760 of whom 7,670 are stipendiary clergy, 2,880 are self-supporting clergy, and 7,210 are clergy with permission to officiate. If 7,000 of these clergy holding permission to officiate are indeed 'retired clergy continuing to serve', they comprise 39% of the parochial workforce, or 2 in every 5 parochially engaged clergy. Despite the potentially important contribution that this considerable pool of retired clergy may be able to make to the overall provision of ordained ministry within the Church of England, little research has been invested in listening to this group.

In order to stimulate a greater research interest in the experiences and expectations of retired clergy, Neal and Francis (2020) invited 14 retired colleagues to publish their reflections. These reflections were published under the title, *A new lease of life?* Within that title the question mark is of considerable importance. For some clergy, retirement did indeed offer a new lease of life, but for others the experience was far from life-giving. To conclude this book on the experiences of retired clergy, Bishop David Walker reflected on the individual narratives and drew out important themes from which the Church of England

could possibly learn. In this chapter, Walker (2020) identified recurring issues that had made retirement difficult for some clergy, including: getting over the initial hurdle of retiring and coming to terms with loss of motivation, purpose and recognition; losing their familiar surroundings and social life; feeling banned from their previous parish and cut off from people with whom they had established deep pastoral relationships; facing financial constraints and downsizing to a smaller property; oscillating between being sometimes considered wise and helpful, and sometimes considered out-of-date and useless.

Almost immediately following the publication of *A new lease of life?*, all Anglican clergy (stipendiary, self-supporting, and retired) faced the unprecedented challenges of Covid-19. In England the government imposed a lockdown of the nation on 23 March 2020. The following day the Church of England imposed a lock-up of all its churches. Churches were closed completely, even for private prayer, and even for the clergy (see McGowan, 2020). Stipendiary, self-supporting, and retired clergy who were accustomed to seeing the parish church as the centre for their liturgical and pastoral ministry needed to discover a new way of life, new ways for delivering ministry and mission, new ways for engaging their congregations with liturgy and worship, and new ways for fulfilling the obligations and commitments of their vocation to ordained ministry.

While the first national lockdown was still in force, the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* was launched on 8 May 2020 in collaboration with the *Church Times*, and some Church of England dioceses to begin to assess the impact of the pandemic on clergy and laity (see for example, Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021). Drawing on these data, Francis and Village (2021) compared the attitudinal responses of retired clergy and stipendiary clergy toward the scope of the lockdown, toward closing church buildings, toward developing virtual church, and toward how the crisis might affect the Church in the long term. The data suggested some highly significant differences in the attitudinal responses of these two groups

of clergy, with overall findings suggesting that retired clergy were feeling less comfortable with the Church's response to the pandemic and more disaffected from the institutional Church.

Research question

The findings reported by Francis and Village (2021) raised a number of questions about the impact of the pandemic on retired clergy that the *Coronavirus, Church & You Survey* had not been designed to address. For that reason a follow-up survey was designed, *Through the eyes of retired clergy*. This survey followed the same approach as that employed by Neal and Francis (2020), this time specifically inviting retired clergy to reflect on their experience of the pandemic.

Method

Procedure

Tony Neal, himself a retired priest living within the Diocese of Truro, wrote during September 2021 to 30 retired priests personally known to him, inviting them to participate in the project. Of the 30 Church of England clergy invited, 24 accepted the invitation to participate. The invitation read as follows.

As retired clergy we are inviting you to reflect with us on your experience of the pandemic. We are offering you a small number of questions to open the reflection. We hope that you will wish to address these questions in a systematic way, and then open the canvass for your wider view on things.

1. What impact has the pandemic had on your physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and spiritual wellbeing?
2. What opportunities have you had during the pandemic to exercise Christian ministry?

3. What Christian ministry have you received from others?
4. What have you missed most during the pandemic?
5. What have you gained most during the pandemic?
6. How do you feel about the way in which the Churches have responded to the pandemic?
7. How do you see the future for the Church after the pandemic?

Participants

Of the 24 retired Church of England clergy who completed the questionnaire, 20 were male and four were female. The length of response varied with seven of the retired clergy using 400 words or less, 10 using between 400 to 1000 words, and seven using more than a 1000. The question eliciting most response concerned the impact on health and wellbeing (3,120 words), followed by questions on the future of the Church (3,034), opportunities to exercise ministry (2,546), the response of the Church during the pandemic (2,519), things missed (1,418), things gained (1,291), and ministry received from others (1,155). Three respondents added additional comments, including one of over 700 words.

Analysis

All the written responses were combined into one *Word* document and were subjected to content analysis. First, the answers to each question were grouped together. These were then read through several times to identify the key reflections being expressed. Retired clergy expressing similar views and opinions were then grouped together. The majority of responses were kept verbatim to allow the voice of the retired clergy to be heard. The analysis in the current paper focuses on the first five areas in terms of the personal impact of the pandemic on retired clergy. Responses to questions six and seven, concerning the response of the Churches to the pandemic and the future of the Church will be reported on in a subsequent

paper. To preserve anonymity each participant was assigned a unique number and differentiated by sex (M/F).

Results

Impact of the pandemic on wellbeing

While a small number of retired clergy mentioned the negative impact of the pandemic on their physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing, the majority of responses stated that the pandemic had made little difference to their health and wellbeing or had actually enhanced it. Where responses highlighted the negative impact on health and wellbeing these comments were often short one-line answers. In contrast, those who wrote positively of the benefits to their health and wellbeing did so in much more detail.

Physical wellbeing

The impact on the physical wellbeing of retired clergy was frequently described as ‘minimal’ (7M), ‘negligible’ (23M), ‘unaffected’ (12M), and as having ‘very little detrimental impact’ (22M).

The impact on my physical well-being has been minimal. We have managed a great deal of exercise and have had no physical problems. (7M)

Only two retired clergy mentioned the pandemic causing a reduction in physical fitness with one stating, ‘Though I have been out for walks I have not been out as frequently nor walked as far as I should have done’ (13M), and another commenting, ‘I think I feel older due to the pandemic - slower, achier!’ (5M). In contrast, the majority of retired clergy described how their physical wellbeing had improved. Many felt they were fitter and healthier than before the pandemic, with outdoor exercise and increased opportunity for walking often being the catalyst for this improvement.

Physically it has been a good time. The daily walk has been a real blessing in various ways but certainly physically ... With the pandemic I have for the first year of the restrictions been walking daily ... for an hour to an hour and a half. I'm sure I'm healthier as a result. (9M)

I enjoy walking ... This helped my physical and mental wellbeing. I took photos on my walks which developed into a sort of nature diary through the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 2020. (3M)

For other retired clergy, the opportunity to take life at a slower pace, to reduce workload, spend more time at home, and engage in leisure activities had contributed to enhanced physical wellbeing.

I loved the first lock down and spent the whole time in the garden and got fit and tanned.... I had been doing too much and taking too many services, so I was glad not to have to think about sermons as I was very fed up with the sound of my own voice. On the whole I got a lot done and felt good about it. (19F)

Some activities such as cycling and walking were enhanced by the lockdown's limitation of traffic. Gardening, photography and a return to painting continues to help maintain my physical fitness and mental health. (22M)

Indeed, for some retired clergy the social restrictions put in place because of the pandemic had, in their opinion, contributed to an improvement in physical health, since they had avoided contracting annual winter colds.

Physically, I kept well; probably better than usual as the lack of physical contact and the wearing of masks was probably responsible for a common cold free couple of years. (24F)

Mental wellbeing

The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of these retired clergy was reported as being only slightly more negatively affected than that reported for their physical health. In some instances, the pandemic had made pre-existing anxiety and depression worse. Moreover, for others it was the constant focus on the increased risk of the virus to the elderly that had caused most annoyance, with one clergywoman summing this up when she stated that this had left her feeling ‘grumpy’ (24F).

I am prone to free floating anxiety at the best of times but in company with so many I have been saddened and horrified by the suffering inflicted by the scourge of the plague which is still among us.... Hence, we have all in one sense been bereaved and there has been a marked lack of ‘joie de vivre’ everywhere leading many to silently turn to God and ask Him why he allows so much suffering. (14M)

Mentally ... I have changed. I have become an ‘old woman’ in the past two years – and at times, a ‘grumpy old woman’. Being unable to engage in normal activities and being continuously told that you are old, has had an effect. There has also been the

aspect of having to rebuild confidence in doing the things that used to be done such as going out and even driving any kind of distance. (24F)

It was the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the impact of continuing restrictions that were identified as particularly harmful to mental wellbeing. For some retired clergy the positivity they felt at the outset of the pandemic and during the summer months of the year diminished as time went on, and when restrictions continued into the winter months. Over time this had led to a reduction in confidence, impeding a return to pre-pandemic daily activities and events.

And yet towards the end of 2020 after 9 months of the pandemic restrictions I became aware of how much my life had been diminished by the pandemic, both socially and intellectually. I felt myself becoming more volatile emotionally. (9M)

The first lock-down was quite a novelty in the Spring of 2020.... There was an increase in the number of people riding horses, walking and cycling ... which gave us all an opportunity to stop and chat which was very welcome. The second lock-down was very different.... The wintry weather and darker mornings and evenings were harder to work with and some days were hard to get through, to stay cheerful, motivated and occupied. When the restrictions were lifted ... I was very wary of mixing with people, very nervous with a crowd of people and preferred to keep my distance or stay at home.... (21F)

The number of retired clergy reporting on the negative effect of the pandemic on their mental health was, however, outnumbered by those who stated that they had 'coped well' (13M),

that the impact was ‘minimal’ (7M), that they had remained ‘stable’ (1F). For the retired clergy who felt the impact of the pandemic on their mental health had been minimal the opportunity to focus on the ‘simple pleasures’ in life were highlighted. Also revealed was the view that those who had lived alone prior to the pandemic were able to draw upon previously developed resilience strategies for coping with loneliness and this helped them to get through the isolation forced on them at this time. For others, a focus on work and the opportunity to contribute to ministry sustained their mental wellbeing.

My mental well-being was pretty stable most of the time, better in sunny weather when I was able to get out and walk – long walks. I then felt inspired and invigorated. (1F)

Not much to be honest ... I live on my own and spend most of my time on my own anyway. Most days I am mostly out walking (for a time the walking was replaced by dancing round my flat). My walking (or dancing) time is time in which I repeat to myself, in a systematic way, the scripture I have committed to memory by setting it to music. (20M)

I've generally sustained a good level of mental wellbeing.... My vocation as a priest still gave me a good sense of purpose in these straitened circumstances, by sharing in the ministry in our local Benefice as part of the ministry team, fulfilling some support ministry in the diocese and also in writing.... I continued to connect with others virtually too, pastorally in the Benefice and in shared discussion and midweek worship. (9M)

Indeed, for one retired cleric the pandemic had been a time to ‘thrive’ mentally.

Mentally – I loved the quiet, the space, that beautiful Spring/Summer of endless outdoor days and gardening. Nature became such a friend and full of God. I missed the physical presence of family and friends, and the uncertainty with getting used to letting go of plans. But mainly I thrived mentally. I enjoyed the creative challenges of living simply and connecting with others in many different ways. (10F)

Spiritual wellbeing

When reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on their spiritual wellbeing only three retired clergy alluded to it having a negative impact. For one, his ‘personal prayer life ... was not improved by the necessity of being alone for long periods of time’ (13M), and for another, ‘Spiritually I have missed the stimulation of attending the Mass on Sunday morning which has been main encouragement to my faith for more than thirty years’ (23M).

Most of the responses describing the impact of the pandemic on spiritual wellbeing were positive. One retired clergyman stated that the pandemic had ‘added dimensions to spiritual wellbeing through a re-balancing of work/life (11M)’. For others it had been a time of enrichment to their worshipping life. There was a renewed focus on personal worship and opportunity to engage more fully with the daily offices (morning prayer, evening prayer and compline).

Spiritually this has been a good time. Thrown back on our own resources in the early months of the pandemic, my wife and I developed a shared time of daily prayer as well as Sunday worship. My own daily time of prayer and reflection centred on Morning Prayer has been greatly enriched by the study of each of the gospels, Luke,

John, Mark and now Matthew. My general reading too which has been diverse, has particularly stimulated me spiritually in reading some memoirs or biographies of people I've long admired. (9M)

Spiritually – It was perfect! I could let go of religious routines for the first time in my life – no church every Sunday, no guilt. God was everywhere and I discovered a multitude of nourishing material via the internet, and books, and zoom gatherings with friends. It was such a gift to have time to reassess faith and practice and reflect theologically. (10F)

One retired cleric, however, while noting the benefits to personal worship, highlighted the corresponding loss of communal worship and specifically the availability of Holy Communion.

Spiritually, initially it was like being on an extended retreat with plenty of uninterrupted time for prayer, reading and meditation but the lack of 'in person' communal worship weighed heavily. In many ways I was able to maintain links with a worshipping community, but it wasn't the same.... The absence of the Eucharist was especially difficult. (24F)

Opportunities during the pandemic to exercise Christian ministry

Many of the retired clergy continued to minister throughout the pandemic and lots of examples were given of the different ways in which they did this, including via phone calls, writing to people, one-to-one pastoral work, and video streaming worship. Lots of creative and detailed examples were given as to how engagement with ministry took place at this

time. The use of the outside space around church buildings was frequently mentioned as a place where parishioners were encouraged to meet and engage in worship and fellowship.

I have had good opportunity ... we soon set up a weekly mailing – online and by post (for those not on the internet) with the Sunday readings, a sermon and prayers.... I was one of those asked to contribute to the sermon rota. In July 2020 ... I was soon back then doing what I had done before the pandemic, leading worship and/or preaching twice or occasionally 3 times a month.... From the beginning of August 2020 for nearly 3 months we encouraged our congregation to gather after worship with their own coffee and deckchairs in our car park in socially distanced groups of six to talk together. (9M)

I worked with members of the wider village community in taking church to the outside of the building, providing beautiful arrangements in the porch and inviting people to tie things onto the rails and gates and trees for remembrance, and prayers. (10F)

I have taken services via zoom ... visited parishioners by taking a folding chair and sitting socially distanced outside their doors while they sat in the doorway.... (7M)

While the closure of churches had caused some concern, the move to worship using other communications tools (phone, internet) had provided a local, national, and international ‘reach’ to their work with people drawn in from ‘far flung places’ (12M).

I was ministering to a faithful congregation of about thirty folk, most of retirement age. Only about a third of these had email addresses ... I had previously used telephone conferencing ... so revisited the idea and [started] a Sunday 'Conference Communion' by telephone....With my wife at my side, we would lead a service, preach a short homily and then take bread and wine together, inviting others to join in the remembering with their own bread and wine, whilst stressing this was not consecrated ... the popularity of the event spread so that people from far flung places were regularly joining and I discovered how this was a valuable tool for the house bound. For much of the pandemic, about 50 to 60 people were joining each Sunday.... when we returned to Sunday service, we continued with a Wednesday 'Conference Communion' for the dozen or so people who were attending regularly by phone but were house bound by their health, not necessarily the pandemic. (12M)

I am fortunate to have a foot in two groups of parishes. In one I became part of a team delivering a creative range of online acts of worship, including Morning Prayer, and Sunday services, which brought in offerings from a wide range of people, some of whom would have never taken part in leading an in-church service. (10F)

Six of the retired clergy mentioned that they had been prevented from taking part in ministry and most were unhappy about this. Disappointment with the decisions taken at this time were linked to the perceived vulnerability of those over 70 to the virus, and directives given to them not to engage in direct ministry (a decision they disagreed with).

The blanket ban on clergy over 70 continuing to minister was hard to take although I can understand the concern the hierarchy had for this age group considering the

scientific evidence presented. However, I do feel that myself and others were able to make their own decision to stop or carry on in a limited way as indeed the younger clergy were allowed to do, taking into consideration their own health.... Not being able to make my own decision dented my self-esteem and confidence which only began to return when restrictions were eased and we were allowed back in the churches. (21F)

In the early stages of the pandemic during lockdown, being over 70 and not allowed to engage in public ministry, was extremely frustrating. However, I spent many hours on the telephone, keeping in touch with members of our congregations, especially those living on their own or experiencing particularly challenging situations. (24F)

In contrast, only one retired cleric was open in articulating that he had not taken on any additional ministry during the pandemic pointing out that for him, 'retirement' meant retirement!

I have done four services in two years - but I do not wish to exercise ministry in retirement except in emergencies. I did 42 years of full-time ministry and I believe retirement should be retirement. (5M)

Christian ministry received from others

When writing of the ministry received from others, several retired clergy mentioned the important contribution of family and friends.

I have been supported greatly by my large family who may not admit to being Christians but certainly live in the way of Christ in their love, care and consideration

for others. I have a wonderful priest friend and we have met once a week outdoors, even picnicking in the snow one day, to talk and listen to each other. (1F)

I have been in touch with various friends and relatives and received Christian ministry from them. (13M)

However, the majority of ministry received from others was identified by these retired clergy as fellowship arising from initiatives set up by fellow clergy and church groups including communication via phone calls and emails from both senior church figures and pastoral care staff, from parishioners, and from participation in online services. These initiatives were described as being highly valued.

Saturday Natterday is an initiative of.... This kept many people in his Parishes in touch and others also found the bulletins both useful and amusing at times. In particular, this kept me informed about these parishes where I occasionally help with services. (3M)

In our own church ... from the very beginning of the pandemic ... we set up a system of mutual care.... The ordinary member of our church who rang us weekly was always a delight. Zoom also enabled us to continue to function well as a Benefice ministry team with good mutual support. Wider support from the diocese was made available to us too. (9M)

We used the telephone method to meet for a weekly 'team meeting' to check in with each other in the team. The Area Dean used Zoom to hold fortnightly virtual Chapter

Meetings, again to check in with other colleagues. I would sometimes (but not that often) join other online worship services. (12M)

The availability of online services and other forms of church social media were frequently accessed and highlighted as beneficial tools for continuing to receive Christian ministry contributing to 'regular worship, prayer groups, and bible study' (18M).

I have benefitted from the opportunity (when our church was closed) to hear some online sermons, most of which were very thought-provoking and challenged some of my own preconceptions. (8M)

I attend the 10am Sunday service at Truro Cathedral (or sometimes the online version, which for a while was actually from the houses of staff-members, best of all from the dean's garden with a choir of songbirds). (20M)

However, five of the retired clergy stated that they had received either no ministry or inadequate ministry from others at this time, and this had left them feeling neglected.

Very little, especially from stipendiary clergy. Communication from 'The Church' seemed 'Spiritually institutional' – seeming lacking in knowledge of personal circumstances, thereby rather less than pastoral. (2M)

Very little apart from the fact that I was in hospital four times. The only ministry was from the Methodists through the hospital chaplain. (4M)

I have initially received telephone calls to ask if I have any practical needs but as I had none these ceased afterwards these no contact made with me for the remainder of the shutdown. (23M)

An alternative perspective was given by one retired cleric who, while recognising the ministry received from others in terms of the support provided by the local diocese and wider community (although not the local vicar!), took personal responsibility to seek out other sources of support. For this retired cleric that support was found within the field of literature and the arts.

Lots of amazing online ‘fellowship’ and teaching, ... Our Diocesan websites had regular messages from our Bishops. I had no contact from my vicar, but I didn’t expect to be a special category. I had wonderful support from Christians and those with no faith label. Christ came in many guises. Then there are always those who come through books and music and art across the miles and the centuries. (10F)

Things missed most during the pandemic

In-person contact and socialising with family and friends were the things missed most by these retired clergy and much dismay was expressed that during the pandemic special and long-planned events had needed to be cancelled. While it was acknowledged that the availability and use of technology had mitigated against some of the physical problems experienced in keeping in touch with others, it could not compensate fully for what had been missed in terms of the emotional connection made when meeting in person.

With a large family – with siblings, sons and a daughter, 10 grandchildren in different parts of the country and a wide network of friends – our life clearly diminished

socially. We had to cancel a number of short breaks to family and friends and cancel warmly anticipated holidays too. Though technology kept us in touch with others, it did not compensate ...for the warmth and interaction of meeting face to face. (9M)

Spending time in person with my family. We had doorstep chats with two sons and their families who live locally, and they often shopped for us, so we had a genuine purpose to drive to their front doors to pick up supplies. Our other son and his two children live overseas and not seeing them for eighteen months was about the worst privation of the pandemic for us. (12M)

Personally, I have missed social gatherings whether at church or elsewhere in bodies to which I belong as well as general entertaining or being entertained. Being married and forming a bubble with my daughter and grandson who live round the corner, I was not totally isolated, but we have missed our two sons and their families who live in the States and whom we had not seen for three years. (17M)

Within the church context, the closure of the church building, reduced opportunity for Christian fellowship, not being able to administer to the dying, being unable to receive Holy Communion, or to sing at church services were highlighted by nine of the retired clergy as things that were missed. For some, especially when engaging in worship, the online world could only partially compensate for what had been lost.

The fact that the churches were closed down was difficult and although we were lucky to be able to share in worship on zoom it wasn't the same as meeting in person

and being able to chat and mingle. However, these zoom services kept us in touch with one another and gave everyone a little bit of spiritual support. (21F)

I much resented that early on churches were locked so I could not go to my church and simply sit and pray and meditate – particularly when a friend had died. I did not join Zoom services which for me did not work. I have missed the Eucharist above everything else, and even when we can now go to church and receive the sacrament in one kind standing in our pew, I miss the full ‘communion’ of the giving of the peace, sharing in the common cup and kneeling at the altar next to whoever comes up, friend or stranger, someone I like or someone I don’t, which always brings home to me how important this service is and what it means to be part of the body of Christ. (17M)

What did I miss? The fellowship and being able to minister to the dying. The eucharist in a church building. (4M)

An alternative and theologically profound perspective was voiced by one of the retired clergywomen when she wrote:

I realise that I never missed Communion. Gradually everything became sacrament. A Christian friend told me, this week, that she has not taken communion for 2 years. I’m not suggesting ditching Holy Communion, but we need to share creative ways of reimagining inclusive transformative Eucharistic community. (v. filing up for a soggy wafer from behind a vizor!) (10F)

Gains during the pandemic

Only two of the retired clergy stated that they had gained nothing from the pandemic. In contrast, many wrote eloquently about what they had gained from the pandemic in terms of personal benefits to themselves and their families. They described having more time to engage in learning and leisure activities or to ponder on the bigger questions in life. They had developed a recognition of what they could live without and what was of most value. Here there was overlap with the positive outcomes already identified as associated with the impact of the pandemic on health and wellbeing. Retired clergy had learnt to say 'no' and to enjoy more fully other pleasures in life.

I did gain time to think, time to write, time to walk. I realised that before the pandemic I was committed to doing far too much in certain areas. I hope to be able to do less in those areas now 'rules' are relaxing. I may have learnt to say 'no' during the pandemic. (1F)

The capacity to slow down, structure more carefully activities that have been permitted. Become more disciplined in reading and creative reflection. (11M)

Perhaps the stimulation to re-think priorities, and the classic Who am I? What may I hope? What should I do? questions. (16M)

It sounds pious but the gift was time to simply be present, to practise presence. Valid opportunity to let go of routine commitments that it's hard to wriggle out of. To be creative with living sustainably and simply ... Exploring our immediate countryside. Space and the quiet. (10F)

Many retired clergy wrote about having a new appreciation for their family, friends, and of nature together with a commitment to be less complacent, and to not take these new gains for granted going forward. For example, one reported 'greater appreciation of familial relationships and close friendships' (11M), another noted that he was now 'actively looking for every chance to spend quality time with our sons and grandchildren' (12M), while three specifically mentioned getting 'to know my wife better' (4M), spending 'more time with my wife' (5M), or valuing 'the company of my wife' (8M).

I have obviously gained a greater appreciation of all the things I missed. In the first lockdown my wife I got up at 6 a.m. and went walking in the local nature park. It was superb weather and we saw Spring arrive. There was very little traffic on the ring road and one could hear the birdsong. We also saw various animals. It was a very special time and something we shall treasure always.... I think we also gained an appreciation of each other. (17M)

Above all a fresh appreciation of the natural world and of a simpler and more healthy lifestyle. We have become more embedded in our local coastal community, with stronger links with neighbours and local shops and amenities. We enjoy enormously the rich wildlife here with the birds and striking coastline.... these last 2 years of pandemic restrictions ... have helped me appreciate the life my wife and I share here more fully. (9M)

Several wrote about gains in terms of the opportunities the pandemic had provided to open up new ways to worship including the wider use of technology, and the greater engagement with and enrichment to personal faith and prayer.

I have gained a new extended understanding of my own identity as a priest, felt the importance of prayer and collegiality. (7M)

One of the joys of Zoom services was the gathering of all the congregations together and getting to know one another better in the small group coffee sessions afterwards.... Sadly, we are in danger of losing that 'togetherness' as we emerge from the pandemic and resume worship in every church every week. (21F)

Developing different perspectives on familiar events and places, e.g. Holy Week at home without the ceremonies during first lockdown was quite profound. Prayed the Eucharist at home. (22M)

Conclusion

Building on the methodology proposed by Neal and Francis (2020), the present study was designed to give voice to retired clergy, to listen to their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to assess the personal impact of the pandemic on them. Specifically, retired clergy were invited to address five questions. Analysis of their responses leads to the following five conclusions.

First, retired clergy wrote about the impact of the pandemic on their physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. Across all three areas, the majority of responses were positive. Retired clergy drew attention to improved physical wellbeing (resulting from more exercise, more outdoor activity, and less work-related stress) and to improved spiritual wellbeing (resulting from a better work-life balance and from enrichment in personal reading and devotional life). Even for mental wellbeing most responses were positive (reflecting the same

causes as for physical wellbeing). Negative impacts on mental wellbeing were related either to pre-existing diagnoses (anxiety or depression) or to anxieties generated by the pandemic (suffering of others and increased risks among the elderly). Overall, retired clergy displayed resilience.

Second, retired clergy wrote about their opportunities during the pandemic to exercise Christian ministry. Again, the majority of responses were positive and revealed creativity, imagination, and energy, finding ways to play an enriching part alongside stipendiary clergy in maintaining pastoral and liturgical ministries, adapting to new technologies where appropriate, and drawing on established forms of communication (telephone, the printed word, and socially distanced engagement). On the other hand, six of the 24 retired clergy drew attention to the fact that they had been prevented from carrying out ministry (not only had their churches been locked, but those over the age of 70 had been stood down from active ministry). They experienced unhappiness about this.

Third, retired clergy wrote about the Christian ministry received from others. Many had received most support from family and friends (with some drawing attention to how such ministry was received and welcomed from those who would not count themselves as Christians). Many also had received support from their congregations, from fellow clergy, and from the wider Church. On the other hand, five of the 24 retired clergy drew attention to the fact that they had received no or little support from the Church. They experienced a sense of neglect.

Fourth, retired clergy wrote about what they had missed most during the pandemic. Their responses reflected a mixture of personal and professional concerns. Personally, many missed social, and in-person contact with family and friends. At this stage in life two years without seeing children and grandchildren (especially those living overseas) was a privation. Professionally, many missed the familiar context of the local church (with church closure),

many missed the familiar opportunities to engage in fellowship and in-person worship, and for some sacramental deprivation weighed heavily. While welcoming opportunities offered by technology for keeping in contact with others and for sustaining a form of public worship, these innovations could not fully compensate for pre-pandemic life and pre-pandemic church.

Fifth, retired clergy wrote about what they had gained most during the pandemic. Faced with this question only two retired clergy said that they had gained nothing. Most reflected on the experience and drew from it positive benefits. Their responses to this question resonated with their responses to the question on wellbeing. Looking back, retired clergy spoke about the gains in terms of benefits to personal wellbeing and in terms of benefits to spiritual wellbeing. Overall, retired clergy displayed not only resilience, but positivity and optimism.

There are clear limitations with this small exploratory study. The 30 retired clergy invited to participate did not comprise a representative sample but reflected the personal contacts of one retired priest (Tony Neal). That six of those invited did not participate adds a further caution to generating from these findings. Similar studies among other groups of retired clergy are needed to test the replicability of these findings. Despite such limitations, two key messages emerge from these data. The first key message concerns the significant contribution made to the ministry and mission of the Church by retired clergy during the pandemic. Without this body of resilient, optimistic, positive, and responsive ageing clergy, the ministry and mission of the Church during the pandemic may have been weaker and less effective. The second key message concerns the kind of recognition and support that would have been welcomed by retired clergy and that may have increased the effectiveness of their contribution to the ministry and mission of the Church. Here is an agenda for further enquiry and further investigation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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