



# *Church of England Experiences of Distanced Church Amidst COVID-19*

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Church Army's Research Unit

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This report presents the findings of a mixed-methods research project investigating the ways in which engagement within the Church of England was modified by COVID-19. The primary sources were a survey of 607 people and focus groups/interviews with a total of 16 participants.**

### ONLINE CAN'T DO EVERYTHING

Online church did not function as a wholesale substitute for onsite church to the satisfaction of the majority. Experiences of Holy communion, corporate prayer and corporate worship were rated as 'worse' or 'much worse' by the majority, and most respondents reported more negative changes to experience than positive. We therefore recommend that online practises are used to supplement, rather than substitute, other forms of church life.

### ONLINE COMMUNION WAS RARELY EXPERIENCED AS COMMUNION

The overwhelming majority described their experience of holy communion as having worsened, with over half of respondents describing it as 'much worse' than it had been prior to the pandemic. Worshippers from more sacramental traditions questioned the validity of a digitally mediated sacrament, whilst others simply found it to be experientially inferior. There may be good reasons for online holy communion, but we do not advocate its practise in the absence of these.

### FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT WAS A LIFELINE FOR MANY

Respondents who engaged in onsite, face-to-face interaction with others were more likely to have had improved experiences of feeling loved, being encouraged, and praying corporately. Focus group participants described such interactions as a 'lifeline'. Now that the British government have removed the last of the legal restrictions, we recommend that churches make offline interaction safely accessible for the most vulnerable. In this sense, we affirm and echo the apostle Paul's eagerness, having been 'away... for a short time', to see his brothers and sisters 'face to face' (1 Thessalonians 2:17 NIV).





## EVEN ONLINE, IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE FACE-TO-FACE

Not all livestreams are created equal. Being able to see the faces of other participants during a livestream meant a higher likelihood of improvements to corporate prayer, corporate worship, and an ability to care for others in the congregation. It also helped to maintain a sense of belonging and feeling loved and encouraged. We recommend that churches scrutinise the digital platforms they use to ensure that they best serve those who make use of them.

## 'PICK 'N' MIX' CHURCH?

Anglican experiences of distanced church were incredibly varied – just as varied, in fact, as Anglicans themselves. Where local provision did not meet the requirements of local worshippers, some confessed to seeking services from other parishes or even other denominations. Could new digital options for worshippers exacerbate the existing fragmentation the Church of England?

## MARGINALISATION IN THE RETURN TO THE BUILDING

The return to the church building threatens to exclude the many worshippers who are still shielding from COVID-19. It also threatens to remarginalise those whose experience of distanced church preceded the pandemic. This latter group have had a more positive experience of distanced church during the pandemic than most. Having been formerly marginalised, will they be marginalised once more?

## THE EXCLUSION OF THE OLDEST AND POOREST

The poorest and the oldest are often the least well-equipped to engage online. They have been excluded from digital church provisions, and unable to participate in this and other similar research. Locally and nationally, great care must be taken to listen to their voices and provide for their needs.



# INTRODUCTION

**This report documents the findings of a mixed-methods research project investigating Anglican experiences of distanced church amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.**

## RESEARCH AIMS

This mixed-methods research project aimed to explain how experiences of engagement with Church of England churches were modified by the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, it sought to investigate the following questions:

- How and why did experiences of distanced church vary in quality between individuals?
- Did engagement with particular resources or platforms affect the quality of individuals' distanced church experiences?

## CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION

The period in which this research was carried out might be thought of as a season of frustrated anticipation; it was formally commissioned by Church Army in May 2021, during the second stage of the government's 'roadmap' out of the third lockdown. The analysis was completed in January 2022, when the Omicron variant had brought about a return to widespread working-from-home. Throughout this period, many worshippers have been awaiting the removal of the last of the coronavirus restrictions, so that church life might finally get 'back to normal'.

The precise meaning of 'back to normal', however, has been a subject of some contention. Some within the Church of England desire a wholesale return to pre-pandemic practises, whereas others advocate a 'new normal' in which online meetings are prominent. Within this diverse context, digitally mediated services have been viewed as a necessary evil, a silver bullet, and all manner of things in between.

As the Church discerns how best to serve God in this season, it is important to pay close attention to how worshippers have experienced distanced church and how they interpret those experiences. This research, which asked Anglican worshippers first-hand about what they have found helpful and what they have found frustrating, provides valuable insights to inform such an undertaking.



## RESEARCH CONTEXT

**Before describing in more detail our research methodology and findings, a brief review of existing publications relevant to the research topic now follows. The four reports detailed below are among the other major contributions to this emerging field. This project is distinct from existing work in that it used a mixed-methods approach to investigate individual experiences of church specifically within the Church of England.**

### CORONAVIRUS, CHURCH & YOU

As far as we are aware, the largest survey of British Christian experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic to date was York St John's *Coronavirus, Church & You*. This investigated how wellbeing during the pandemic had varied between churchgoers on the basis of age, tradition, ordination, self-isolation and gender. At the time of the publication of the preliminary results in June 2020, over 6000 respondents had completed the survey, 79% of whom were from the Church of England. Our research, which is focused on individual experiences of church, has yielded qualitative insight into the breadth of experience that can exist within a statistically distinct group of worshippers.

### LOCKDOWN DISCIPLES

*Lockdown Disciples* was a snap research project carried out by the St Peter's Saltley Trust. Data collection consisted of a survey of 165 people from across the UK, 57% of whom were Anglican. The survey took place between July and August 2020, and two follow-up focus groups in November 2020. Respondents were asked open-ended questions about their current experience of personal discipleship.

## BRITISH RITUAL INNOVATION UNDER COVID-19

The study of *British Ritual Innovation Under COVID-19* (BRIC-19) included a survey of 604 religious leaders and congregants about their experiences of rituals (including ‘regular worship’) during the pandemic. Data was collected between August and September 2021, and over a quarter of respondents were Anglican. BRIC-19’s findings highlighted the importance of the difference between live-streamed worship experiences (such as those broadcast via YouTube or Facebook Live) and those that were facilitated using conference-calling software (such as Zoom). Our research also found these experiences to be significantly different. BRIC-19 also reported a ‘serious experiential gap between clergy and laity’ regarding ritual within the Church of England. Our quantitative analysis has not reproduced that finding.

## CHURCH AT HOME 2020

The Church of England’s Research and Statistics unit surveyed 82% of all CoE churches to discern what ‘church at home’ services were being provided. Where we have grouped categories of service in similar ways, their findings are broadly similar to our own. *Church at Home* found that parishes in the most deprived 20% of all parishes were less likely to provide church at home; we found that individuals with home addresses in the most deprived 20% of the UK were more likely to have had worsened experiences in a number of areas of church life.





# METHODOLOGY

## DATA COLLECTION

There were two stages of data collection for this project: a survey of Church of England worshippers and a series of follow-up focus groups sampled from survey respondents.

The survey was open between June 24th and August 22nd, during which time respondents were recruited via invitations on Twitter, in diocesan mailouts and a short feature in the Church Times. Upon completion, respondents were invited to share the survey with their contacts via Twitter, email or by sharing a shortened weblink. At least 24% of survey responses came from invitations that previous respondents shared on Twitter. Respondents were also advised that alternative provisions could be made for persons wishing to complete the survey but who might struggle to access it online. This invitation led to a single hard-copy response being received by post.

The survey received a total of 722 responses, of which 607 were sufficiently complete for inclusion in analysis.

## DISTANCED CHURCH DEFINITION

Survey respondents were asked to answer questions relating to their 'most recent ongoing experience (during 2021) of church which did not generally feature face-to-face gatherings of more than six people'. Gatherings of six people or fewer were permitted within the definition of distanced church because this reflected the possibility of such gatherings taking place under the 'rule of six' that was in place for the first half of 2021.

The experiences that respondents described may have taken place at any time between January and August 2021. Some survey responses will therefore be retrospective, and some contemporaneous with collection.

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS WERE:

- 64% female; 35% male; 1% non-binary, agender or genderfluid
- 73% over 54 years old; 6% under 35 years old
- 98% white
- 20% ordained or ordinands; 23% licensed/recognised/authorised lay; 57% 'lay-lay'
- 12.5% shielding from coronavirus; 3% instructed to shield but did not
- 13.9% with long-term health conditions that satisfied the Equality Act Disability Definition

The use of church buildings for public worship was legally permitted in England throughout 2020. However, many churches decided not to facilitate onsite gatherings, and many individuals chose not to participate in them. In January 2021, more than half of the parishes in the Church of England chose to suspend onsite Sunday services<sup>1</sup>. There may be many CoE worshippers whose experience of church was not distanced in 2021, but these worshippers have not been included in this research.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Quantitative analysis was used to identify factors which may have affected changes to the quality of experiences of distanced church<sup>2</sup>. Where certain traits or experiences were found to be associated with changes to the quality of multiple areas of distanced church experience, focus groups were sampled from non-ordained respondents who shared these traits or experiences in order to better understand these dynamics. Invitations to focus groups were sent out in October 2021, and the groups took place in November. Table 1 details the focus groups which were planned and the number of people who took part in each. The statistical patterns identified are explained in more detail later in this report.

**Table 1: Planned focus groups**

Distinguishing variable	General change to distanced church experience	Focus group participants
Engagement with live-streamed Bible teaching without videoconferencing	Worse (compared to livestream with videoconferencing)	5
Engagement with live-streamed Bible teaching with videoconferencing	Better (compared to livestream without videoconferencing)	5
Some face-to-face engagement	Better	5
Previous experience of distanced church	Better	1 (Interview)
Residence in 20% most deprived areas of the UK	Worse	0 (cancelled due to lack of uptake)

<sup>1</sup> John McManus (January 22, 2021). Covid: Church of England services hit by pandemic. BBC News <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55693019>

<sup>2</sup> All associations between variables in this report were found to be significant using  $\alpha < 0.05$ . Unless otherwise specified, associations were tested using a  $X^2$  test of independence.



# FINDINGS

## 1. EXPERIENCES OF DISTANCED CHURCH VARIED, BUT OFTEN WORSENERD

In the quantitative survey, respondents were presented with a list of 17 areas of church experience and asked to rate the overall change in quality to each area during their most recent experience of distanced church. Most of the items in this list were chosen to reflect common practises and purposes of a traditional Anglican service. Some were chosen to reflect the broad levels of human need described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>3</sup>, in case some of these broader categories would resonate more with those who were still exploring Christian faith. Table 2 shows how responses were distributed for each item.

**Table 2: Changes to areas of church experience, from worst to least worst**

Area of church experience	Don't do/expect	Much worse	Worse	Same	Better	Much better
Holy communion	2%	51%	33%	11%	2%	1%
Worshipping God with others	0%	26%	38%	23%	9%	4%
Experiencing something beautiful	2%	28%	32%	24%	10%	4%
Praying with others	1%	20%	31%	27%	15%	7%
Caring for other people at church	1%	12%	35%	28%	19%	6%
Feeling a sense of belonging at church	0%	15%	29%	34%	14%	7%
Feeling loved by others at church	1%	10%	26%	41%	17%	5%
Being encouraged by others	1%	8%	27%	36%	20%	7%
Caring for others outside the church	1%	8%	26%	35%	22%	9%
Experiencing something bigger than myself	2%	6%	23%	42%	17%	9%
Growing into who I want to be	3%	6%	22%	42%	18%	7%
Feeling equipped to live a life that pleases God	1%	4%	19%	55%	14%	6%
Learning about God	0%	5%	17%	49%	19%	9%
Hearing from God	3%	3%	17%	55%	16%	5%
Confessing to God	2%	6%	12%	70%	6%	5%
Being reassured of God's forgiveness	1%	3%	11%	71%	11%	3%
Feeling loved by God	1%	2%	9%	64%	15%	9%

<sup>3</sup> Maslow's hierarchy divides human needs into broad ordered categories ranging from the physiological to the transcendent. Its psychological validity is disputed but is useful here as a simple way of distinguishing between different types of human need.

Some experiences, such as taking Holy Communion, were felt by the majority of respondents to have worsened. Others, such as feeling loved by God, were felt by the majority to have remained the same. Some areas of church experience were reported to have improved more often than worsened, and in some cases these differences were statistically significant: Experiences of feeling loved by God were more likely to improve than to worsen, as were experiences of learning about God.

Caring for others outside the church was the area of church life that respondents were most likely to report had improved, but the data do not suggest that it was any more likely to improve than to worsen. Experiences of this area of church were split relatively evenly between those that had improved, those that had worsened, and those that had remained the same.

The responses given by clergy for the above items were surprisingly similar to those given by lay people; the only difference for which we found evidence was that clergy were slightly more likely to feel that their experience of being 'equipped to live a life that pleases God' had improved.

The British Ritual Innovation Under COVID-19 report found a 'serious...gap' between lay and ordained experiences of ritual in the Church of England. We did not find a similar gap in high-level changes to experiences of church in general. However, we did find that ordained respondents were much more likely to take part in onsite, face-to-face expressions of holy communion. This difference in practise may explain some of the differences in experiences of ritual between ordained and lay Anglicans.

The overall pattern of changes varied between respondents. Among those respondents who gave an answer for every item on the list (n = 416), 64% reported that the majority of the changes they experienced had been negative, whereas only 32% reported that the majority of changes had been positive. Respondents were much more likely to have experienced exclusively negative changes than exclusively positive. These figures are shown in Figure 1.

### Figure 1: Distribution of changes across all respondents

#### Most respondents reported mostly or only negative changes

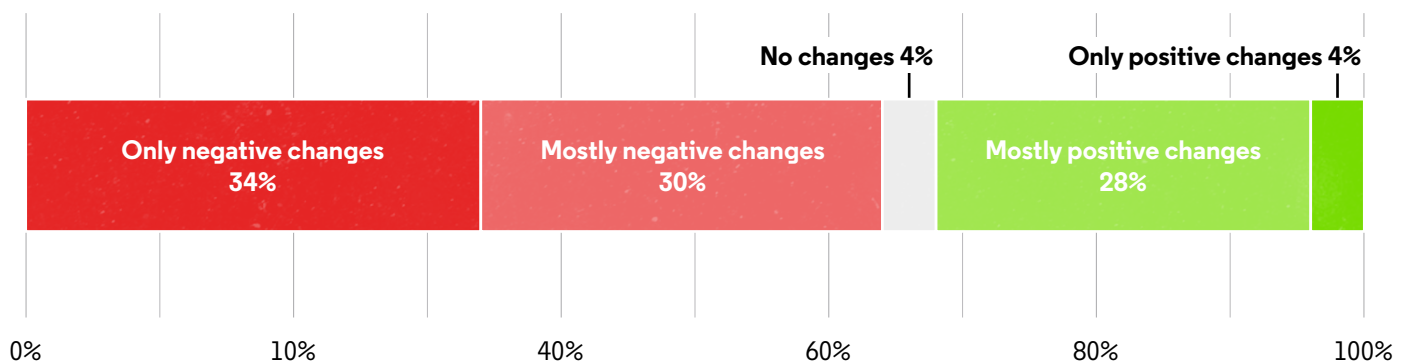




Figure 2 shows how the distribution of the number of improved and worsened experiences varied across this group.

**Figure 2: Distribution of changes to experience**

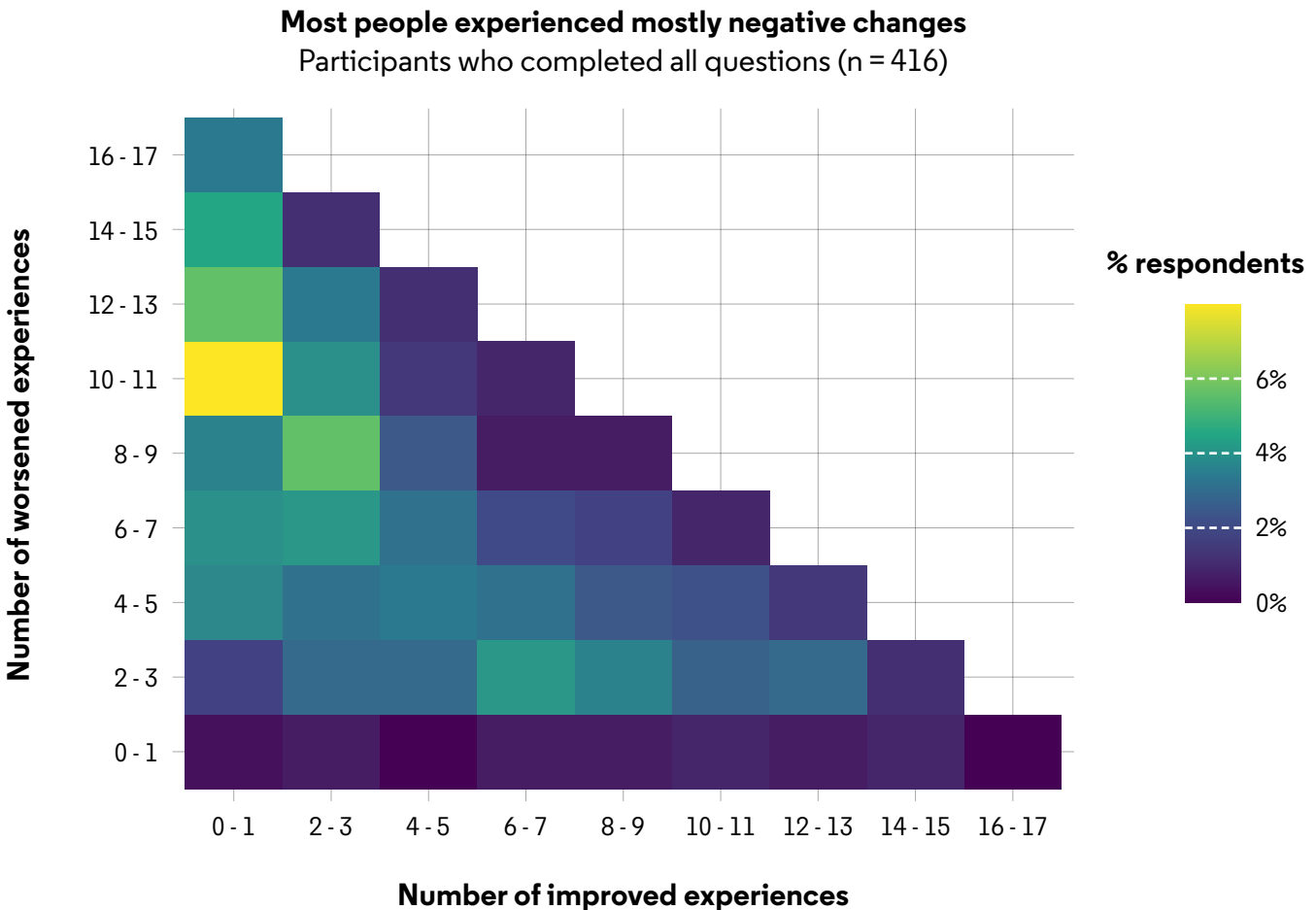


Figure 2 suggests the possibility of two groups of worshippers: a larger group for whom experiences were generally negative, and a smaller group who reported more positive than negative changes. It is also evident from the darker areas of the visualisation that there were very few people for whom all changes were positive or for whom all experiences remained the same.

Tallying these changes to experience is a useful but abstract exercise, since the 17 items are unique and describe a wide range of experiences of church. Our focus groups enabled us to better understand how these varied experiences expressed themselves in human terms.

## 2. MANY FACTORS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR VARIATIONS IN DISTANCED CHURCH EXPERIENCE

Focus group participants were grouped according to their belonging to a statistically distinct subsample, in the hope that focus groups might yield explanations for the statistical patterns found in the quantitative analysis. Over the course of the research, it became clear that the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative results was not straightforward. Respondents did not normally attribute the quality of their experience to a single, unifying variable, but rather explained it as the result of multiple intersecting factors related to their circumstances, networks, preconceptions, and disposition. The more prominent of these factors are outlined below.

### DIFFERING WIDER EXPERIENCES OF THE PANDEMIC

Differences in experience of distanced church were often inseparable from differences in the impact of the pandemic more generally upon each individual. This divergence of experience was concisely exemplified in an interaction between two participants in the same focus group: a lay-leader who explained that she and others had ‘grown in the Lord, because we have had time to... pray together, to study together’, and an NHS worker who described her experience as ‘almost the complete opposite’, and ‘the most horrendous, stressful, awful time’ of her life which had left her feeling ‘jealous that [other] people had time’.

Experiences of distanced church intersected with experiences of the pandemic to such an extent that at times they appeared inseparable. For example, where participants described the new social dynamics they encountered at online services, they did not make clear distinctions between the effects of the online medium and the effects of the pandemic itself upon group dynamics. They described the single, coherent experience of meeting online with a group of people who shared in the experience of adversity.

The need to self-isolate was another factor that could polarise experiences of the pandemic and of distanced church. The significance of pastoral care could be moderated for those who were self-isolating, so that shortcomings in this area were felt more keenly in the context of more urgent relational need. One participant explained that she felt most isolated during the return to face-to-face services in the second half of 2021:

*When lockdown started to be lifted – I’m vulnerable and shielding – I felt very marginalised. What challenged me most of all was a letter [that said] ‘Wasn’t it wonderful that we were all able to join together as a family last week?’ I found that very hurtful... I’ve never felt so marginalised by my own church.*





## EXPERIENCE OF CHURCH AND 'PERSONAL ECCLESIOLOGY'

There was a great diversity of ecclesiology between participants. The ecclesiological breadth within the Church of England is sufficiently vast that it seems appropriate to talk of the 'personal ecclesiology' of each Anglican. Personal ecclesiology was sometimes stated explicitly, and at other times only implied.

Each participant interpreted their experience of distanced church through their own personal ecclesiology. That is, a participant's opinion of the advantages and disadvantages of distanced church varied depending on their perception of what church ought to be.

This was most apparent in an interview with an individual whose personal ecclesiology emphasised the ways in which God was always at work to sustain Christians through the ministry of 'the ecclesia, the people of God inspired by the Holy Spirit', rather than exclusively through formal church gatherings:

*I've drawn upon my family and my friends and reading Christian theology and study and prayer and that's where my church has come from if you like.*

Not all participants explained their ecclesiology this explicitly, but in each focus group there emerged one or more themes that suggested particular understandings of church that were tacitly shared by some members of the group. For example, in the focus group of non-conferencing live-stream engagers, some participants complained of the 'amateurishness' of online provision, describing it as 'not a good performance' or suggesting that service providers ought to 'pull [their] socks up'. The emergence of this language between participants suggests a shared emphasis upon the need for services of sufficient quality in order for an optimal experience of church to take place, which in turn modified the quality of these participants' experiences of distanced church.

Survey respondents' experiences of distanced church were also influenced by the traditions of the churches at which they chose to engage:

- Respondents at churches of a charismatic tradition were more likely to report an improved experience of 'hearing from God'.
- Respondents at churches of an Anglo-Catholic tradition were more likely to report an improved experience of 'confessing to God wrong things I've done', but they were also more likely to report a worsened experience of this item.
- Respondents at churches of an evangelical tradition were more likely to report worsened experiences of 'being able to experience something beautiful at church'.

## PERSONAL DISPOSITION

Differences in experience of the pandemic intersected with differences in personal disposition to modify overall wellbeing. Some participants expressed less dependence on face-to-face interaction with others, and therefore a less negative (or even a positive) experience of lockdown.

*I'm rather a hermit anyway and I rather enjoyed lockdown. It might sound perverse but that was me.*

## TECHNOLOGICAL EXCLUSION: AGE

Online data collection methods have excluded the most technologically disadvantaged from participating in this research. Most other contemporary research projects on Christian experiences of the pandemic have been similarly limited, ironically constrained by the restrictions that they sought to examine.

Online focus groups were only attended by those who had the technological aptitude to do so. However, these groups featured multiple second-hand accounts of other congregation members who had been unable or reluctant to make use of online provisions, often because of their old age. One lay pioneer explained that most members of her parish church were “Eighty or above... none of them want to learn something new... they’ve given a resounding ‘no.’” This pattern accords with national statistics: in 2021 23% of UK citizens over the age of 64 did not use the internet at home.<sup>4</sup>

Older participants appear to have been excluded from the survey as well as the focus groups. The *Everyone Counts* diversity audit carried out by the CoE in 2014 found that 19% of Anglicans were over 75 years old,<sup>5</sup> but by a conservative estimate only 12% of the respondents to our survey were this old. In 2019, the Church of England’s annual Statistics for Mission report found that 33% of the Church of England’s total worshipping community were 70 years old and older, compared to only 26% in our sample. It is likely that those over 80 are even less well represented.

Childhood was another barrier to digital engagement. The previously mentioned pioneer explained that the “flock” she ministered to were “mostly children”, for whom “you cannot do an hour service” on Zoom. Our survey received no responses from anyone under the age of 18.



<sup>4</sup> Ofcom (April 2021). Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes Report [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/217834/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217834/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Archbishops’ Council, Research and Statistics, Central Secretariat (2015). *Everyone Counts Diversity Audit Key Findings*. [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/everyonecounts\\_keyfindings.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/everyonecounts_keyfindings.pdf)



## TECHNOLOGICAL EXCLUSION: DEPRIVATION

Another focus group participant – a commissioned Evangelist – described “technological poverty” as a barrier between himself and those he ministered to. Households in lower socio-economic groups are likely to have fewer online devices, and are more likely to access the internet using only a smartphone.<sup>6</sup> 14% of people in the lowest socio-economic groups in the UK do not use the internet at home.<sup>4</sup> There is no reliable data on the socio-economic backgrounds of CoE worshippers, so it is not possible to verify whether these groups were under or over-represented in our survey compared to the CoE. However less than 10% of survey respondents came from the most deprived 20% of UK neighbourhoods.

The Church of England’s *Church at Home 2020* report identified a weak effect whereby more deprived parishes were slightly less likely to offer ‘church at home’ provision. We analysed the experience of worshippers whose home addresses are in the most deprived 20% of UK neighbourhoods. We did not find a significant difference in the availability of online provisions for these respondents, but we did identify several negative changes to experience, which are tabulated in Table 3 in order of the strength of the association.

**Table 3: Associations between changes to experience and residence in most deprived UK quintile**

Experience	Change	Strength of association ( $\phi$ )
Being encouraged by others	More likely to have worsened	0.119
Learning about God	More likely to have worsened	0.117
Praying with others	More likely to have worsened	0.113
Connecting with something bigger than oneself	More likely to have worsened	0.111

On account of these negative changes to experience, we tried to set up a focus group of respondents from the most deprived 20% of UK neighbourhoods. This focus group, however, received no sign-ups, despite multiple invitations being sent to the fourteen eligible participants. At the time of writing, we are aware of no other research into the pandemic’s effect upon worship that has disaggregated individual worshippers by local area deprivation. The lack of qualitative data pertaining to the experiences of this group is an alarming gap in current knowledge that leaves open the possibility of the needs of the most deprived being neglected as a post-COVID Church takes shape.

<sup>4</sup> Ofcom (April 2021). Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes Report  
[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/217834/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217834/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ofcom (June 2021). Online Nation  
[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf)

### 3. ONLINE COMMUNION WAS A COMPROMISE FOR THE VAST MAJORITY

Distanced experiences of holy communion were noticeably worse for over 80% of respondents, and just over half of all respondents felt that their experience of communion had been ‘much worse’ than their previous experiences. Changes to the experience of communion were not found to vary by church tradition. Qualitative findings have explained some of this uniformity of worsening experience across traditions; generally, participants from more sacramental traditions perceived restricted forms of holy communion to be inauthentic, whereas other participants were sometimes frustrated by clerical constraints that they perceived as unnecessary.

Sadness at the felt inauthenticity of the restricted forms of communion was expressed in clear terms. One participant said of an act of ‘spiritual communion’ that she and her fellow worshippers simply ‘weren’t receiving the sacrament’.

For participants from less sacramental traditions, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing frustrations around the exclusively clerical celebration of holy communion, particularly when it was possible to meet others but not to take communion with them due to the lack of an ordained minister. One lay-pioneer asked: “If we ever get to that stage where we can just drop in, can we not just do a service in someone’s house? Can we not just do communion, which I really miss? I have a real problem that it has to be a [ordained minister] that breaks the bread.”

Another participant in the same group recounted that communion was ‘just not happening’ on account of the need of an ordained minister.

Even where the digital mediation of the sacrament was not felt to compromise its authenticity, it was implied to be experientially suboptimal. One participant, whose sacramental theology was that “God is just glad that people are worshipping him in whatever way makes them happy”, only went as far as saying she “would rather attempt it online than not doing it at all”.

The coronavirus restrictions have revealed many previously unrealised advantages of using digital media for worship, but these widespread reports of sacramental compromise suggest that online church does not currently function as a wholesale substitute for public worship to the satisfaction of the majority.

## 4. FACE-TO-FACE ENGAGEMENT INCREASED THE LIKELIHOOD OF IMPROVEMENTS IN RELATING TO OTHERS

Several respondents indicated that their experience of distanced church had involved one or more onsite 'face-to-face' interactions with others. These interactions included:

- Studying the Bible
- Taking communion
- Praying together
- Other face-to-face meetings

The language that ought to be used to describe interactions that are not mediated by digital technology can be controversial. In this report, we use 'face-to-face' to describe non-digital interactions because this is consistent with the language used in our survey, which was chosen for readability and accessibility.

### QUANTITATIVE PATTERNS

Respondents who had engaged with at least one of those provisions were more likely to report improvements to a number of experiences, which are listed in Table 4 in order of the strength of their association.

**Table 4: Associations between face-to-face engagement and various changes to experience**

Experience	Change	Strength of association ( $\phi$ )
Praying with other people	More likely to have improved	0.189
Feeling loved by others at church	More likely to have improved	0.179
Being encouraged by others	More likely to have improved	0.149

### QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

Participants who had engaged in face-to-face interaction described how they had come to view these interactions as precious and life-giving. More than one participant described face-to-face interaction as a 'lifeline'. This growing appreciation of others, alongside a more deliberate practise of engaging with them, might explain the increased likelihood within this group to have improved experiences of feeling loved and encouraged by others. What remains uncertain is whether these practices directly cause those changes, or whether the changes are experienced by individuals who are predisposed to engage in this way.

*I hadn't realised how much I needed to be with people.*

*I've learned not to take other people for granted.*



Several participants had met face-to-face with people in order to minister to them. These interactions were described as necessary in a general sense, rather than necessary only for the people receiving ministry:

*My salvation was finding ways to meet with people one-to-one... meeting people with mental health needs.*

*Why I had to do messy church in a bag – it meant I had to deliver them... so we kept contact with families. We had to do it – there was no choice... It was a face we would see every week – a lifeline.*

The experiences of improvements to corporate prayer found in the quantitative analysis were mirrored in qualitative descriptions from some participants. Interestingly, one participant described the success of an online prayer meeting as one of the things that had most surprised him. He explained that it “really functioned as a prayer meeting. It is still persisting.” Another participant explained that “prayer on the spot – on the phone, in the garden – has become the norm.”

The preciousness of face-to-face interaction was sometimes contrasted with the perceived lifelessness or inauthenticity of online expressions of worship. These shortcomings also extended to the restricted onsite gatherings that people had been experiencing in the Autumn of 2021:

*Zoom services were lifeless. When we got back into church it was still lifeless.*



## 5. THOSE WHO DID NOT SEE FACES ONLINE SUFFERED GREATER RELATIONAL LOSS

Those who could not see the faces of other participants online lost more relationally than other live-streamers. Conversely, those who could see one another's faces online had richer experiences of relating to others.

The majority of respondents indicated that they had engaged with live-streamed Bible teaching (e.g. sermons). Of these streamers, 14% said that they were not able to see the faces of other participants at online church meetings. Compared to other live-streamers, this group were significantly more likely to have had worsened experiences in several areas, all of which pertained to their relationships and interactions with other people. This accords with the British Ritual Innovation Under COVID-19's finding that 'worshippers tend to prefer forms of online worship that are more interactive (such as those done as conference call software) over those that deliver a 'better audio and visual quality'.

### QUANTITATIVE PATTERNS

Table 5 shows the areas of experience that were identified as having been modified by inclusion in this group.

**Table 5: Associations between non-conferencing live-streamers and various changes to experience**

Experience	Change	Strength of association ( $\phi$ )	Odds ratio <sup>7</sup>
Feeling loved by others	More likely to have worsened	0.265	-
Feeling a sense of belonging at church	More likely to have worsened	0.265	-
Being encouraged by others	More likely to have worsened	0.226	-
Praying with other people	Less likely to have improved	0.185	-
Caring for others at church	Less likely to have improved	0.127	-
Worshipping God with others	Less likely to have improved	-	0.362

<sup>7</sup> An odds ratio is an alternative measure of associations, provided in place of  $\phi$  where a fisher's exact test has been used because expected values would not allow for responsible use of a  $X^2$  test. The two figures are not comparable.

## QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS: EXPERIENCES OF NON- CONFERENCED LIVESTREAMING

A church's decision to host non-conferenced live-streamed services was sometimes one of practicality rather than principle. Participants cited poor bandwidth and the inability of the congregation to engage online as reasons for which churches chose not to offer conferenced services. One lay-pioneer said of her elderly, inherited congregation that they "didn't do anything online because they couldn't". She described disappointment at the limited provision available to these elderly congregants, and at her church's inability to engage with the question: "If they can't do online, what else can they do?"

*The bandwidth wasn't enough at church [for Zoom], so it became for my wife and I that we were watching a performance.*

Participants' experiences accorded with many of the quantitative patterns for this group; they had been disappointed by inadequate online provision, and sometimes wounded by poorly organised pastoral care.

Participants in this group were more willing than those in other groups to talk directly about the quality of church services, which they had frequently found to be inadequate. The language of 'amateurism' was used to describe services of distractingly low quality:

*I was looking for some sort of streaming, some sort of service where the people weren't amateurs. Too much amateurism and my blood pressure was going up and I wasn't worshipping... I had to look outside my own parish.*

*I could quite easily turn off YouTube, I could quite easily not go to anything because it was just amateur, you know? If you're going to do something like that then pull your socks up and at least do it well.*

The critique of 'amateurism' might imply an expectation of professionalism, and thus a model of the service as a well-curated liturgical experience facilitated by the clergy for the benefit of the laity. That is, liturgy as 'work for the people' rather than 'work of the people'. Whether this emphasis preceded the pandemic or not was unclear; it may have been a natural expectation arising from the constraints of the non-conferenced online medium.



The non-conferencing live-streamers we spoke to keenly understood the importance of pastoral care and had often found it to be inadequate. Because video-conferencing was not the norm, phone calls and home visits were depended upon for pastoral support. These were often poorly organised and inadequate:

*There was no system to how people were contacted in the parish, it was willy-nilly... people were saying 'Oh I wish my phone would stop ringing!'*

*[My wife said:] 'As someone who was shielding, there was no pastoral care whatsoever from church.'*

Having found services amateurish and pastoral care insufficient, participants in this group had often resorted to finding ways to engage online beyond their own parishes. One participant had found her own parish so challenging that she “had to go a lot further afield and to a different denomination”, and had been “surprised how easy it had been to find lots of other ways to feed myself”. These means of spiritual feeding included “a 15-minute mini-service, and I could do two or three a day and I could choose what time.” Another woman, who was shielding, began to watch live-streamed services from a church she had attended previously.

## FURTHER QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS: UNFORESEEN BENEFITS OF VIDEO-CONFERENCED MEETINGS

Several participants described how new, positive and unexpected dynamics had emerged from the practise of meeting online via video-conference. These included experiences of new relational directness, and of a softening of hierarchy in liturgy.

### **New relational directness online**

Two participants who had access to video-conferencing with other members of the congregation reported that it had interrupted existing social dynamics and brought new directness and vulnerability. One participant, a woman from an Anglo-Catholic parish, explained that “When we were on Zoom it was as if people were given the ‘OK’ to speak”, adding that “Zoom coffee allowed people to say things for the first time – to ask questions about worship.” Though she did not explain how precisely video-conferencing had enabled greater relational directness, she provided examples of speaking to people over Zoom who she “hardly knew before”, and having conversations about faith, which was “something that didn’t often happen”.



Another participant described a similar experience, which he linked not only to the online medium, but also to the critically formative context of the pandemic itself:

*Relationships are more authentic or direct. We're speaking to one another's needs more directly... we are having conversations about spiritual things in a practical and open way... We've all suffered to some extent... we have therefore had a common experience... that our faith has something to say about and that has probably cut through a lot of other stuff that was probably peripheral and transactional and formal.*

He experienced the purposefulness of video-conferencing in this context as an interruption to the tired social rituals that people were used to at onsite gatherings:

*If you feel that after each service you have to go and have coffee, then you have your five-minute coffee and then go and speak to somebody else. But in this situation people are talking to each other because they've got a real need to talk to each other. If somebody is ill... and needs somebody... to get them food... that's a different conversation from 'What kind of biscuit should I have?'*

It is unclear whether this new relational growth is predominantly the result of a shared formative experience or of a shared digital space. It may be that the combination of a global pandemic and a video-conferenced church service were necessary for these new dynamics to emerge.

### **A softening of liturgical hierarchy**

When liturgy was conducted via video-conference, it was found by some participants to be more rewarding in that it stimulated the participation of the congregation and minimised the centrality of the vicar. For example, one participant said of online Bible studies that:

*It all becomes a little bit more democratic in a way; you've actually got a voice, and an informed dissenting voice and an informed encouraging voice. It's less centred on the character of the vicar... which I find really rewarding and helpful.*



The unhelpful centrality of an ordained minister in liturgy is described by liturgist Gordon Lathrop as the ‘hierarchical distortion’ of liturgy, in which ‘the Christian conception of “church”’ is distorted to distinguish between ‘those who rule amid the sacred things, and those who are ruled.’<sup>8</sup> It is a distortion whereby lay participants in liturgy do not recognise the necessity of their participation in order for true liturgy to take place.

The experience of video calls as a more democratic church practise echoes Brian Cones’ reflections on the liturgical merits of conference calling, which he describes as ‘an improvement on the banks of forward-facing pews in our church building. Instead of the back of so many heads, we see a sea of faces—which casts in digital relief the idea that the church is simply people joined in common prayer and purpose.’<sup>9</sup> This sentiment is mirrored in the experience of another participant, who shared that she would:

*Hate it to go back to ‘as-it-was’, where everyone goes in, sits and listens and goes back out. But on Zoom there’s been discussion, feedback, we’ve had to make decisions and have our own thoughts.*

The experience of less hierarchical liturgy via video-conference is noteworthy, but it is not necessarily the inevitable consequence of using that medium. Reflecting on the above insights from Lathrop and Cones, liturgist Stephen Burns warns against the assumption that digital forms of church innately alleviate hierarchical distortion. In fact, the administrative privileges of those who moderate digital meetings carry their own clerical dangers, such as the policing of those to whom ‘the Zoom link’ is distributed, or the ease with which ‘the gallery gives way to speaker view’ on video-conference calls.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lathrop, Gordon (2009). *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (p. 182). 1517 Media; Fortress Press. ISBN 9780800696559

<sup>9</sup> Cones, Bryan (2020). *How Do We Gather Now? What We Have Lost—and Gained—through Virtual Worship*. *The Christian Century*, 137 (8). pp. 22-24. ISSN 0009-528

<sup>10</sup> Burns, Stephen (2021). *Worship in a Digital Age (What Makes Liturgy? The Key Elements) [Webinar]*. [Online]. Centre for Radical Christianity, 2022-10-02. Script available at: [http://www.crconline.org.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/Stephen%20Burns%20What%20Makes%20Liturgy%20-%20the%20key%20elements\\_3.pdf](http://www.crconline.org.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/Stephen%20Burns%20What%20Makes%20Liturgy%20-%20the%20key%20elements_3.pdf) (accessed 2022-01-24)



## 6. THOSE WITH PRIOR EXPERIENCE OF DISTANCED CHURCH WERE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE IMPROVED EXPERIENCES

6.8% of respondents said that the COVID-19 pandemic was not their first experience of distanced church. Respondents had previously engaged with distanced church for a multitude of reasons, which are listed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Reasons for prior engagement with distanced church**

Reason	Percentage of those who had engaged with distanced church previously	Percentage of all respondents
I found a specific distanced community that I wanted to be a part of	44%	2.3%
Other	44%	2.3%
I have a disability which makes it difficult to access church in a building	21%	1.1%
Many of my networks and relationships are non-local, so it's what I'm used to	18%	0.9%
I move between places, so I appreciate a community that's not bound by geography	12%	0.6%
Distanced church fits in better with my schedule	3%	0.2%

The most popular reasons for previous engagement with distanced church were finding a specific distanced church community and 'other' reasons outside of the options provided. Responses specified under the category of 'other' for this question were varied. Some of these are listed below:

- [I'm an] oblate of a religious community.
- Just interest. Many available online.
- I found an LGBT affirming church which wasn't available to me locally and which I was anxious about attending in person if it had been available
- I streamed services I led via Facebook
- Theologically I view church as being with fellow Christians; this is not constrained by place and networking is done by the Holy Spirit
- Facebook private group allowed sharing of prayer requests, Bible verses and encouragement during the week when everyone is working. Meetings in person on Sunday supplemented by online church in week.

## QUANTITATIVE PATTERNS

Respondents who had engaged with distanced church prior to the pandemic were a very distinct subgroup, with higher likelihoods of improvement across several areas of experience. They were the only group identified whose experience of ‘feeling loved by God’ was comparatively more likely to have improved. The distinct experiences of this group are listed in Table 7 in order of the strength of association.

**Table 7: Associations between previous engagement with distanced church and various changes to experience**

Experience	Change	Strength of association ( $\phi$ )	Odds ratio
Feeling equipped to live a life that pleases God	More likely to have improved	0.168	-
Feeling loved by God	More likely to have improved	0.148	-
Praying with other people	More likely to have improved	0.116	-
Feeling loved by other people at church	More likely to have improved	0.102	-
Being able to experience something beautiful at church	More likely to have improved	-	2.719

## QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS: RICK'S STORY

Though we originally sought to conduct a focus group for people with previous experience of distanced church, only one person was willing and able to participate. We therefore interviewed this person, who we have given the pseudonym ‘Rick’, instead. We summarise below some of the key insights emerging from Rick’s interview. However, the following account needs to be read with an awareness that, given the very small sample (just one person), it may not adequately represent the views of other people with previous experience of distanced church.

When talking about his previous experiences of a distanced expression of Church, Rick explained that, for him, ‘distanced church’ did not mean involvement with a specific congregation. Instead, it reflected a long-term personal emphasis on the importance of understanding his own Christian network as “the ecclesia, the people of God inspired by the Holy Spirit”. Or as Rick put it:

*God inspires and walks with us in everything we do. Communication is important in that process, and... the Holy Spirit almost oils the wheels of it, so if I'm communicating even on the telephone to somebody then that conversation is distanced church.*



Rick regularly attended church before the pandemic, but “found it a real struggle sometimes”. He was dissatisfied with the liturgical implication of “the priest acting as a conduit between you and God”, with a perceived disconnect between the church and the “everyday lives” of the congregation, and with the formal, transactional nature of the interactions between members of the congregation. For these reasons and others, Rick had “felt a bit of an outsider in the formal church”, and had developed a dependence on wider Christian networks for spiritual sustenance:

*I’ve drawn upon my family and my friends and reading Christian theology and study and prayer, and that’s where my church has come from if you like.*

Rick emphasised the positive aspects of online church meetings, which he felt were “more democratic” and relationally authentic than traditional forms. His experience of online services had been that they reduced the apparent centrality of the vicar within liturgy, and that they interrupted what he described as the “transactional formality” of relationships within church.





## CONCLUSION

This report has presented the findings of a mixed-methods research project exploring experiences of distanced church during the COVID-19 pandemic within the Church of England. As the previous sections of the report explain more fully, the study's main findings have included:

1. Experiences of distanced church varied, but often worsened.
2. Many factors were responsible for variations in distanced church experience, including wider experiences of the pandemic, personal ecclesiology, disposition, and access to technology.
3. Online communion was a compromise for the vast majority
4. Face-to-face engagement increased the likelihood of improvements in relating to others.
5. Those who did not see faces online suffered greater relational loss.
6. Those with prior experience of distanced church were more likely to have improved experiences.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Now that the last of the coronavirus restrictions have been removed, churches are still working to discern best practise in the 'new-normal' of a post-pandemic world. As those conversations take place, it is important to take seriously the experiences of Anglican worshippers, including those documented in this report. Having reflected on the study's findings, we offer the following suggestions, questions, and reflections in the hope of stimulating further prayerful reflection and discernment:

### **Online can't do everything**

For most people, online church did not function as a satisfactory wholesale substitute for onsite church. We therefore recommend that online practises are used to supplement, rather than substitute, church life.

### **Online communion is rarely experienced as communion**

As noted above, experiences of online communion were often particularly difficult. There may be good reasons for online holy communion, but we do not advocate its practise in the absence of these.



### The importance of face-to-face (offline and online)

Focus group participants told us that having onsite face-to-face interaction provided a valuable 'lifeline'. Now that the last legal restrictions have been removed, we recommend that churches make offline interaction safely accessible for the most vulnerable, mirroring the Apostle Paul's eagerness to see his brothers and sisters 'face to face' (1 Thessalonians 2:17 NIV).

Even online, face-to-face contact appears important to participants' emotional and spiritual wellbeing. In view of this, we recommend that churches review the digital platforms they use to ensure that they best serve those who engage.

### 'Pick 'n' mix' church?

We spoke to several Anglicans whose search for satisfactory online services took them beyond their own parish, or even outside the Church of England. Some supplemented local involvement with online provisions that were more convenient, better quality or more aligned to their preference for a particular tradition. Experiences like this raise important questions for the Church of England, the parish system, and individual churches. For example:

- How can churches resist a consumerist approach to church in a context where it might be easier than ever to pick a favourite flavour of church?
- How should pastoral responsibility be managed if attendance at multiple churches becomes more common?

### Marginalisation in the return to the building


The return to the church building threatens to exclude the many worshippers who are still shielding from COVID-19. It also threatens to remarginalise those whose experience of distanced church preceded the pandemic. Those with previous experience of distanced church were often 'on the margins' prior to the pandemic and have had a more positive experience of distanced church than most. Now that the last coronavirus restrictions have been lifted, will these worshippers be expected to return to the margins of church once more?

### The exclusion of the oldest and poorest

The poorest and the oldest are often the least well-equipped to engage online. They have been excluded from digital church provisions and are underrepresented within research that has been conducted online. Where churches continue to minister online, care must be taken to consider those who are less able to make use of these provisions. We also suggest better understanding of the experience of these groups should be a priority for further research.







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