British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19

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The final report of the project Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation Under COVID-19 (BRIC-19), funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/V008730/1). A joint research project of the Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Chester.

This report, and further information about the project, is available on its website https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk.

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29 September 2021

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Executive Summary

This report outlines the context, methods, data, and findings of the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project British Ritual Innovation under Covid-19 [BRIC-19]. The project ran from August 2020 to September 2021, with the aim of documenting and analysing changes to British communal religious life during the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, and of providing best practice recommendations for religious communities adapting their practice to address similar crisis situations in the future. Particular effort has been made to include data that reflects, to the extent possible, the geographic and religious diversity of Britain, by focussing on questions of religious practice rather than on theological questions or issues of belief which are specific to faith traditions. The full context of the project, along with a detailed discussion of the research methods used, is contained in the introduction.

The project comprised three key modes of research, each detailed in a separate chapter of this report:

1. A large-scale survey (n=604) of religious leaders and congregants about their experiences of rituals (regular worship, life-cycle events, and festivals) both before and during the pandemic. While survey participants were recruited via snowball sampling and thus ought not be interpreted as representative of the British population as a whole, this is easily the largest and most detailed survey available of Britons' experience of ritual during the pandemic, and demonstrates compelling and interesting patterns of experience.

2. Fifteen specific case studies—based on interviews, digital ethnography, social and broadcast media analysis, and related methods—investigating different communities or aspects of British religious and ritual life under the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. An action research group, consisting of clergy and allied professionals with practical experience conducting ritual work during the pandemic, who respond to, comment on, and contextualise the rest project, bridging the gap between researchers and professionals. Personal reflections from group members are included as part of this report.

The project team carried out a thematic analysis of the data gathered across all three modes, detailed in the fifth chapter of this report. The themes which emerged from this analysis were (a) perceptions of time in the pandemic (b) perceptions of the scale at which the pandemic was experienced, and at which pandemic response operated (c) the role of ritual in the creation and maintenance of communities, and the way that adaptations to ritual altered the boundaries of communities (d) issues of embodiment and the importance of physical space (e) shifting structures of authority and (f) tensions between continuity and change in pandemic response. This analysis, in turn, informed the conclusions presented in the final chapter of this report. Key findings include:

- By almost every metric, the experience of pandemic rituals have been worse than those that came before them. They are perceived as less meaningful, less communal, less spiritual, less effective, and so on.

- Human connection seems more important to congregants than technical quality or spectacle. 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 (such as streaming video).

- While the disembodied nature of online practice could make some rituals feel distant or inauthentic, the ability of worshippers to join communities far from their homes has nevertheless been perceived as a significant positive development that is likely to continue. This is especially for people with disabilities, for those who do not have a local congregation that serves their religious needs, or for members of faiths whose numbers in the UK are relatively small. However, the relative overall dissatisfaction with online worship suggests a limit to the potential of online-only communities. Some form of online-offline hybrid seems likely to be the way forward.

- Participants in larger communities found their experience of rituals during the pandemic to be significantly less positive than was the case for participants in smaller communities. This suggests that smaller communities were better able to maintain a sense of togetherness and mutual support through their rituals during this crisis, and that their convivial, small nature was a source of resilience rather than a weakness. We would urge those making decisions about the mergers and closures of communities to take this into account.

Social Distance, Digital Congregation: Introducing the Project

Practical Context

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 was the biggest single disruption to British society since the Second World War. In this, Britain was hardly unique. Across the world, to protect the public from the uncontrolled spread of an airborne, contagious virus that had the potential to–and did, in fact–kill millions, governments imposed a wide variety of restrictions on the movement and gathering of people, especially in indoor settings. While some countries were more aggressive with these 'social distancing' measures than others, very few were unaffected by them. For the sake of public health, people were required to stay home with few exceptions, to avoid public gatherings, to maintain a distance of a few meters from each other, and to wear face masks when some degree of social contact was necessary.

In the UK, these restrictions —sometimes tighter, sometimes looser—were imposed in some form from March 2020 until July 2021, though at the time, no one was sure how long they would last. During these sixteen months, many people in Britain experienced a degree of isolation that they never had before, and became reliant on digital means not just for work, but for nearly all forms of social engagement. At the same time, many of them were grieving the loss of family members, loved ones, colleagues, and community members; as of September 2021, nearly 136,000 have died from COVID-19 in the UK. This isolation, grief, and profound social upheaval meant that Britons, from a wide variety of backgrounds, turned to their religious traditions for a sense of comfort, a feeling of community, and an ability to give meaning, sense and order to times that seemed to lack these. The psychological and social need for religious life shot up.

In spite of the increased need for spiritual support, the same rules that limited social life in general also restricted the ability of religious communities to respond to these needs. Some public concessions helped, such as the designation of clergy as 'key workers' exempt from some restrictions, and the provision for outdoor funerals attended by a small handful of mourners. But these were quite minor, and did little to alter the fact that religious congregations could not congregate. While meditation and private prayer are important in many religious traditions, most religions do much of

their spiritual, psychological and social work through communal ritual. These rituals come in many forms: from weekly or daily regular worship that structures the passage of time, to festival rituals that mark out the year and recall the history of the faith and its members, to life-cycle rituals that carry a person through the transitions that structure their life from birth to death. While of course these rituals all work differently, for the vast majority of participants their efficacy depends on the affective experience of being part of a gathered community.

Because communal gathering was not possible during the pandemic, leaders of rituals had to improvise. An August 2020 analysis of Savanta ComRes polling by the digital theologies team at Durham University suggests that a quarter of British people have engaged in a form of online organised worship during lockdown, and that this figure jumps to almost a half for those aged between 18-34. This is an increase from 4 million to 19 million religious service interactions per month. This increase was also noted in the Church of England's 2020 Digital Report, which found a 40% increase in engagement with C o E and Church House Publishing apps and that, nationally, weekly online services were viewed almost 3 million times. This is in addition to 17,000 online services which were run by local churches, and 4,200 church leaders who attended some form of digital training, a fourfold increase from 2019. Though digital means were common, they were not the only ones used; working with the restrictions imposed, ritual leaders also developed adaptations, new practices, and a variety of supplementary techniques to respond to, or in some sense compensate for, that gap created by the lack of gathered community.

Some of these techniques were dramatic, some subtle. Some were more effective than others. Most grew out of a deep desire amongst ritual leaders to serve their communities' needs, but also out of passionate debates about what was appropriate, effective, and authentic. Many required ritual leaders to step outside of the practices with which they were experienced and fluent and embrace a way of working that they never had before. Cataloguing and analysing these adaptive techniques is the work of this project.

The very language of describing this project's subject matter, however, courts controversy. For some, the generic anthropological term 'ritual' was a poor description of the work their communities did together. For others, the issue was ritual change. One of the aspects that make rituals significant and effective is their invariance and adherence to tradition (Bell 1997). As such, the idea of 'ritual innovation' is hugely problematic for many ritual leaders, and they would reject that term outright. Many maintain that the adaptations they have made to their practices during the pandemic are not really about the rituals at all; rather, they are in the way those acts are framed, communicated, and presented. For some, the idea that they are doing anything that is fundamentally new is inaccurate and offensive.

Of course, we respect that, and we respect that there are many for whom important rituals either could be performed or they could not; there was no adaptive middle ground. But religious history also clearly demonstrates that the details of ritual practices and beliefs develop over centuries, sometimes more quickly than others. Whether or not these changes are fundamental to the core of a ritual or simply performative ephemera is a theological question that we do not address in this report. Clearly, some forms of religious change have happened, historically, and clearly, the current religious life of British communities under the pandemic was quite different from that which had come before. During the pandemic, religious change was happening before our eyes.

And, of course, it will happen again. While we all hope that we will not live through a similar pandemic, climate change and geopolitical instability mean that future crises, of some sort, are a long-term near certainty. More immediately, though, many of the developments and adaptations that have emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will outlive it. Some of the changes in how, for whom, and in what contexts rituals take place have opened up possibilities that will not easily be shut off. Some of them have been embraced by communities and have expanded what was seen as ordinary and possible. Some have also begun to factor into the difficult but always present challenges of the financial and organisational sustainability of religious life. While some of these adaptations may be embraced because of how welcome they are, practical concerns cannot be ignored, either.

Ritual adaptations under COVID-19 have been varied, as ritual itself is varied. In different contexts, ritual does its work differently, and the adaptations that we have observed in this study suggest different things about the nature and social function of ritual, and of religious community itself in 21st century Britain. This report explores the many varied contexts in which ritual adaptation has taken place in response to the pandemic, and what such adaptations might tell us about the changing religious landscape in Britain.

Academic Context

This is far from the only academic study of religious activity during the COVID-19 pandemic; the research in this report has been conducted in parallel with a number of other studies. Very early on in the pandemic, Heidi Campbell's The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online (2020) appeared, collecting reflections from thirty religious and digital practitioners on the sudden shift to online worship. While Campbell's contributors were mostly (though not exclusively) American, this collection nonetheless provided a valuable point of reference and vital reassurance that practitioners facing similar issues in different geographic contexts were not doing so alone—a theme which this project has endeavoured to carry forward through initiatives such as the action research group, which we discuss in greater detail below. Campbell has continued to publish similar collections through the pandemic period, providing valuable snapshots of attitudes towards digital worship at particular moments in time.

The Churches Online in Times of Corona (CONTOC) project collected data in April and May of 2020, from over six thousand church leaders, primarily in Germany. Early findings indicate that, while church leaders were encouraged by working with digital media, they lacked digital skills (90% asked for more training). Even so, a majority also said they would continue to do a form of digital worship in the future, while they were also pleasantly surprised by the reach and numbers of those engaging their services. These findings are broadly consistent with the findings of this project.

Gladys Ganiel's May 2020 report "People Still Need Us: A Report on a Survey of Faith Leaders on the Island of Ireland During the Covid-19 Pandemic" similarly found a significant increase in the online presence of Irish churches during the early stages of the pandemic, with a decline from 31% to 7% of those providing no online form of community activity or worship during the pandemic (p. 19), 70% planning to retain some online worship (p. 21), a reduction from 44% to 13% of churches who have no one responsible for the church's online presence (p. 17), and 71% of churches providing some 'other' form of online presence (prayer groups, bible study, pastoral work, youth groups etc, p. 19) during the crisis. The report also recounts the proportion of religious leaders receiving some kind of support for their online work (p. 20, 21), though the variation here is in part dependent on the divergence in online provisions between different traditions before the pandemic began; for example, before the pandemic 43% of Catholic churches were already livestreaming and the Church of Ireland were livestreaming only 5% of the time (p. 17). Towards the end of the report, there are some other reflections on online services drawn from the survey, with religious leaders noting a question about how to retain attention of those who move through content quickly online (p. 38), an increase in theological accountability for those leading online (p. 38, 39), the difficulty of competing with other online voices (p. 38/39), some leaders feeling their traditional pastoral skills do not translate well into the online environment (p. 28). A number of religious leaders have also taken comfort from the apparent accessibility and reach of their online provisions (p. 29-30).

The majority of research published on religion during the pandemic has focussed on Christian communities. With few exceptions (e.g. Al-Astewani 2021; Hassan et al. 2021) most work on minority religious communities and COVID-19 has been concerned with community spread (in the early stages of the pandemic) and vaccine hesitancy (in more recent months). This project has attempted to fill these gaps in knowledge.

Research Methods and Types of Data Produced

The primary aim of this project has been to capture a broad range of evidence about how religion has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic; the secondary aims of the project have related to analysis of this evidence and the formulation of recommendations for religious communities going forward. To that end, the project has consisted of three main research approaches.

First, an **online survey** was conducted from September 2020 to May 2021. This survey solicited responses from 604 religious leaders and congregants about their experiences of rituals (regular worship, life-cycle events, and festivals) both before and during the pandemic. Survey participants were recruited via snowball sampling, with the assistance of our project partners (Council of Christians and Jews, Interfaith Scotland, and the Faith and Belief Forum). Due to this sampling method, the survey data should not be interpreted as representative of the British population as a whole. However, it is easily the largest and most detailed survey available of Britons' experience of ritual during the pandemic, and both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the survey results demonstrate compelling and interesting patterns of experience. A detailed discussion of the survey results can be found in Chapter 2 of this report.

Second, the research team produced 15 **case studies** which investigated different communities or aspects of British religious and ritual life during the COVID-19 pandemic. These case studies were selected with a view to (i) gathering data on communities and practices which were poorly represented in the survey (a-h) and

(ii) exploring particular forms of practice in greater depth than was possible within the constraints of the online survey (i-o). The case studies are:

a. Online Navaratri: Red Lotus Events
b. Black-Majority Churches and their adaptations
c. Alcoholics Anonymous
d. Inclusive Church and Technology
e. Orthodox Jewish online women's prayer groups
f. Buddhist Temple, London
g. Green Lane Mosque, Birmingham
h. Local and Global Catholicism
i. Virtual pilgrimage
j. The British Pilgrimage Trust
k. Chaplaincy under COVID-19
l. Enabling Death Care
m. Digital Memorialisation
n. Remembrance Sunday
o. Ritual Tech Support

The methods utilised in each case study were adapted for the particular circumstances of the study, and are described in the individual case study reports. These methods were generally a combination of interview, participant-observation, digital ethnography, and social and broadcast media analysis. Detailed summaries of each case study can be found in Chapter 3 of this report.

Finally, the project convened an **action research group**. This diverse group of professionals with practical experience conducting ritual work during the pandemic responded to, commented on, and helped the project team to contextualise research findings. Because the need for effective ritual is not tied directly to any particular theology or geographic location, members of the group from very different backgrounds were able to offer each other practical advice and support as they each navigated the challenges of facilitating ritual under pandemic restrictions. The action research group met online once a month from January to August 2021, and reflections from group members are included in Chapter 4 of this report.

Leader and Participant Survey Findings

Background and Methods

To begin to get a sense of what the engagement with ritual felt like across the UK during the pandemic, we conducted a broad survey of both those who led rituals and those who participated in them. The survey, which was conducted online, asked participants about their experiences of engaging with ritual both before the pandemic and during it. It asked about the challenges, discoveries, and frustrations of this engagement, as well as the techniques and tools they (and their communities) used to get through this. We also asked demographic and contextual questions about themselves and their community (size, faith, location, attendance patterns, etc.).

Our purpose in running this survey was twofold. First, of course, we aimed to gather as broad a range as possible of data on how the pandemic had impacted religious life in Britain. While a virus itself does not discriminate and the social distancing measures imposed impacted all of the UK (though, of course, they differed between the four British nations), the social, economic and cultural contexts in which people responded to them were vastly different. Our desire to collect as diverse a group of survey respondents as possible did not come simply from an ideological desire to act inclusively; it is a research imperative. Our research aim is to understand the full range of possibilities that British religious communities had in responding to the pandemic in their ritual lives. Therefore, we needed to reach out to as broad a range of communities as possible to understand the scope of those possibilities. The broader our data, the more useful it can be.

But second, as the project developed, we realised that the survey data, both quantitative and qualitative, could not properly convey the depth to which religious experience has been challenged by the pandemic. And so the central focus of the project shifted from the survey to the case studies. The survey then became a tool with which to solicit stories and contact with people who had done the difficult work of adapting their ritual practices to the context of the pandemic, to provide examples for our case studies and participants in our action research group. In this, we were looking for particular examples. The number and breadth of the case studies below is due in no small part to this effort.

Our outreach efforts here were greatly aided by our collaborative partners, including the Council of Christians and Jews, Interfaith Scotland, and the Faith and Belief Forum, as well as a great many faith, denominational and community groups who shared word of the survey. While we are happy with the final number of respondents (604), this method of social-media-facilitated snowball sampling means that we cannot (and do not) claim that our survey respondents are a representative sample of the British population as a whole. Indeed, there are some demographic groups which are notably

underrepresented: Hindu and Muslim communities from across Britain, and, to a lesser extent, younger people (those under 40). These caveats are important, and we would caution those working with these communities in particular to treat our statistical data as perhaps of less than direct applicability.

Conducting surveys during the pandemic has been challenging for researchers in all fields. The proliferation of surveys and studies of pandemic life from both academic, governmental, and commercial sources has led to considerable survey fatigue and an understandable distrust of online data sharing. In addition, in many communities, the details of religious life are to be kept within that community, and sharing this sensitive information with an unknown academic outsider, even anonymously, is difficult. For communities historically and justifiably distrustful of governmental data probing, the pandemic has created additional anxieties regarding profiling and prejudicial social management. It is harder for any academic project to posit the nuances of difference between academic enterprise for the public good and governance in this context. As an emergency funded COVID-19 impact project, with project timescales of 10 months, we could not build the solid relationships that would have benefitted this research and overcome these hurdles. Despite them, however, the current project contains the largest UK survey of the experiences of making and participating in religious rituals that we know of, in the pandemic or at another time.

The survey used a mix of free-text and multiple choice questions to capture the experience of ritual. The central question, the results of which frame much of this section, asked our respondents to judge their experience of ritual both before and during the pandemic on a matrix of adjectives (an image of this question appears as Figure 1, on the next page).

This method allowed us to quantify the collective subjective experiences of our respondents and see how they correlated both internally (that is, say, if those who said their experience was more communal also said it was more participatory) and with demographic and contextual information. The answer to this question—and, especially, the differences in experience between pre-pandemic and pandemic rituals—provide the bulk of the quantitative data presented in this chapter; they are supplemented with qualitative responses provided by the survey respondents which helped us contextualise and explain that data. We draw on that quantitative data both here and in our final chapter.

The survey was conducted online, and all participants were offered full anonymity. It remained open from 21 September 2020 to 30 May 2021 (though the vast majority of respondents completed the survey before January 2021). During this time, restrictions on social gatherings meant that most religious assemblies were either banned or severely restricted. These restrictions had first been imposed in March 2020, and so by the time of the survey, most communities had some practice dealing with restrictions, and they were not new to regular worshippers.

The survey asked about three kinds of rituals: regular rituals (ie, weekly or daily worship services), festival rituals (which marked or commemorated special or annual events), and life cycle rituals (such as funerals, weddings, baptisms, and coming-of-age ceremonies). With the exception the information on funerals, which fed into our death care and memorialisation case studies (see p. 70ff and 73ff), the vast majority of the useful data we received was on regular rituals, and that is the area this report will focus on. (In most cases, figures for the other categories of rituals were either quite similar to those for regular rituals or so few people completed them that we cannot have confidence in the findings; we do not see a clear pattern of difference between regular and festival rituals, as such, though many respondents referred to festivals in their free text comments.)

This survey was conducted by the BRIC-19 team as a whole. Particular thanks go to Dr Jennie Bailey for her help in setting up the survey and Dr David Lowe for his help in analysing the data. Because the survey was quite complex, and each question can be broken down on the basis of others, this data set presents many analytical possibilities, not all of which are useful or meaningful.

In this report, we present only a selection of those findings where we have reasonable confidence that our data is explicable, robust, and interesting enough to be of relevance. We conducted additional analyses that were not as fruitful and are thus not presented here. In addition, the breadth and robustness of this data set means that it would benefit from further analysis, which we hope to perform in the months to come.

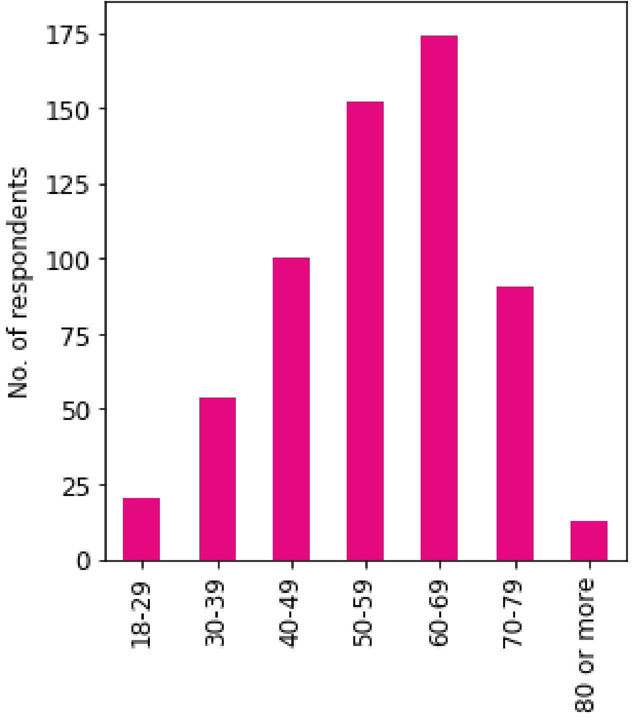
Sample

Our overall sample size was 604 people. Of these, 59.8% were female, 38% were male and 2.2% were non-binary. Just over a third of them (214, 35.4%) were clergy and other leaders of religious rituals; the remaining two thirds (390, 64.6%) were participants or congregants in them. Though we were interested in both groups, their experiences were different enough that we split the survey so that we could ask slightly different questions of each of the groups.

Below is a list of adjectives that some people have associated with the experience of ritual. For each of them, we'd like you to tell us to what extent you think that the *regular rituals* that you led, both *before* and *during* the pandemic and lockdown, could be characterised by that word (e.g., "I thought this ritual was well-attended"). For each term, please tick one box for your community's rituals *before* the pandemic and one for your community's rituals during the pandemic.

	Rituals **before** the pandemic from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent)					Rituals **during** the pandemic from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent)				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Well attended?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Communal?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effective?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Identity-building?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Traditional?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Formal?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Rule-adhering?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Participatory?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Meaningful?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Inspiring?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sacred?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Spiritual?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Musical?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Comforting?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Entertaining?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Frustrating?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Intellectually stimulating?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Morally edifying?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Figure 1. An example of the 'matrix question' used on the survey. The wording was slightly different for leaders and participants.



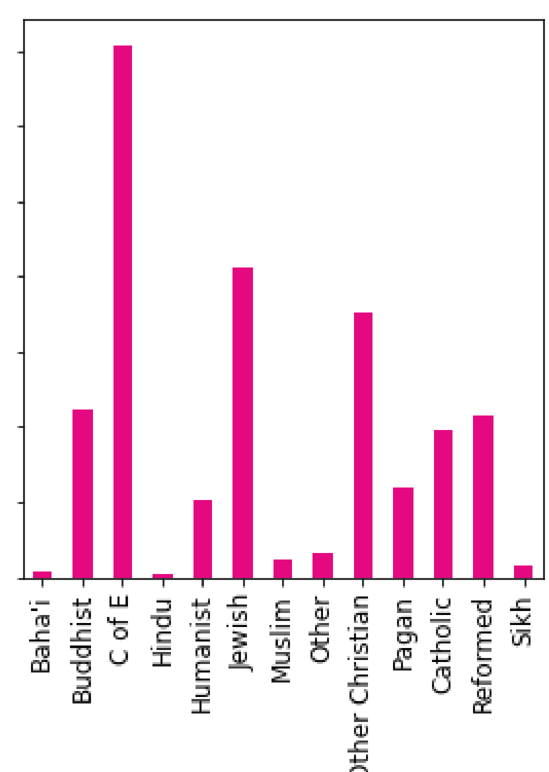


Figure 2. Breakdown of survey respondents by age and religious tradition.

Respondents came from all around the UK, with the largest groups coming from Greater London (17.2% of participants and 10.3% of leaders), South East England (8.2% and 17.3%, respectively) and North West England (16.2% and 14.5%). There were small but broadly proportional representations from Wales (1.8 and 5.1%), Scotland (9.5% and 7%) and Northern Ireland (5.1% and 2.3%). Respondents were roughly evenly mixed between rural, town, and city environments, with 27% of participants saying that their communities were located in a small town and 29% saying they were located in a major city.

The age breakdown was as depicted in Figure 2; notably, over half of our respondents were in their 50s and 60s. While this might reflect typical religious participants, it is noticeably older than the UK as a whole, where the median age is 40.4. (This may not be as skewed as it appears; our survey did not target or accept responses from those under 18 for ethical reasons, but of course, the calculation of the UK median age includes children.) The religious breakdown is also depicted in Figure 2.[1] The under-representation of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities is noticable, as is the (relative) overrepresentation of Jews, Pagans, and Buddhists. We speculate this is due to the existing academic networks of the BRIC-19 team which were used initially for snowball sampling.

1 This multiple choice question simply listed ‘Christian’ as an option; we have broken this data down into different Christian groups based on a free-text answer as to which “denomination, church, or movement of the above religion” respondents locate themselves in.

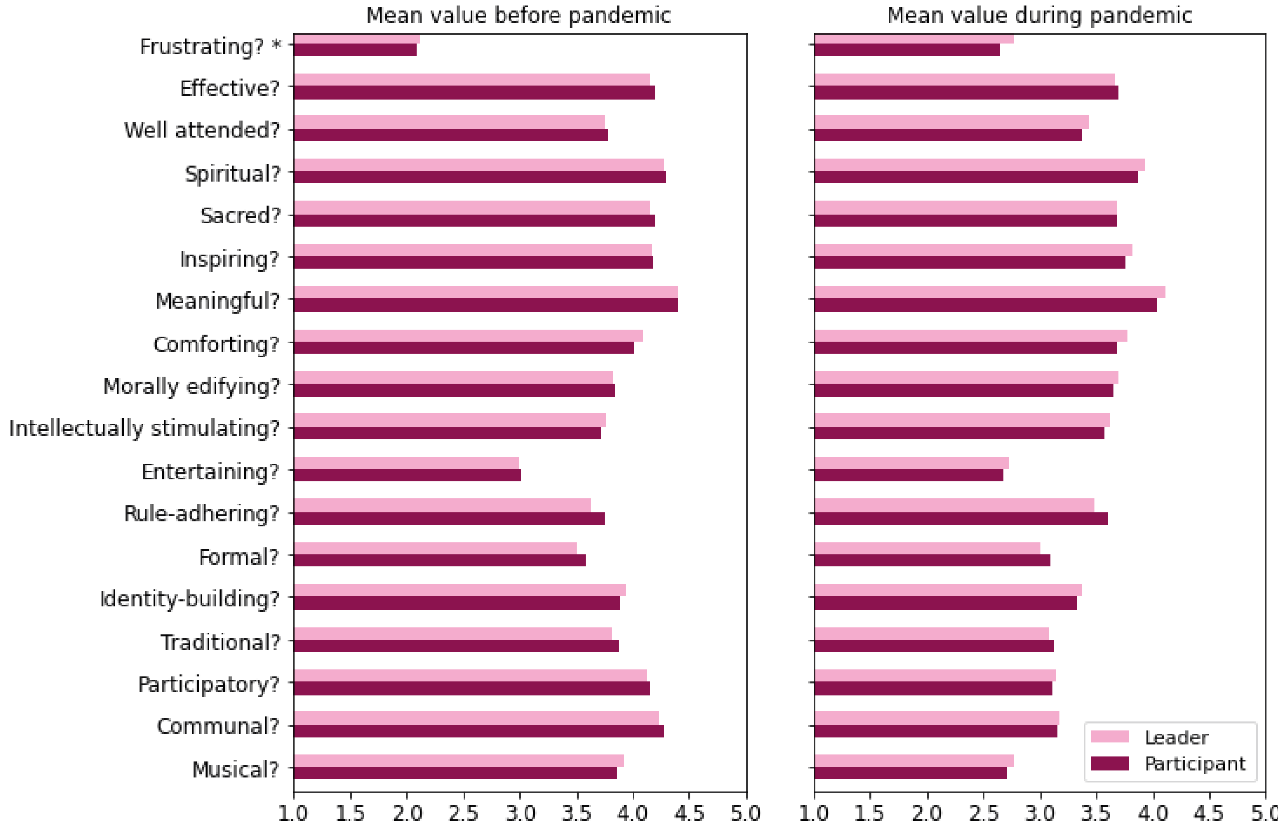


Figure 3. Respondent's reported experience of ritual on 18 criteria

Overall Experiences of Leaders and Participants

In Figure 3, you can see our respondents' reported experience of rituals both before and during the pandemic on 18 criteria, on a five-point scale. We would caution skepticism about reading too much into the absolute value of these numbers; while it may be interesting that both leaders and participants seem to think of rituals as more meaningful than morally edifying, this difference may reflect more about the connotations of those terms than about the experiences being described. What is more useful is to examine the change in these measures between pre- and mid-pandemic rituals.

Almost universally, pandemic rituals were seen as worse than those conducted beforehand, but this method of asking about many different aspects of the ritual experience allows us to be considerably more specific about how these experiences changed. These changes are shown more clearly in Figure 4 (see next page). In this chart, you see the degree to which ritual evaluation fell from before to during the pandemic. The left-hand (light pink) bars refer to participants, and the right hand (dark pink) bars refer to leaders. For clarity, we have inverted the bar for the term 'frustrating' here and in each subsequent chart - it is drawn downward instead of upward so that it can be compared to others. Our data found that both participants and leaders found pandemic rituals more frustrating than those conducted beforehand. As 'frustrating' was the one negative criteria we asked about, it is the one criteria for which the metric went up.

As is clear from Figure 4, while the experience of ritual did drop in almost every category, it did not do so evenly. The criteria which relate more directly to the sense of taking part in making rituals together are the ones that fell the most. This includes the terms 'communal' and 'participatory,' of course, but the term 'musical' should also be placed into this category. In interviews and free text comments, many participants noted how much they

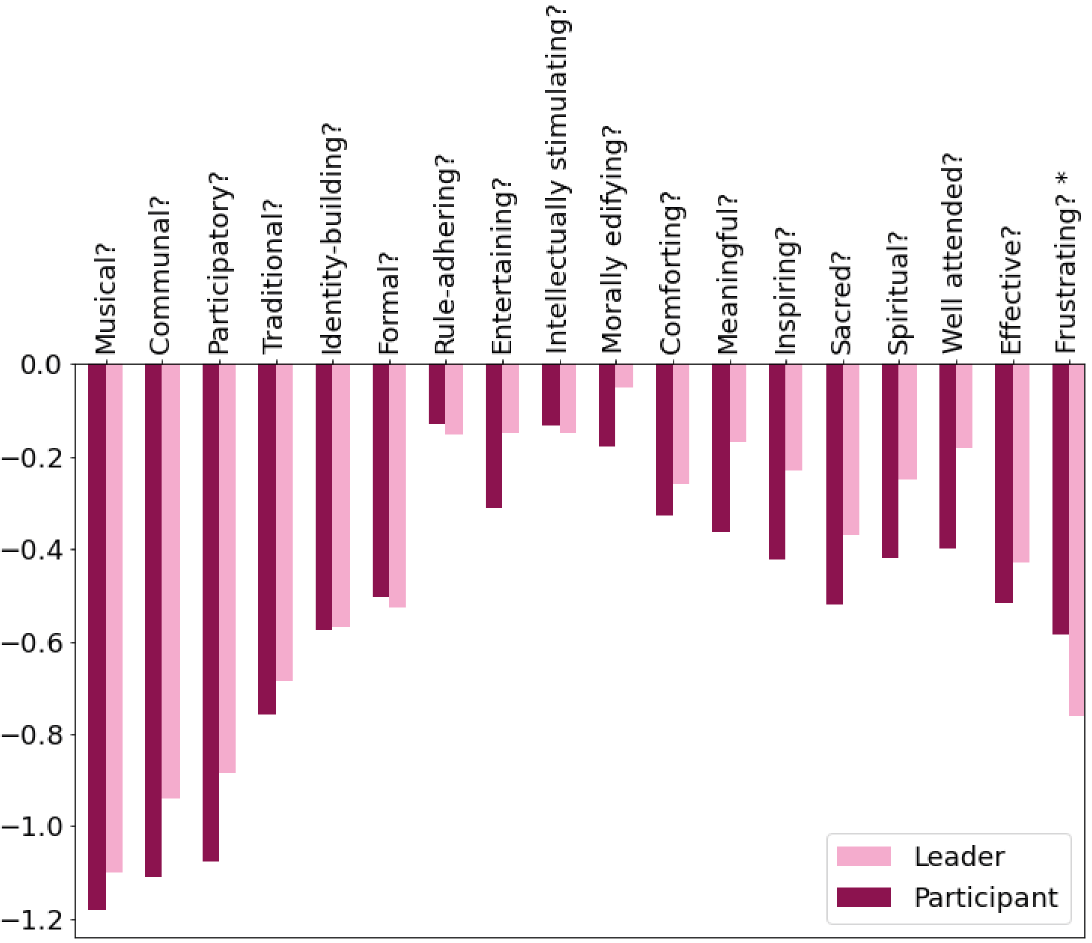


Figure 4. Drop in respondents' reported experience of rituals during the pandemic on 18 criteria

missed the experience of choral or communal singing as part of their worship, and that this was very difficult to replicate online through conference call software. The experience of collective singing together was part of this participatory experience. It is also notable that these criteria were the three that fell the most for both leaders and participants; the sense of loss around these aspects of ritual was clear and shared.

We also wish to draw attention to four other criteria - 'meaningful' 'inspiring,' 'spiritual,' and (to a slightly lesser extent) 'sacred', which also show significant drop-offs during the pandemic, though not at the level of the first three. However, there are two additional reasons to pay particular attention to these criteria. First, there is some suggestion that these criteria are more important than others. Our statistical expert, Dr David Lowe, calculated the similarity between the sixteen criteria used through a statistical method called Euclidean distance, which is a measure of how close two responses are likely to be to each other. For example, survey respondents were very likely to give similar marks to the categories 'morally edifying' and 'intellectually stimulating.' They may have been high or low, but whatever mark was given for one was likely to be very similar to that of the other. This closeness is described as a low Euclidean distance. In contrast, there was a much bigger difference between 'rule adhering' and 'participatory'—the score for one is less correlated with the score for the other. This is described as a high Euclidean distance.

Figure 5 shows the Euclidean distances between each of the criteria on our survey. This calculation was based on the reverse of the criteria 'frustrating,' for the reasons explained above. The redder the square, the closer the two criteria are to each other. This method reveals a tight correlation between these four criteria—meaningful, inspiring, spiritual, and sacred—and that

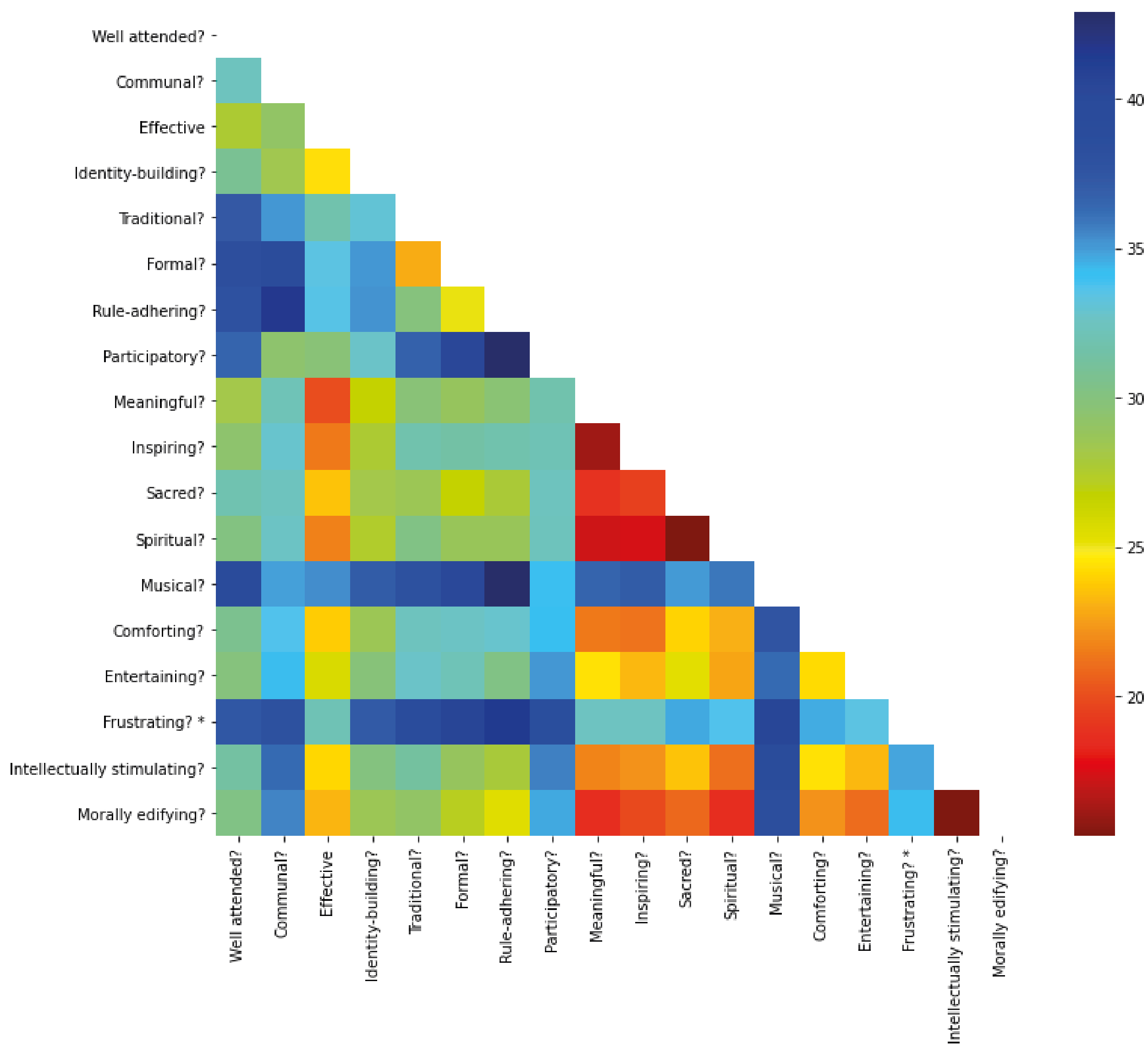


Figure 5. The measured Euclidean distance between our 18 criteria, representing how closely they correlate with one another.

they are also the four which are most closely linked to the term 'effective.' While we did not ask for an overall assessment of the ritual experience, 'effective' was the most neutral and broad-ranging term we used, and its tight connection to these four criteria suggest that their decreases, though relatively small, are particularly significant. Something similar, but slightly less strong, could be said about the criteria 'comforting' and 'morally edifying,' which were the next two criteria on the list of those tightly linked to 'effective.' However, the survey did not record as sharp a decrease in these criteria.

The second reason that these criteria deserve particular attention is the gap between the ratings for leaders and participants. The fall in experience was considerably greater for participants than it was for leaders. But breaking down our data allowed us to isolate this gap further. Figure 6 presents the same information as figure 4, but only for leaders and participants within the Church of England. It shows that, for the C of E, the gaps between the experience of leaders and participants is quite marked; leaders' experience of ritual during the pandemic were marginally worse than those before, but for participants, the gap was considerably larger. We did

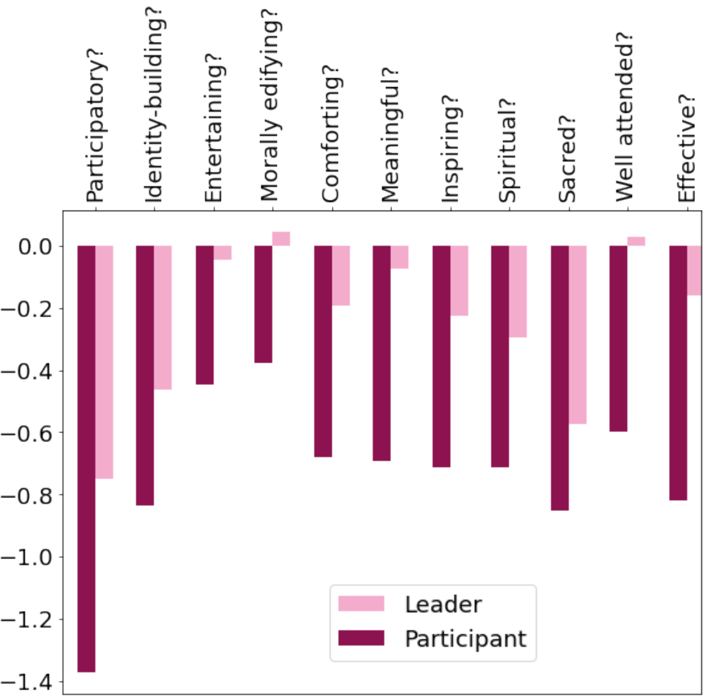


Figure 6. Drop in Church of England leaders' and participants' experience of ritual during the pandemic.

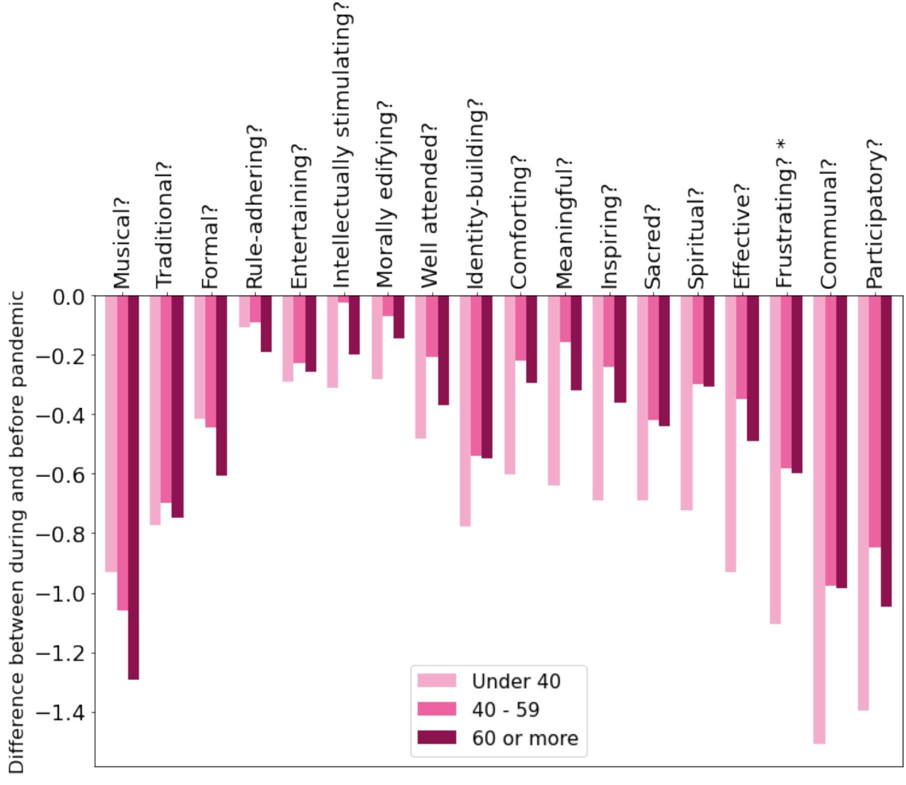


Figure 7. Drop in respondents' experience of ritual during the pandemic, broken down by age.

not see this gap between leaders and participants for other faith groups. This suggests a serious experiential gap between clergy and laity for the C of E. While the reason for that gap is more than can be explained by this data set, we would speculate that it has to do with the nature of the community of the established Church, and how this differs from the chosen communities of other religious groups. For whatever reason, C of E clergy seem less aware of or attuned to the experiences that their worshippers have had during this pandemic than others. We would suggest that this experiential disconnect, even if mended by a resumption of 'ordinary,' in-person services, is likely to affect the relationship between C of E clergy and laity going forward.

One other factor which influenced overall experience, but not perhaps in an expected way, was age. With the caveat that a relatively small percentage (under 15%) of our respondents were under the age of 40, there was a noticeable correlation between age and experience of pandemic rituals.. Younger respondents—under age 40—had a consistently worse experience of online ritual than their older peers. This difference was quite even and did not depend greatly on which criteria we examined, or which group (see figure 7 for details). The assumption that a digitally native generation would be more comfortable with online worship does not seem to be borne out by this data.

Forms of Adaptation

We also asked our survey respondents about the methods that they and their communities had used to adapt their rituals to the situation of the pandemic. Interpreting this data is difficult, as communities may have responded in multiple ways and it can be hard to fit these adaptations into simple categorisations. Nevertheless, some patterns are evident, and again, differences between the experiences of leaders and participants are evident.

Figure 8 shows the changes to experience for those who did and did not use live streaming—that is, broadcasting the ritual live on a platform such as YouTube, Facebook Live, or something similar. The charts show the size of the drop for the measurement of each criteria for those who did not (light bars) or did (dark bars) use livestreaming, with leaders on the left and participants on the right. Where the dark 'yes' bars are shorter than the light 'no' ones, this suggests areas in which livestreming was in fact useful. We can see, for instance, that

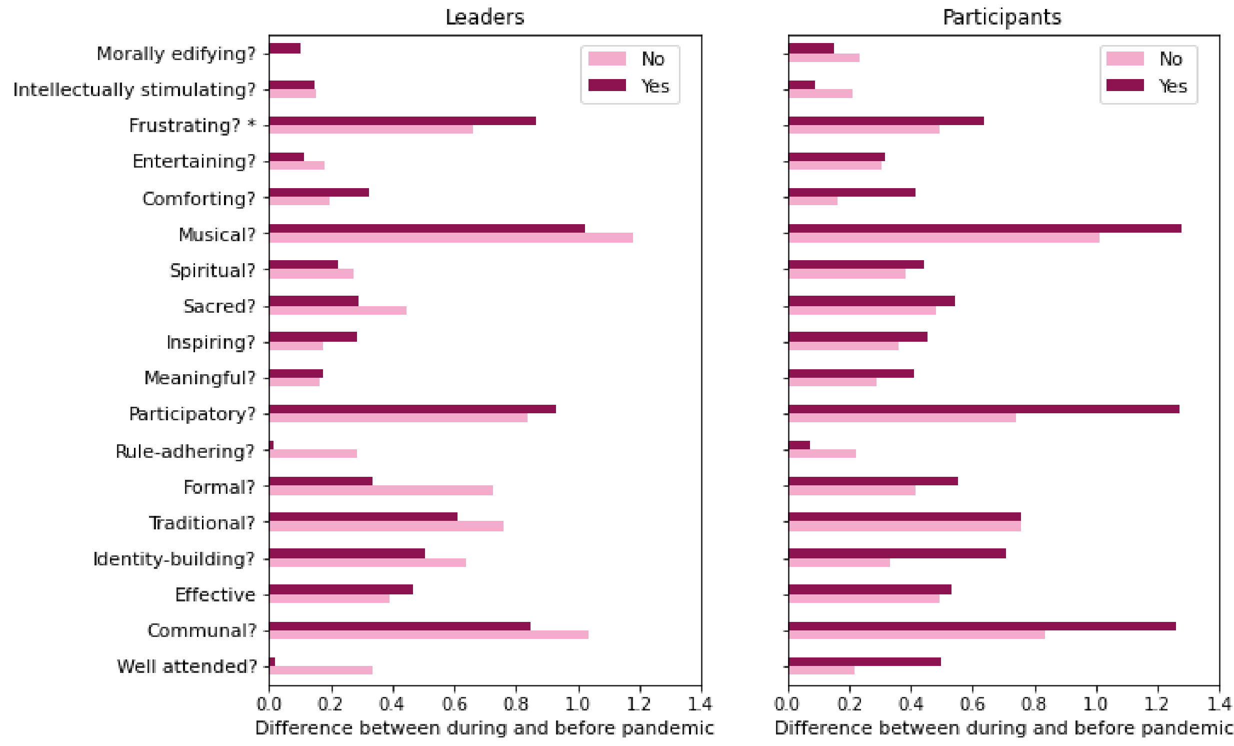


Figure 8. Drop in respondents' experience of ritual during the pandemic by the use (or not) of livestreaming.

according to leaders, livestreaming nearly eliminates the problem of poor attendance. Participants disagree, but in livestreaming, it is much more likely to be the leaders who actually know how many people are attending. Participants are responding to a felt sense that there are fewer people in the room. This matters, but it is a different issue. The overall pattern is clear: while livestreaming is for leaders, in certain senses, slightly better than the alternatives, for participants it is markedly less communal, less participatory, less musical, and less identity-building. For most other measures (including 'effective'), it is slightly worse than the alternative.

These results were not substantially different for those who watched streamed rituals pre-recorded instead of live. In particular, the sense of participation and community was about the same. This is not surprising; the experience of watching a streamed service is virtually identical whether it is live or pre-recorded, and most communities which live streamed services also offer them on demand as well. While the sense of engagement was important to our respondents, our survey does not demonstrate that the liveness of livestreaming was, in itself, an effective technique in creating this. This is not to suggest that streaming cannot be an effective solution for many communities, but this data does suggest that, in itself, it is insufficient to create a sense of engaged community to support the ritual.

The pattern looks quite different when we turn to those communities which used conference call software—such as Zoom, Teams, Webex, or Google Hangouts. See below, figure 9. Here, while leaders noted that these rituals were likely to be less traditional and formal, both leaders and (especially) participants found the experience to be improved across the board, far more so than was the case for livestreaming. This was especially the case for participants' senses of the communal, participatory, and identity-building aspects of ritual, as well as its overall effectiveness. The effects on meaningfulness, inspiration, and spirituality were more modest, though they do not seem to be the largest drivers of the change in overall effectiveness. While these spiritual aspects may correlate more directly with the overall sense of ritual efficacy, they seem to be somewhat more resilient to changes in ritual forms than other aspects. Even though conference call software does not allow leaders the control or flexibility that streaming does, nor does it often provide as high a level of sound or video quality, it does seem to facilitate a

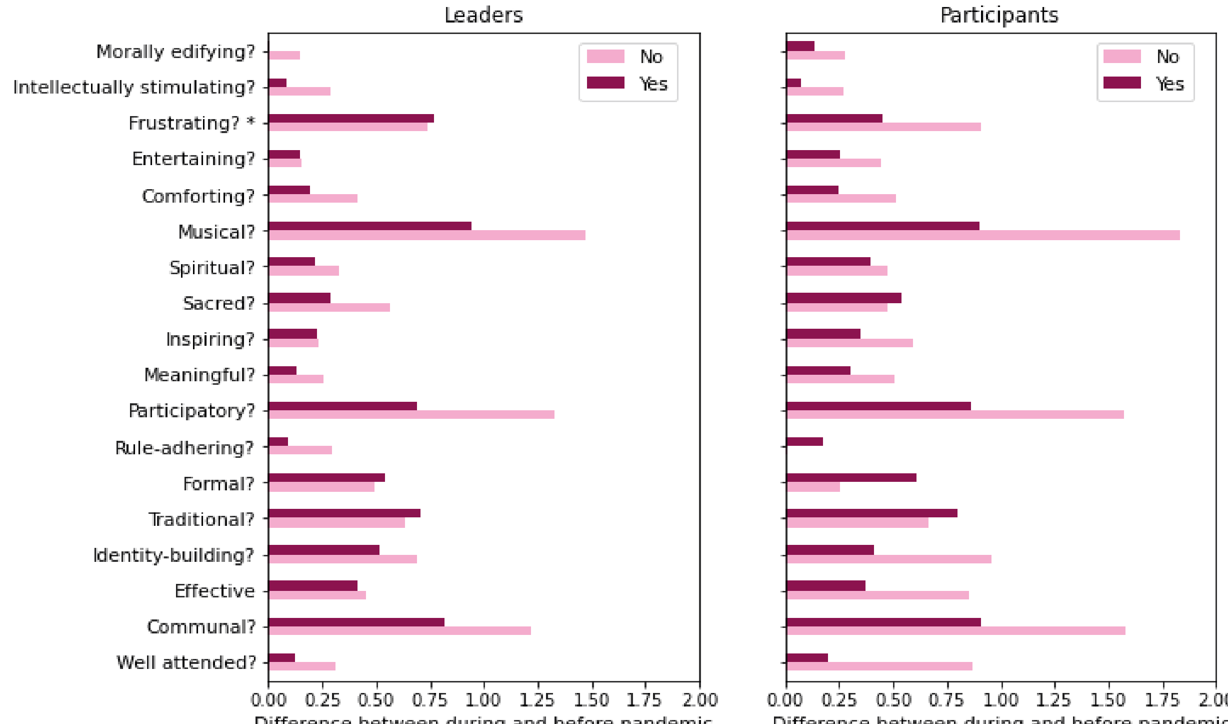


Figure 9. Drop in respondents' experience of ritual during the pandemic by the use (or not) of conference call software.

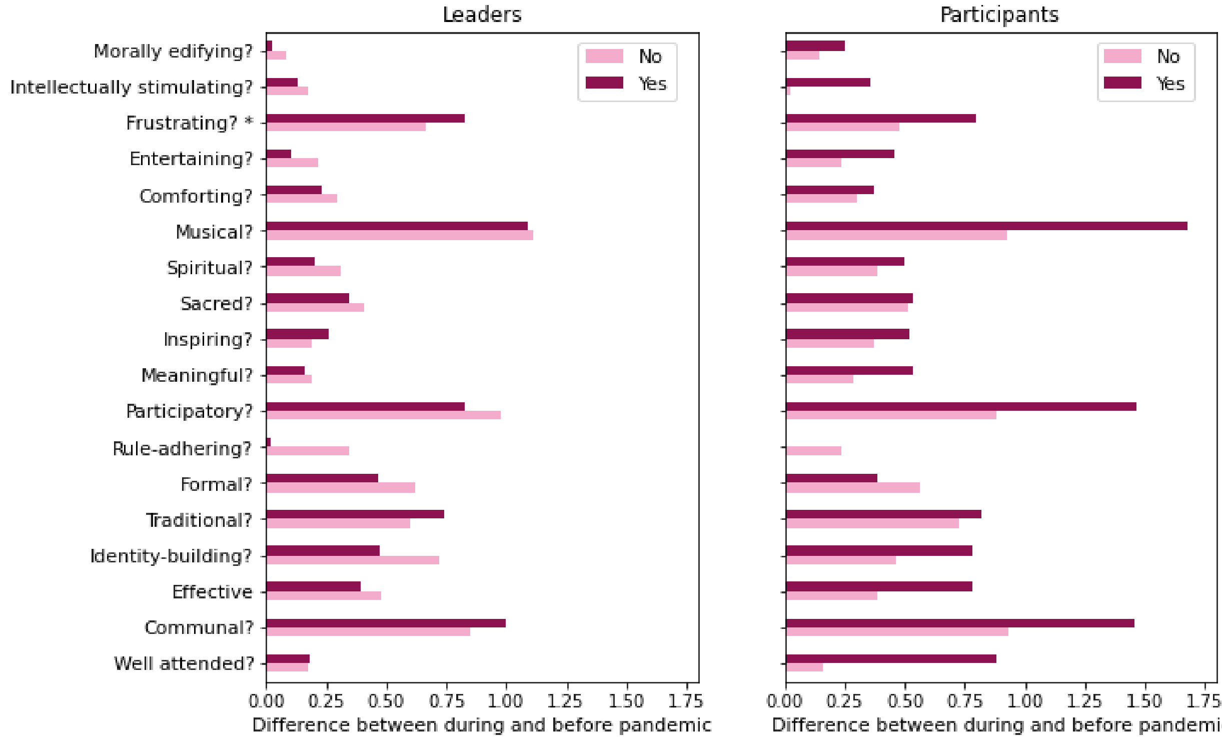


Figure 10. Drop in respondents' experience of ritual during the pandemic by the use (or not) of in-person rituals during the pandemic.

sense of engagement and community which participants desire.
Some examples of these features of ritual response for video conferencing participants can be seen in the free-text responses, offered below. However, it should be noted that the positive feelings towards these platforms, as "genuine" facilitators of community, needs to be seen in context. Evidently, where participants used the same software for other community building tasks (even or especially work), it became harder to differentiate spaces, communities, and create an adequate division between spiritual/religious observance and other elements of life.

> *The rituals which I have most enjoyed are the interactive prayer times on Google Meet which allow genuine interaction (like on zoom) rather than just listening but not being able to contribute.*
>
> *Our service leaders came across more relaxed and informal, especially on Zoom.*
> *Use of Zoom is very good. Easy to use. Gives a virtual feeling of community.*
>
> *Yes, the presence of other people on Zoom has helped keep me grounded within the religious community.*
> *For me there has been a struggle with the constant zooming. This is mainly because my working life now seems to be conducted on zoom and so when attending community events which are normally in-person and very intimate the fact that they are also on zoom can be quite exhausting after a day of work related zoom.*

Finally, one group of our respondents said that they had led or participated in rituals live and in person during the pandemic, despite social distancing restrictions (Figure 10). These restrictions were, as a rule, quite severe. At times, they included required distances between people, capacity limitations, restrictions on singing and physical contact, and the requirement that everyone wear a mask. They were disruptive enough to noticeably affect the experience of worship, especially for participants. In fact, for participants, the experience of these in-person rituals was worse than the alternatives in essentially all categories except for 'traditional,' formal' and rule-adhering,' though it is not clear that these are necessarily positive. Leaders, however, had nearly the opposite

experience, with in-person rituals being slightly but consistently preferable to their alternatives by most any metric (see figure 10). While the numbers here are not large, they do suggest that leaders are, understandably, emotionally invested in the established techniques of ritual-making in which they have training and experience, and that they see the presence of these techniques itself as efficacious, far more so than their congregants do. Again, as in streaming, we see in participants' experiences of socially-distanced, in-person rituals a noticeably greater drop in a sense of communality, participation, musicality and effectiveness than we do spirituality, inspiration, or meaningfulness. The fact of in-person gathering does not in itself guarantee a sense of communality. That sense is something that a ritual and its environment need to create, and here, we see the techniques of that work being disrupted by social distancing.

Attendance and community size

In thinking about how rituals during the pandemic can be adapted to ensure that the sense of engaged community and spiritual efficacy can be maintained, there are two other factors that deserve a mention: the regularity of a worshipper's attendance and the size of communities. While none of these figures are definitive, they do suggest some interesting ways in which we can see the importance of pattern, practice, repetition and engagement in creating effective rituals.

It is worth noting that our respondents are more likely to attend religious services regularly than the general population. About 75% of ritual participants who took our survey said that they attended religious services either 'most weeks' or 'more than once a week' before the pandemic. It is not surprising that people who are more engaged with religious practice are more likely to fill out a survey about that practice. Nevertheless, by breaking our responses down by (reported) frequency of attendance, a few patterns emerge.

By some measures, those who were less frequent attendees at rituals before the pandemic had a better experience of ritual during it than those who had developed a habit of attending more often. For instance, figure 11 shows how respondents' views of how inspiring rituals were changed during the pandemic, broken down by their self-reported attendance at rituals before the pandemic. In these graphs, each bar represents a group of respondents with a certain level of attendance, getting more frequent as you move down. The bars are shaded to show what percent of each group said that the rituals they experienced during the pandemic were much more, more, just as, less, or much less inspiring than those before them. This is measured by a difference of 0, 1 or 2 points on the five-point scale in either direction. The larger the grey and red sections on the right, the higher percentage of people in that group thought that mid-pandemic rituals were less inspiring than those that came before. There is a small but clear pattern visible.

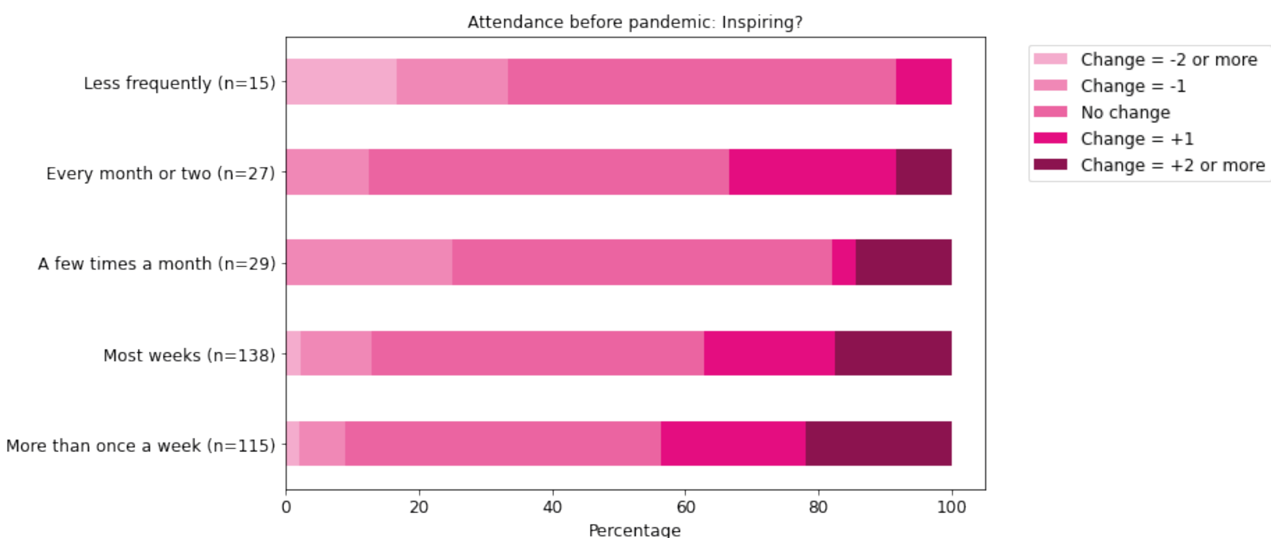


Figure 11. Change in participants' assessment of rituals as 'inspiring' during the pandemic, by frequency of attendance **before** the pandemic

The more regularly a participant had been attending rituals, the more likely they were to find the adaptations necessitated by the pandemic disappointing. Similar patterns are visible for the terms 'meaningful,' 'sacred,' 'spiritual,' and, to a lesser extent, 'musical,' effective' and 'participatory.' This finding makes sense. It is those who were more familiar with the pre-pandemic operations of ritual life who most missed those patterns when they were disrupted. Less frequent attendees were not as attuned to those ritual patterns, and thus were less disappointed when they were broken.

The survey also asked participants about how often they attended rituals during the pandemic. While the pattern here is smaller, it is still visible, and though it goes in the opposite direction, the explanation is the same. Those who attended rituals more often during the pandemic appear to appreciate them slightly more. Figure 12 shows the same data for figure 11, but grouped by how often respondents attended during the pandemic, rather than beforehand. While not enormous, there is a pattern where those who attended pandemic services more often were more likely to find them more inspiring, or at least less likely to find them less inspiring. Similar small but consistent patterns are visible for the terms 'inspiring,' 'sacred,' 'spiritual,' 'communal,' 'effective,' 'morally edifying' and, to some extent, 'comforting' and 'identity-building'. This finding admits multiple interpretations: perhaps the more participants get to know the digitally adapted modes of worship used in the pandemic, the more solace they can take from them, or perhaps those who did not appreciate pandemic services simply stopped attending them as often.

The context in which a participant can get to know these practices, however, varies considerably. One important distinction is between large and small congregations. While not all congregations are wealthy and not all small ones are poor, of course, there is a general pattern that larger congregations have access to financial, cultural, and human resources that larger ones do. Many leaders of smaller congregations who we spoke with were concerned that, because of the expense of running a sophisticated and high-quality service for broadcast and the ease with which online participants can move from one congregation to another, larger communities would be able to put on a better show than their smaller counterparts. In time, this could lead to the 'Amazonification' of religious life, with smaller local houses of worship closing down, unable to compete with online-based behemoths. Our data suggest that, at the least, this fear needs to be qualified by the fact that smaller communities seem to have offered a more engaging and positive experience to their congregants during the pandemic than the larger ones have.

As a measure of size of community, our survey asked leaders and congregants how many people would typically attend regular services in an average week before the pandemic.

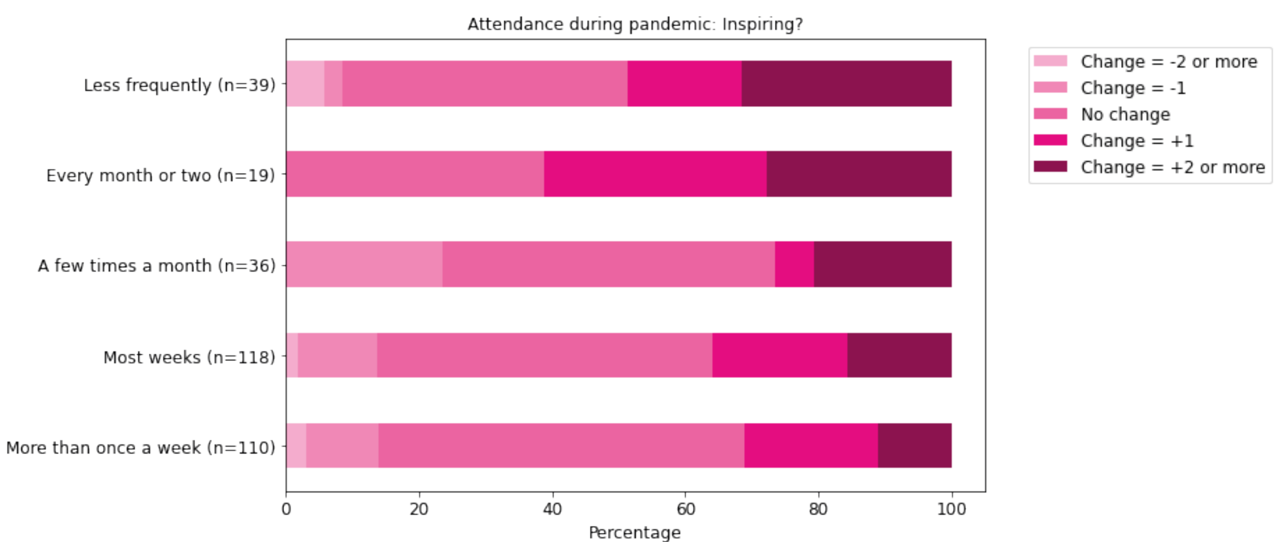


Figure 12. Change in participants' assessment of rituals as 'inspiring' during the pandemic, by frequency of attendance **during** the pandemic

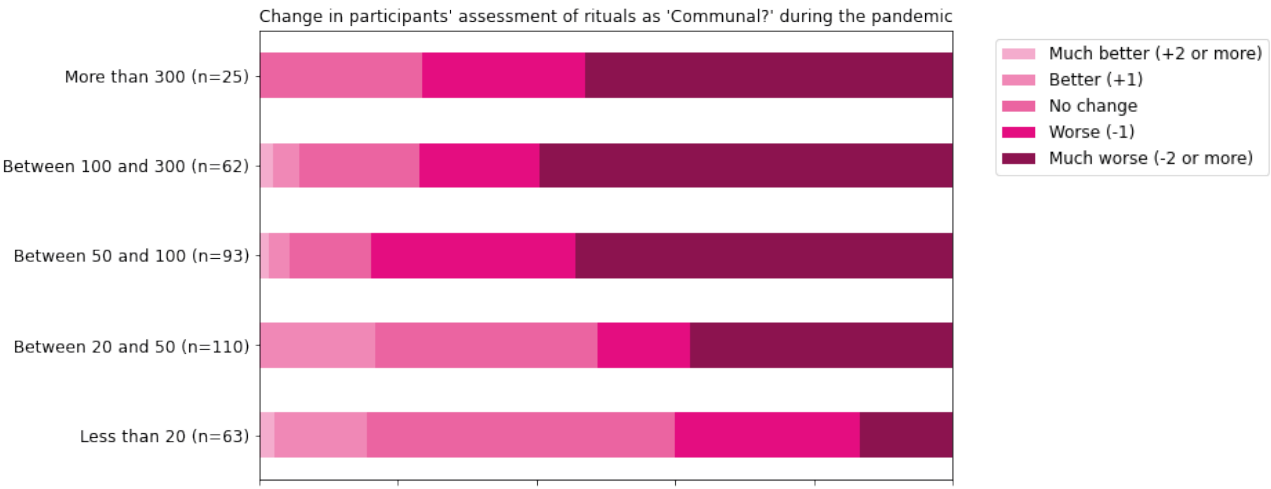


Figure 13. Change in participants' assessment of rituals as 'effective' during the pandemic, by size of community.

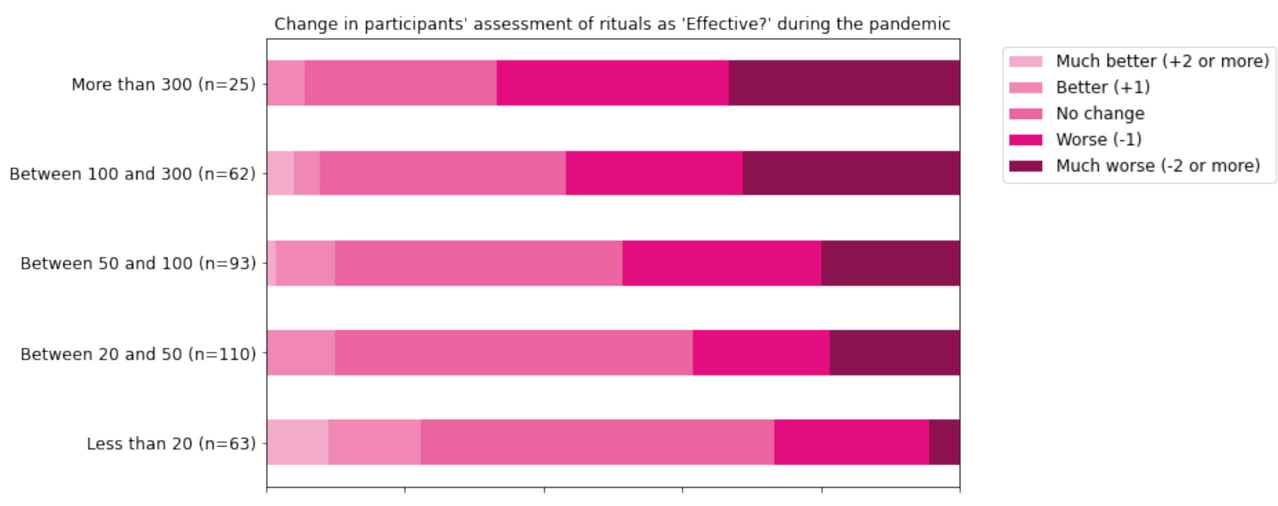


Figure 14. Change in participants' assessment of rituals as 'communal' during the pandemic, by size of community.

Figures 13 and 14 show how participants' assessment of the effectiveness and communality of rituals changed during the pandemic, broken down by congregational size. The pattern is clear. Participants in the smallest communities were nearly as likely to say that pandemic rituals were more effective than they were the opposite; this was far from the case for the latest communities. One particular point of note is that about half of participant respondents from the smallest congregations (less than 20 participants per week) said that their regular services were better attended during the pandemic than before. While attendance has, in fact, gone up almost everywhere, what is notable is that this group of participants knew that it had. This suggests that they were aware of who else was attending services with them, something which does not seem to have been the case in larger institutions. This speaks directly to the sense of community that smaller congregations are better able to create. This same pattern of more appreciative participants at small communities is also observable for the terms 'identity-building,' 'participatory,' 'meaningful,' 'comforting,' and to some extent, 'sacred,' 'spiritual' and 'inspiring.' Even 'entertaining,' the term that comes closest to encapsulating our interviewee's worries about what large congregations can offer that smaller ones cannot, was nearly evenly divided (see figure 15, below). The smallest congregations did the best by this measure, narrowly beating out the largest congregations. It was the mid-sized ones (between 50 and 300 worshippers per week) which seemed to do the worst, but this data shows a great deal of continuity—most participants saw pandemic-era rituals as no more or less entertaining than what had come before. If there is to be a new, highly produced, online digital form of worship that will be the future of British religion, it does not yet exist. The importance that participants seem to put on the sense of community and participation would suggest that such a new form may be a long time coming.

This survey represents an unusually broad examination of the experience of ritual during the COVID-19 crisis. While, as we noted above, the means by which this survey was taken mean that we cannot claim that its results necessarily reflect the views of the UK population as a whole, we hope that we have demonstrated that it can provide rich and useful insights into the patterns of adaptation that ritual life has seen during the pandemic, and what these might suggest about the function and value of ritual more broadly. But of course, ritual life is too complex to be covered in any survey; many disruptions have been much broader than individual experience, and no matrix of adjectives can contain them all. To begin to address some of these gaps, we now take a different methodological approach, and turn to a set of case studies, which take more ethnographic and netographic approaches, and an action research group which relies on the wisdom of religious professionals.

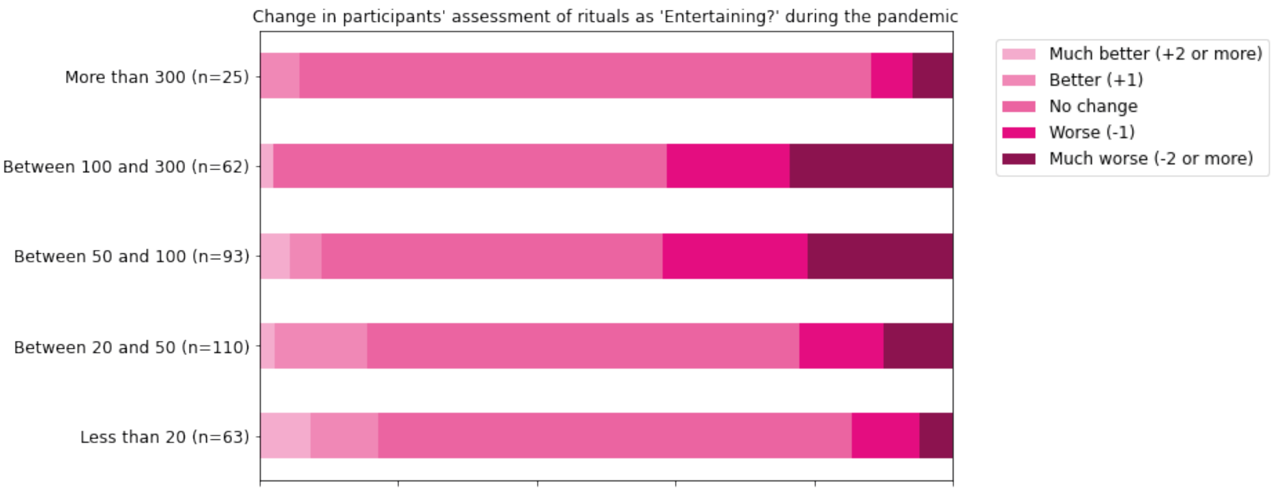


Figure 15. Change in participants' assessment of rituals as 'entertaining during the pandemic, by size of community.

Introducing our Case Studies

The fifteen case studies that make up this section are the heart of this research. They represent our best efforts to capture the breadth of experiences of ritual life under COVID-19 in the UK, and to do so in sufficient depth to tease out the nuances, complexities, and values at play. In choosing these case studies, we aimed for breadth: a variety of specific communities that approximated the variety of religious, cultural, economic, and social contexts present in the UK, and communities who were facing different kinds of challenges and addressing them in different kinds of ways. Our methods here were largely ethnographic and personal; in some cases, as a consequence, the identities of our case study participants must remain confidential.

We soon realised, however, that a focus only on individual communities would be unhelpful and a bit myopic. The pandemic created novel challenges for particular communities, yes, but it also changed the ways in which we, as a society, deal with some of the broader themes that rituals can address: the finitude of life, the need to remember the past, our relationship to space and time, and the nature of our community. We have added some case studies which address these larger issues.

Each case study is its own small-scale research project. Each was initiated and developed by a specific member of the research team, who is listed as lead author here, and the design reflected many factors: their pragmatic responses to the research environment under COVID-19, their ability to build relationships with communities, their own academic backgrounds and expertise, all of which they balanced within the overarching priorities of the BRIC-19 project. Some case studies reached various stages but did not progress to fruition, for many reasons. But, in all cases, the report can only include a fraction of the research effort required by case studies. All have produced far more material than can fit in the scope of this report, and so the chapters that follow should be seen as introductory doors to larger projects. We expect to publish more on each of these studies, in various forms, in the months and years to come. In doing so, we hope to bring out some of the stories, ideas, people and examples that unfortunately could not be included here.

We recognise the kaleidoscopic nature of this research. We have not aimed for consistency here; each case study uses the methods appropriate to its subject matter. Nor has it been our goal to provide a comprehensive overview of all the ways in which the pandemic has affected aspects of British ritual life. Even if we had the time and resources to offer something this comprehensive—which we did not—placing them all into a single rigid methodological or analytical framework would fail to respect the contradictions, peculiarities, and contingencies that these studies have demonstrated. We do think, however, that, when placed in dialogue with one another, one can see larger patterns of how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the ways that people in the UK have engaged with ritual, for good and for ill. Finally, much to our regret, we cannot individually credit or thank all of the people we spoke with for these case studies, those who so generously shared their time, insights, data, experiences, and stories with us, even when they were painful or difficult. A particular thanks to those who we spoke with whose stories, for whatever reason, are not told directly here; we value and remember your contributions, which are present here between the lines and we hope to bring out more overtly in the future.

Red Lotus Events and Navratri Online

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Background: Navratri in the UK

Navratri is one of the most important festivals of the Hindu calendar period: a ritual held over nine nights in honour of the goddess Durga. It is renowned for its scale and vibrancy, blending fasting and collective prayer with music, dance, food, and spectacle. In the UK, Navratri has become a fixture in local areas with significant Hindu populations, particularly British-Gujarati communities. In the past, Leicester's and North London's Navratri festivities have been seen as the more significant, but recently Bolton's has also emerged as a major expression of local-cultural relationships and identities (Vickery 2019). Diwali and Navratri have been treated as civic festivals, part of a cultural strategy to celebrate the diversity of Britain and the history and populations of these cities. However, recently there have been many controversies regarding the withdrawal of council funding from faith-based public festivals such as Diwali, which councils have justified due to tighter budgetary restrictions. The pandemic occurred as Hindu communities were finding relationships that had been built with councils through the coordination of these events increasingly difficult to navigate.

The impact of the pandemic, however, was catastrophic on Navratri celebrations, as the government rolled back the loosening of restrictions in the summer due to rising cases. September had seen announcements of the 'rule of six' in indoor and outdoor settings, and communications signalled worse was to come. Occurring between 17 and 25 October 2020, Navratri took place just after the announcement of the new three-tier system restrictions in England. Most Hindu communities had been placed in strict lockdown. Hindus in Brent, for instance, were placed automatically in Tier 2 "High" restrictions from 15 October, which restricted any household mixing indoors and permitted gatherings outside of no more than six people. Celebrating Navtratri would have to take place within individual households and behind closed doors (Patel 2020).

Many British and Indian communities responded with an online solution to the challenge of the pandemic (Mutch 2020, Northlines 2020). Brent-based Red Lotus Events (RLE), who created a multi-media 'virtual' Navratri in just a few weeks, offers a fascinating example of creativity and innovation in ritual making, not simply because of the online format they employed. RLE's interventions demonstrate the rising importance of community and cultural arts organisations, driven by creative entrepreneurs, which have emerged as ritual makers for new generations. Their model of delivery of virtual Navratri demonstrated the power of artistic collectives, and how entrepreneurs help performers weather economic storms and preserve cultural traditions and skills. RLE's Navratri, which engaged thousands online, was driven not only by a need to provide comfort and sustenance to the wider Hindu community, but to preserve respect for, and give work to, the considerable talent pool of performers who support Hindu festival rituals in many forms. This report briefly summarises the research into delivery and engagement with online Navratri, based on netnographic research and interviews with Red Lotus Events directors and one member of the project team.

Red Lotus Events – Brief History

Red Lotus Events is directed by two artists: Pritee Varsani, an international vocalist specialising in Gujarati folk music, and Mira Salat, a dancer and educator. Over the past few years, RLE has established a reputation as both an events company with a wide network of well-known musicians and performers and an educational enterprise known for its cultural activism and community events, which has aimed to raise understanding of Indian Gujarati cultures in the British-born Indian community and wider North London areas.

RLE's work has been grounded in community, using experiential and story-telling methods to immerse people in the customs and folkloric understandings of Indian cultures. They have run festivals in North London for the past 9 years, some with a community arts ethos and basis. Their 2012 event in remembrance of Indian Freedom Fighters, performed at the Watford Colosseum, drew in a cast of crew of non-performers

(e.g. supermarket workers, mechanics, school children) who learned the creative processes of dance, storytelling and music in workshop-style tuition. Recently, their work has grown in ambition and scale, moving into cultural activism and ambassadorial roles. In 2017 they gained funding and support from the Indian government to produce Tribal India – a three day interactive festival held in Fryent Country Park, Kingsbury, North London, which showcased musicians, tribal performers who travelled from India, drumming collectives, and dancers (North West London Times 2017).

Developing Navratri Online

Prior to the pandemic, RLE approach focused on the sensory power of Gujarati heritage through artisanal crafts, cookery, music and dance. In the initial crisis phase of lockdown, with theatres and parks closed and live events cancelled, they struggled to figure out how they could continue their work in a different format. The considerable use of social media during this time, and particularly the explosion of videos on TikTok, demonstrated people's need for art in a time of crisis, but it also created an extraordinary competition: "everyone became an artist in Covid". RLE's challenge was to think of how their unique cultural insights and expertise could operate in a far more competitive multimedia format.

Whilst RLE were bound by an enormous sense of obligation to the wider community, their decision to become online ritual-makers was also driven by an acute sense of crisis within the arts. The musicians and dancers in their network, who contributed so much to the annual ritual calendar in Hindu communities in any "normal" year, could not survive as artists with theatres closed and live events shut down. RLE's effort to put Navratri online was, at least in part, concerned with creating artistic opportunities at a time when many artists and specialists (e.g., lighting designers, sound engineers) were taking manual labour or jobs in the gig-economy and preserving valuable skills in cultural heritage.

Moving Navratri online involved new collaborations and the acquisition of new skills to move from a multi-sensory live events ethos into multimedia live streaming formats. They maintained the model of sponsorship from local businesses, but widened partnerships to support their ambitions: collaboration with a local creative company brought the use of a proper production studio. They collaborated with Parle Patel, a highly successful British Gujarati influencer with a wide following, who knew the terrain of online culture and brought professionalism to presentation as well as a large audience. RLE learned new production methods: how to live stream, set up for cameras, produce video effects, and engage participation in live streaming by setting up a large screen in the studio, where the artists could connect with the audience.

RLE's online Navatri did not attempt to replicate the festival online through performance; it aimed to find the means for people to engage in a meaningful way with the festival at home. Communal dancing and collective prayer characterises much of the 9 night/10 day festival, but RLE had to find new ways to allow people access that communality and intensity at home, in multi-generational households, where parents might be working at home and schooling children at the same time. RLE's Navratri was recognisably a multimedia event, which captured but reorganised the essence of Navratri festivities in new ways. It met popular expectations, playing the "normal music" on particularly auspicious days, but restyling the familiar songs in new formats "more like lounge music", on others, so it could blend in within the routines of the domestic households and people could "enjoy it differently". RLE felt they remained true to the spirit of Navratri, the celebration of the goddess spirit and female empowerment, and kept a community ethos through sketches and chat with the online audience.

RLE reported a phenomenal response. People sent in pictures of families dancing around decorated homes, in living rooms, around coffee tables. They sent in shout out requests. Activity packs, which RLE had offered free to participants, were a surprise hit. These included colouring, puzzles and games, fun facts about the festival and pop up idols. Over 4,000 packs were sent out for the festival and parents talked positively about how engaged their children were, and how the activities had prompted them all to reflect more on their culture and beliefs and why they were important.

Impact of Navratri and Online Rituals

The success of Navratri encouraged RLE to pursue other elements of their work in multimedia formats, which led to new online rituals of memorialisation. Since 2008, RLE has held Sur Dhara – a free musical evening with complimentary food and multicultural dynamics. This began as the brainchild of Pritee Versani's father as he was dying of cancer: it was his dying wish to hear his daughter sing the music that connected them, but he was also a firm believer in community and the importance of free, live events. Since his death, the event has continued every January and become synonymous with RLE. It has assumed a memorialisation function for the wider British-Indian community, and not only for Versani's father. Salat articulated its contemporary purpose in these terms: "to remember our ancestors, to give back to charities,

and start the year from their blessings to live in the moment." After the success of Navratri, and with the weight of considerable expectation from the community, RLE organised this as an online event: Sur Dhara – In Memory of the Lost Loved Ones, which was streamed on 31 January 2021.

This acted both as a fundraiser for the arts (facilitated by links to Just Giving), and a locus for grief on a much larger scale. Compared to Navratri, it achieved an even larger and more emotional response: 14,421 views and £5,368 raised for its artists and performers. People sent photos of their loved ones, which were inserted into a memorial template, and displayed throughout during the performance. Many of these had obviously died during the period of COVID-19, but the event also became a vessel to contain longer-standing feelings of grief. Salat reported connecting with someone who had never been able to grieve for her sister because her parents had been in too much shock to organise a memorial service. "She said for the first time I feel like I've been able to say goodbye and get closure," said Salat. The event lasted for over four hours because the stream of photos sent by members of the public did not stop. RLE decided to preserve it on their YouTube channel. "We kept it up because people wanted the memory to be there. They feel like their loved ones are a part of it," said Salat.

Conclusions

- Arts entrepreneurs and collectives have demonstrated an integral role in creating ritual during the pandemic. They have responded quickly to fast-changing social and economic circumstances. They have shown they can address audiences' needs with artistic and cultural expertise and use the communication tools that the online and multimedia artistic environment presented to considerable effect. This leadership of entrepreneurs and artists in ritual making is not new, but the pandemic heightened this role considerably and communities benefited from it.

- The multimedia formats that RLE produced offer considerable opportunities for all audiences, not just for Hindu communities. Certainly, arts organisations like RLE should be fully engaged by local councils, heritage organisations, and faith representative bodies, throughout the processes of planning local festivals and cultural events.

Ritual Adaptations or 'Sparked' Changes in two Black Majority Churches

Mark A Minott

I think we are rising up to it. We are making it work despite these drawbacks and, that is the most important thing, we are making it work!

Elder Mandus

This quotation indicates two things. One, the willingness and determination shown by both churches as they attend to the challenges brought on by the pandemic and accompanying lockdowns but, more importantly, the pervading mindset giving rise to various ritual adaptations. Via interviews and observations of various rituals, we uncover several ritual changes sparked by this broad mindset.

Background

This case study examines the ritual adaptations of two Black-majority church communities in Greater London during the time of the pandemic, and the differing ways in which they rose to the challenge of serving their communities during this time. The two communities are quite different from one another. The first, the South London Grouping of the United Reformed Church, is of the Christian tradition and is an amalgam of three churches—Streatham, Brixton Hill, and Stockwell Green United Reformed Churches. The grouping is a black majority church (BMC) with less than 1% Caucasian (Scottish) membership. The majority of attendees are from Africa and the Caribbean and those born in the UK of Afro-Caribbean descent. Before the pandemic, all three churches held regular morning services in their respective buildings. All owned the premises used for worship. They also had lifecycle and holiday rituals. During the pandemic, the churches had online services hosted by the Streatham United Reformed Church. The pastor of the grouping is ordained. He has been involved with ministry for 20 years and has led the present group of churches for nine years. Average attendance at online services during the pandemic was between 40-45 per Sunday.

The second church, the Holy Dove congregation is also of the Christian tradition and is an outgrowth of the Cherubim and Seraphim and Celestial Church of Christ movement out of Nigeria, which are sometimes called 'Aladura' churches and whose members can be identified by their white flowing robes. 'Aladura' is a Yoruba term from Nigeria, meaning 'owners of prayer', 'prayer fellowship' or 'the praying people'. The congregation is a new Black Majority Church (nBMC). The term nBMC differentiates independent Pentecostal black Majority Churches (BMCs) from those BMCs that are part of historic churches such as Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and the United Reformed Church (URC). The Holy Dove community rents the premises used for worship. The location of the premises is in the Stockwell Green area of London. The pastor or (shepherd, a preferred title) has engaged in ministry for 20 years and has been the shepherd of the present congregation for 15 years. There are 23 members of this congregation and, this number is not atypical of this kind of church community.

Having outlined the background of both churches, I now return to the idea of sparked changes or adaptations. Here I give examples of adaptations, participants' experience of, and the effects of these adaptations. I end the report by highlighting things learned from the research.

Ritual adaptations or 'Sparked' Changes

Examples of adaptations made by the case study churches included switching to online platforms and associated technology. Changing ritual contents to suit being online and change to day-to-day operations.

> *We have adapted our services to virtual online gatherings. We use skype for our services now, and we use Facebook live for our evening daily prayer. With Skype, everybody can connect. We can see each other and worship together for as long as we want.*
>
> *Pastor Ade*

Changes also included accepting that social distancing is a reality that removes in-person physical contact with people outside an immediate household. Some participants bemoaned this change. For example, Emmanuel A, a participant, said,

> *The online service does not feel like when you are in your church building and things are happening. Our presence is missing, we are not able to do things physically. Though we can participate online, but it's not the same as when we are there physically to do things. The physical presence is missing.*
>
> *Emmanuel A.*

An example of changes to the day-to-day operations of the churches involved taking holy water to the home of a family wishing to baptise a baby without going in and giving them instructions on what to do. Usually, this life cycle celebration—baptising a baby—would occur in the church among the congregation. Also, some pastoral activities such as visiting members at home were replaced with a phone call or sometimes did not happen.

Case study participants' experience of adaptations included a sense of belonging or connectedness, faith being built and missed inter-personal physical contact. However, along with these came fluctuating emotions revealed in the language of difficulty and hope. For example, on one hand, there was the use of phrases such as, '*it can be difficult if you are not used to the technology*'; '*overall, it's been a bit difficult*'; '*I was a bit disappointed*'; '*it was difficult, we had not been able to go and do what we were supposed to do*'. On the other hand, there were phrases that displayed a reliance on the Holy Spirit to work things out and show the next step and seeing the pandemic as a blessing in disguise, because of unexpected results such as an increase in online viewers.

Individual members and whole congregations felt the effects of changes brought on by the pandemic. The effects were displayed in words and actions such as a sense of freedom and autonomy; involvement; being determined and hopeful; lowering spirituality; increased spirituality; meeting new people; numerical growth and, reaching out to others.

What Are some Things Learned from These Churches?

Here are six things learned.

1. The choice and use of online platforms and associated technology was not always the result of the advanced state of the technology, for example, high-speed broadband, but economics and convenience. One congregation used Skype because it was free, and they could be online for as long as they wanted without incurring additional costs. This choice seems to make sense given the small size of the congregation and the demography involved i.e., a small nBMC.

   We have adapted our services to virtual online gatherings. We use skype for our services now. With Skype, we don't have to pay anything extra, and everybody can connect. We can see each other and worship together for as long as we want.

   Pastor Ade

2. The online platforms and technology required learning 'on the spot' how to operate, troubleshoot, and remembering techniques such as speaking directly to the camera. For example, Sarah explained,

   The first couple of weeks, it was about trying to understand how we could connect everybody, who would have access to it in terms of our regular members and a format of how that would work—transferring from live church to being online. Would the format still work the same? Would we have to bear in mind late joiners? because it is slightly different to when they join late on a zoom, to when they join late in person. And the logistics, given that the operators were in a different place from the minister, how that would work. Would he be able to connect still if there were any technical issues? What would happen? So, these were all considerations.

   Sarah

3. Members with knowledge in technology voluntarily facilitated the move to online services.

4. Changes to routines incurred costs. The costs included time to learn the new technology and address accompanying ‘glitches’, especially when first employing the technology.

5. The pandemic resulted in personal and presentational adaptations for those leading regular and other rituals. Personal adjustments were facilitated through self-reflection triggered by the change to online services and personal acceptance that God can be worshipped via the use of technology.

6. It is, however, in the area of the life cycle event of a funeral that personal and presentational adaptations were most noted. Changes include preaching which took the form of a running commentary between various speeches made by family members instead of a block of time where the minister delivers a talk. Pastor Reggie explained,

   The difference is, at the moment, the amount of time we use to spend on the funeral service has been drastically reduced. We could spend 1.5hrs, now it’s 30mins. We have to include all aspects. This calls for a total adjustment in terms of time management and picking out what is essential to be shared with the community.

   Pastor Reggie

Conclusion

Black churches were not exempt from ritual adaptations and the negative and positive experiences and effects of the pandemic and accompanying lockdowns. There was, however, a willingness and determination shown by both churches as they tackled the challenges. This willingness, determination and associated actions and activities indicate a pervading mindset.

Anonymity and Sobriety in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Paulina Kolata

Introduction

This case study draws on experiences of four members of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Fellowship during the global COVID-19 pandemic to understand what migrating online and limiting in-person meetings meant for their experiences of sobriety and anonymity. The pandemic stories of my four interviewees reveal the complexities of negotiating the absence of in-person support and certain kinds of ritual structures that regular attendance at AA meetings provides, as well as the complexities of negotiating anonymity and presence in the online environments. This case study shows that it is important to consider carefully what happens when people's ritual support structures move into online spaces, and the consequential risks and opportunities it creates for vulnerable members of the AA Fellowship.

AA is an international Fellowship dedicated to helping alcoholics with peer-to-peer support to stay sober through regular AA meetings and its Twelve Step programme. AA support meetings are a form of sobriety-oriented ritual practice where members describing themselves as in recovery, recovered or seeking recovery share their personal experiences in achieving sobriety. These meetings' regularity, consistent structure, and embodied support networks, inside and outside of the meetings, are key. They are an anchor for the members' efforts to stay sober. Members of the Fellowship are often supported by a sponsor and usually choose to follow the Twelve Steps programme at some point during their membership. AA membership involves no fees and members commit to the principle of anonymity – especially at the public level (including online spaces), but how can such anonymity be preserved in online spaces and how can AA members maintain their sobriety when the tangible support structures have been disabled? This case study is included within a report documenting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on communal ritual lives of people across the UK because AA Fellowship provides its members with the ritual structures that support their mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing – they help them stay sober and support others on their journeys to sobriety. Our interlocutors range from people in long-term abstinent recovery to newcomers who found sobriety during the pandemic. The experiences of the four AA members who entrusted us with their stories can help us consider the pandemic impacts on rituals through the prism of bare vulnerability that quite literally is a matter of life and death.

AA is an organisation with religious sentiments. Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, founders of the AA and the Twelve Step programme in the US in the late 1930s, were influenced by the religious practices of the Oxford Group, a conservative evangelical form of Protestantism. This form of Protestantism looked back to the early Christian church for its inspiration and the language of the Fellowship often refers to God or the Higher Power. However, Wendy Dossett argues that this "higher power" in no way automatically means the "God of religion" and can mean different things to different members of the Fellowship. The four interlocutors whose experiences inform this study spoke of the notion of "higher power" as something other than their own willpower, and that this kind of power greater than their own was equated by with an acknowledgment that they could not stay sober without the help of other accessed through their support networks (AA meetings and sponsors). It is therefore important to note that AA has no alignment with any religion or faith and has no requirement of belief, even if it relies on terminology that evokes such associations.

Alcohol Addiction Timescapes in the Pandemic

Lockdowns have had a severe impact on people's drinking habits more broadly. Drinkaware, a national charity tackling alcohol misuse and providing independent alcohol advice, reveals that alcohol

consumption at home has increased during lockdown. Young people have been drinking alone to ease anxiety, parents have been drinking earlier in the day than previously, and furloughed workers have been drinking more frequently during the week than before the pandemic. In line with the government guidelines for England, AA meetings were disbanded in March 2020 and it was not until mid-March 2021 that new guidelines were introduced allowing some venues to remain open for specific exempt activities such as childcare and support groups (with a limited capacity of 15 people). Along with the groups for victims of crime and other drug and alcohol recovery groups, AA meetings fell under the category of the support groups that are formally organised and are essential for providing mutual aid, therapy or other forms of support. The new guidelines had not yet been announced at the time when I conducted the interviews with four members of the Fellowship. Their reflections relate to the period from March 2020 to February 2021 when AA, like many other communities, went digital. In the AA context, members who usually serve as meeting chairpersons were instrumental. They are usually the ones who glue their local communities together, and in March 2020 they shifted their efforts online bringing the AA community into the 21st century. But the speed at which this happened came with serious consequences for those who wanted to get and stay sober, at the time when the whole country had been confined to a life of isolation.

Methodology

The data for this case study has been collected through semi-structured interviews with four members of the AA Fellowship. To preserve their anonymity, they are not named and any references to details that could hint at their identity are also excluded. To contextualise the interviews, I also collated and analysed the media coverage around AA and addiction recovery more broadly during the pandemic, and relied on the Fellowship's website and broader academic scholarship on addiction recovery in the UK. I would like to thank Dr Wendy Dossett, Director of Research for the Chester Studies of Addiction, Recovery and Spirituality Group and the Principle Investigator of the Higher Power Project, for her support and guidance in bringing this case study to fruition. I also extend my wholehearted thanks to all the interviewees who entrusted me with their stories.

Key Findings

The principle of anonymity within the AA Fellowship is, as Wendy Dossett explains, an observance with spiritual dimensions that facilitates creating safe spaces for honest sharing of people's experiences, while guarding their privacy. Due to the social stigma and shame attached to addiction, AA newcomers would often choose a meeting that is geographically further away from where they live. A newcomer, like all my interviewees at some point on their journey to sobriety, would call the AA helpline and a volunteer at the other end of the line would often direct them to an AA meeting. This route of access to support became both easier and harder during the pandemic. On the one hand, with meetings moving online, people gained access to instantaneous support. As Eric explained, helpline volunteers have been able to direct people to meetings all across the world. In an online context, meetings became more readily accessible and people could "travel" as far away from home as they wanted. However, the mobility of AA online spaces have also increased people's concerns around being recognized more easily because participation via Zoom reveals more information about participants, if they are not careful, including details of their home environments and their full name at the bottom of their video tile. Elizabeth, who was new to the AA Fellowship and had overall positive experiences with the online AA meetings, admitted that "In an AA meeting in person, I don't have to tell people anything about me, if I don't want to. Not even my name. But I had some other attendees in the online meeting find me on Facebook and send me some inappropriate messages, which is both scary and also a violation of my privacy." Such transgressions outside of AA meetings may happen more readily in the online contexts where access to personal data is sometimes harder to protect and mutually accountable social conduct is harder to discipline. But it puts already vulnerable people and their privacy at risk, and transforms spaces of safety, structure, and trust into potentially predatory ones.

A related concern arises when a member does not have a safe or private environment around them from which to attend an online meeting. As Jenni explained, many economically vulnerable members may not have access to a reliable internet connection or may be relying on Internet access through public service institutions like a local library. In both cases, attendance at the online meetings becomes either passive or impossible. Elizabeth and Adam recounted that many attendees online keep their cameras switched off and often just listen in. While listening alone may well be a source of support, it means it is harder to build a connection or even know if someone is there for genuine support or lurking, which comes with its own set of concerns for other attendees' safety. In other cases, members were forced to attend meetings from their car because their partners neither knew nor supported their efforts to remain sober. Jenni, who is also an AA sponsor, worried that some members were unable to attend

meetings because the pandemic has reorganized their family life and they have been unable to either travel to the meetings or to find a quiet place in their home without children's interference to access their sobriety support network via meetings online. Women have been disproportionately affected more by childcare pressures during the pandemic, and so she is concerned that they, in particular, have been unable to connect to AA during this time, and thus women with already existing multiple barriers to recovery have been disproportionately excluded from access to mutual aid.

All four interviewees also talked about the distractions of reorganized home conditions during the pandemic, as well as the inability to travel to and from meetings having deprived people of an important aspect of the ritual. In Jenni's words, "An AA meeting starts before a person arrives at the meeting and enters the room. It is a fellow member picking you up and driving together, it is a communal 'last cigarette before you go in' kind of moment. It is a moment of hovering over tea and biscuits before the circle begins." These are all the things that put a person in a mindset of what they are about to participate in and they make them feel human. The immediacy of online spaces has removed those moments of travel and preparation: the last breath in and out, the last sigh, someone's encouraging smile inviting you in as you hover outside the entrance unsure whether today is the day when you will enter. For a newcomer it may be a crucial moment of commitment to seek help for the first time. But for an "old timer" familiarity of a meeting space, its smells and textures, is also a source of reassurance. Adam admitted that this lack of embodied presence has discouraged him from attending meetings altogether and they have only relied on their sponsor's support, which also has been affected by travel restrictions during lockdown and the two have been only able to speak on the phone. He also explained that AA is also his social life and those social rituals were lost during lockdowns.

Lack of embodied presence can also hinder the flow of the meeting. All the interviewees admitted that despite the moderators' efforts, sharing online is more difficult than sharing in person. As Adam explained, "usually, you can somehow feel and read the room and you can tailor your own share based on what may be needed (…) or you may be moved in a moment by something that someone else shared and you want to say something spontaneously, but on Zoom it just means interrupting or potentially interrupting because you keep thinking 'maybe someone else wants to go too', so it becomes impossible to share." For some interviewees, online spaces significantly hindered their ability or willingness to share, transforming spaces of inspiration, uplift and motivation to get and stay sober into spaces of "muted awkwardness." Online spaces can also be intimidating with our own and others' faces up close. Zoom speaking etiquette is also often hard to navigate and the spontaneity of intimate moments like sharing in AA meetings is hindered. For Jenni and Adam, an aspect that was difficult to negotiate in the online contexts was our ability to pick up on bodily cues. We are unable to read others through our senses. Jenni explained that "Sometimes to find out how someone is really doing in an AA meeting is being able to smell how they are doing." A person may be too ashamed to admit they restarted drinking or to ask for help. But in an in-person situation, a fellow member may be able to spot it and reach out without a person needing to say anything.

However, others like Elizabeth found online spaces liberating. She admitted that when she started attending the in-person meetings shortly before the lockdown in March 2020, she often lied about her sobriety or how much alcohol she consumed in a given week: "It felt like I wasn't really serious about it. When things moved online, and I got this 24/7 access to support I attended three meetings a day. I could go to a meeting whenever I felt an urge to drink. (…) And so I think I became serious about it. I think I finally understood and I stopped drinking. (…) I also started the Twelve Steps programme with a sponsor who I met in person in pre-pandemic times. Although Step 8 and 9 (making amends) has been difficult to do remotely, I was able to commit more time to the whole process." For some, online ritual spaces like AA meetings can be empowering and fruitful as they create a specific kind of intimacy that is simultaneously more distant and deeply felt. The distance affords courage to share more openly, while the ability to explore and find one's own kind of crowd without travelling hundreds of miles might just be a trigger for new, deep affinity to others. This affinity can emerge for various reasons. Adam, for example, explained that until the meetings moved online, he tended to attend English-speaking AA meetings but the pandemic motivated him and other geographically dispersed Welsh-speaking members of the Fellowship to start regular AA meetings where they would share in Welsh. For him, this created a different way of emotionally connecting with his own story of achieving sobriety and it revived his motivation to attend more meetings.

To achieve and sustain sobriety via AA Zoom meetings has been extremely difficult for many. While some found their feet in online spaces, the AA community welcomed the ability to return to in-person meetings with a sigh of relief. Like in many of the other cases discussed in this report, migrating people's ritual lives online reveals and can exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. Digital ritual solutions, while helpful for some and instructive for analytical purposes, are unlikely to become a rule.

Testing Inclusion: Technologically Dis/ Enabled Rituals

Paulina Kolata

Introduction

This case study focuses on a Church of England (CoE) based in suburban northwest England, which in the past few years adopted the "Inclusive Church" (IC) identity . The Inclusive Church status commits the church to fostering an environment which does not discriminate on the bases of economic power, gender, gender identity, mental health, mental or physical disability, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Through an analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of community members, most of whom are women (ordained and lay), this case study documents the challenges of inclusion in the communal ritual life of the church with a declared commitment to the principles of inclusivity. In doing so, the focus is on the question of access to worship, managing diversity, and the role of technology in crafting dis/enabled worship communities under COVID-19 restrictions. The question of technological use thus serves to explore how choices around the technology used in ritual contexts can transform religious rituals to foster, limit and disable religious sense of belonging. To protect the privacy of my interlocutors, the church will not be named and my interlocutors' reflections will appear under self-selected pseudonyms.

The make-up of this community is diverse but dominated by the majority demographic of middle-class, suburban, economically stable, White members, often family-centred participation. The church community has four distinctive congregations which range from a very traditional Book of Common Prayer liturgy favoured by older members of the community to the middle of the road services aimed at families with children, and more eclectic forms of worship from High Church to strong evangelical styles. The diversity of members is therefore reflected in worship styles and preferences of various groups around the structure and format of liturgy, including aesthetic choices concerning music, participatory elements, and more ephemeral/affective aspects of worship and understandings of the individual relationship with the divine that drive people's spiritual nourishment. The membership is more complex still as the church community includes a sizable community of Farsi Christian asylum seekers.

The church supports a congregation of over four thousand households. Geographically, the majority of the community members live in the church's vicinity and the parish boundaries. After adopting the inclusive church status a few years ago, the community lost a few of their members who opposed this development. This, however, has been offset by the influx of new members from the outside of the parish who were attracted to the community because of their official stance on inclusivity. Members of the Farsi community are also geographically dispersed and often travel in to participate in worship.

Methodology

This case study is informed by data collected through digital anthropology methodologies including:

- content analysis of audio-visual materials including weekly pre-recorded and professionally edited Sunday service, social media feeds (Facebook), and regular emailcampaigns with the church community updates;
- digital ethnography of Zoom services during Easter 2021;
- interviews conducted remotely with the use of online conference software (Zoom) with self-selected religious professionals (3), lay church community leaders (2), and lay church community members (6). The interviewees age groups range from mid-20s to mid-60s.

The data collection process took place between November 2020 and May 2021, thus spanning across various stages of national and regional lockdowns in England. Stephen (pseudonym) who was my key contact was interviewed four times (November and December 2020, April and May 2021). This allowed to include some reflection on the changing temporalities of the pandemic and provided Stephen with an opportunity to respond and reflect to some of the concerns raised by his community members throughout the pandemic.

Key Findings

On Exclusion/Inclusion. This investigation and the voices of my interviewees reflect how technology works to bring a community together (or apart) in ritual, as well as what and who is included or excluded in the process. It also reveals how economic structures and demographics play a role when it comes to enabling rituals at times of global health crisis.

The church's leadership decided to close its premises before the lockdown measures were introduced across England in March 2020. Prior to the pandemic, the church had four regular services on Sunday catering to a range of different communities, including two services aimed at family-centred congregations, one focused on more orthodox liturgy, and one that tended to attract "single professionals'' and LGBTQI+ members. The regular worship was further supplemented by outreach volunteering, social gatherings at the church café (including the annual Pride celebration), Bible study groups for children and adults (including a monthly session for a Farsi community) aimed at deepening people's faith and understanding of ritual structures. With the closure of the church premises in March 2020, the schedule of activities was halted, and the ritual life of the church community migrated online. Four distinct Sunday worship services were digitally united under one umbrella of a pre-recorded church service broadcast that was assembled and edited weekly and then streamed on the IC's website via the YouTube Premium service. This professionally-produced recording has been broadcast every Sunday at 10:30 am since March 2020. It became the central pillar of the institutionally organised IC ritual life during the pandemic, aiming to bring under one umbrella the diverse congregational groups within the IC community.

Ritual labour, ownership, and authority. The IC has been forced to prioritise ritual labour and the technological infrastructure it requires. The majority of non-clergy staff members were placed) on furlough, which diversified the kinds of work the ritual specialists needed to perform. Upskilling of staff to adapt to the online/digital working environments has been a challenge. Religious professionals across communities needed to develop new skills for not only preaching online, but also for technological support it requires, from the basics of various video conferencing programmes to complex audio-visual editing suits. (See the Tech Team case study, p 80ff, for more).

CoE communities vary in their access to economic and human resources and some ritual professionals have been facing greater upskilling challenges, while others have been able to draw on external support. The IC community has benefited from the existing expertise of local members, often co-opting the support of professionals in the tech, media, and creative sector. As a result, we see an emerging involvement of the lay community in the staging of rituals and their aesthetics. There is a renegotiation of existing power structures. In our interview, Anna questioned the very ownership and spiritual (and structural) authority around the rituals: "[Technology and technological expertise are] shaping a lot of things up about who's got the power here. (…) who's actually leading this stuff? Is our Sunday broadcast designed by a priest or by a technician?" (Anna, 15 February 2021).

The motivations behind the service broadcast design were to exclude elements that "did not make good TV" (such as Eucharist and the Holy Communion). Exclusion of the sacramental elements that "just don't work online" was also an effort to treat everyone equally by excluding everyone from accessing it, lay members and clergy alike. Three of my lay interviewees openly questioned whether the broadcast was therefore still an encounter with the sacred or whether it was "a church community bulletin." However, the pre-set framework of the church service broadcast calls into question the value of communal ritual co-creation and the legitimacy of spiritual leadership.

Streamlined and over-professionalised worship. Pre-recording of services was meant to support staff during this time and produce a more "in control" experience for the members. However, it also resulted in creating distance between the ritual professionals and lay members who were the intended audience of the broadcast, changing not only the kinds of labour performed but also the nature of the service that was broadcast. Technological rigidness and streamlined ritual experience can also lead to disengagement in communal ritual forms. The broadcast adopted at the IC borrows the format of the BBC radio daily service and develops it to incorporate participatory elements. Members are invited to contribute with video recordings of the Bible readings and photographs, so it is participatory in principle but there are no interactive elements during streaming. Members of the clergy team

provide recordings of leading the service with prayer and reflection from domestic environments (and occasionally from the church buildings). These are interwoven with professionally recorded music in a home-made studio by professional musicians and the audio-visual presence of the church spaces (bells, altars, gardens, stained glass artwork). Text is either provided on screen (hymns, song, prayers) or as captions below (reflections). The Lord's Prayer is led by staff or community-members (including children), but also delivered in Farsi and British Sign Language. The final element is always a slide of photographs provided by church community members in their local/home settings. So, the video displays a great degree of inclusion, but it is passive at the point of encounter.

As the IC's team rector, Stephen, explained, consolidating the worship services into one broadcast was meant to unite all church members to generate a sense of shared experience. For Tom, it worked. Him and his wife gathered every Sunday morning to watch it in real time at 10:30 am: "(…) it's this idea, this very hazy notion in the back of your mind that everyone else is doing this at the same time as well. So, we're actually all doing this at the same time, together". Although Tom was aware that this assumption was unverifiable, it generated a sense of belonging to a larger "imagined community" of fellow worshipers. However, for others, the overly professional feel of the broadcast, assembled and edited by a community member-cum-professional video producer, the final "product" of that work felt "too sleek" and it did not "feel real." Four of the interviewees questioned the efficacy and the affective capacity of such spiritual encounters. Florence, who joined the IC community during the pandemic and for whom the broadcast provided a window into learning about Christian faith and practices, the broadcast is about watching rather than participating. As a Christian newcomer, she considered this opportunity to "watch" as an opportunity to learn, but it prevented her from exploring further or joining in the practice.

For many of interviewees, the broadcast should have been "a temporary, first response solution" that should have, in time, transformed into more participatory forms of worship led by religious professionals in conversation with the needs of the congregation, rather than tech wizards. This suggests that over-professionalisation of worship can create greater distance and affective disconnect from one's community. Technical glitches were welcomed as they created an illusion of participation and accounted for "the realness" of the ritual experience. The service for Remembrance Sunday was the only live streamed service that took place at IC in 2020. Jane, a member of the IC community, said that technical issues and time lag that happened during that broadcast generated a robust and cordial discussion in her local home group's WhatsApp feed. "Although we all did a moment of silence at a wrong time," she said, "at least we knew we were all a little bit off" (Interview, 26 January 2021). Technological glitches in ritual worship can therefore create connections among people and root them in the moment across cyberspace and time lag.

Participation vs. viewership. While many recognised the online broadcast service as impressive and labour-intensive, they also conveyed dissatisfaction with the medium: it generates viewers, not participants. IC community members were already relatively familiar with the online interactive platforms such as Facebook, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or developed their understanding through the necessities of homeworking in their professional lives. Therefore, they expected the ritual provision at their local church to follow a similar trajectory from a static service broadcast to more interactive forms of worship.

Most of the interviews reported "unplugging" from watching the broadcast after a few weeks of novelty worn off. Others returned to the broadcast occasionally to watch the photographs that IC community members send in weekly that are included at the end of the broadcast. Those who watched regularly admitted "watching" rather than participating, often still in their dressing gowns and with a cup of tea in their hand: "At first, I prayed and joined in loudly, but with time, it felt silly (…) The congregation wasn't there to encourage me and the gestures felt out of place" (Interview, 27 January 2021). For Lina, quoted here, the ritual process that once felt familiar and comforting had been displaced. Since she could not experience this sense of ritual community, she stopped watching the broadcast as it did not provide her with "meaningful encounter with the Spirit." Instead, she started investing more time in personal prayer at home and in nature where she could experience the familiar sense of community.

While viewing worship online can be more inclusive and educational, allowing new members to join unnoticed and converts to the tradition to get a feel for the community and observe ritual patterns, the lack of participatory and communal elements can lead to affective and spiritual disconnect. The interviewed members of the IC community often supplemented the broadcast service offered at their church with participation in services from other churches delivered via Zoom and live streamed via Facebook. Later on, in the pandemic, a few members of the community decided to lobby the IC ritual leaders to create alternative formats of engagement, including live streaming of services to a closed Facebook group and Zoom prayer gatherings.

Exclusion as an enabling mechanism. Exclusion can also be empowering, intentionally or otherwise. The Farsi community, who previously participated in one of the English-language Sunday worship services, developed its own online Sunday service led in Farsi and accessible via Zoom. In the conditions of the pandemic, the inability of the Farsi members spread out geographically across the North West of England to attend in person created an opening for them to carve out their own space of worship within an overwhelmingly English-speaking church community. Transitioning into the online world has also meant that people living further afield have been able to join the services and the IC's Farsi community has tripled during the pandemic. Anne, a member of the IC clergy team, sees this as a positive development in principle. However, she raised concerns over the scriptural and spiritual integrity of people's faith. As most of the Farsi members are new Christians and the clergy team often rely on translations into English provided by one of the members, they are concerned about the accuracy of the theological teachings and ritual structures they are able to provide. Another long-term concern is over the alienation of the Farsi congregation from the rest of the church community. While technological solutions created a precedent for building an independent space for the Farsi community to practice and explore their faith, the clergy team are aware of the challenges this could pose for integration.

One solution that the community decided to invest in is a crowdfunded dedicated room within the church premises that can be used for hybrid worship and prayer sessions. The pandemic forced the majority of the UK population into conditions of exclusion that had been previously already experienced by various minority communities including people with disabilities and health conditions that made in-person attendance a challenge. This has forced various religious communities, including the IC, to consider more robustly the question of building a more inclusive ritual landscape. Explorations of the hybrid forms of worship are one step in that direction.

Exclusion, experienced by the LGBQI+ community members, who found it difficult to connect with the non-participatory model of ritual life at the IC community, felt empowered to explore access to other, digitally enabled communities. One interviewee said, "Until I started looking, I didn't know there was so much support for the LGBT people in the Church of England. Once I started exploring online, I fell down this rabbit hole of possibility."

Conclusion

The pandemic has challenged and expanded the ability of religious institutions to be inclusive and provide meaningful participation and spiritually efficacious nourishment to all, but it also exacerbated the pre-existing challenges around ritual participation and adaptability. It has revealed the inclusion challenges faced by people in religious contexts and forced far more people to confront them than had been the case.. But the "one size fits all" solutions can dishearten even the very faithful. The more universally conceived a ritual that strives for wholesome communal unity, the more it seems to reveal the marginalised voices and diverse styles of practice. Many of the interviewees felt that the broadcast (standardised & structured) did not take their spiritual needs into account and did not provide the flexibility in ritual styles that attracted them to the community in the first place, thus challenging the processes of making the ritual spaces their own. So, can we move beyond crisis response mode to expand a more mindful technological provision that might require a more shared model of ritual labour and authority?

This case study draws our attention to the important issue of digitally en/disabled ritual worship. Advancing digital or digitally enabled communal rituals and spaces has a huge potential to build inclusion, but also huge risks of exclusion at the time when digital disparity and poverty is becoming more acute. Voices of the IC community members make it clear that ritual leaders need to pay close attention to how technologies enable and constrain practitioners, their practices and senses of belonging, and people's access to spiritual nourishment. Equally important is how, for whom and under what circumstances these technologies create worlds we may want to inhabit and claim for ourselves. What and how technology is used to create points of access and engagement with the religious worlds (institutions, practices, places and people), has potential to produce not only a physical, but also emotional distance between ritual leaders and participants, challenging the value of the institutional frameworks of belonging and reorganising the scales of such belonging from local, through to translocal and global.

The Pandemic as Catalyst for Step Change in Orthodox Jewish Female-Only Online Prayer Groups

Katja Stuerzenhofecker

Prompted by the closure of synagogues during the first lockdown, two female-only online prayer groups started up in the spring of 2020 under institutional auspices to celebrate Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of the Jewish month. They gather for 15 – 30 minutes to sing the traditional Hebrew liturgy of Hallel, Hebrew for 'praise'. The event is possible online when Rosh Chodesh falls on days when the use of electronic equipment is permitted by the groups' Orthodox authorities i.e., not on a festival or the Sabbath. Before the pandemic, the groups met in person, but only very occasionally in their associated synagogues and in private houses with limited numbers attending. The online gatherings are much bigger with hundreds of participants.

"It's an act of compassion because it brings in women who were excluded from attendance for all sorts of reasons," says a regular online attendee who had stopped going to synagogue before the pandemic because it had lost its meaning for her. Accessibility of the sacred space and of the ritual itself is a major concern for many Orthodox Jewish women and girls who have become committed to regular communal prayer online during the pandemic.
The move online grew out of a desire to offer a regular ritual event aimed specifically at female members of Orthodox communities in recognition of the additional demands and challenges they face during the pandemic. Also, in-person COVID safety measures made women's and girls' marginal positioning in most Orthodox synagogues—often high up on a balcony with bad acoustics and sightlines—even worse than before, increasing their sense of distance from the ritual action. When synagogues are open with very limited capacity, there is a general sense that males should have priority, as prayer is required for males but optional for females.

One prayer group holds Zoom meetings with 100 – 200 participants, led by 15 lay women and girls, most of whom lead from separate locations. The other event is live streamed on Facebook with only the one or two prayer leaders visible. These leaders are occasionally lay leaders and more usually rebbetzins (traditionally, wives of rabbis who are often appealed to as religious authorities in their own right). Recordings of these events are available on Facebook and receive several hundred views each. Both groups have a core of regular leaders with changing additional singers. They attract participants from across Britain and beyond, and all are encouraged to share where they are joining from. Each gathering opens with a speech on the month's theme, while the Facebook event also includes explanations of the liturgy. Most of the singing is solo and unaccompanied. The Zoom meeting ends with informal time that includes voice chat, further singing or videos.

In order to understand the effect of these two online rituals on participants, I collected their experiences through two anonymous online questionnaires customized to each group and advertised to participants by the group organizers. The survey for the Zoom Hallel received 18 responses which is a 10% response rate; the FB Hallel survey received only 2 responses. In addition, I carried out eight semi-structured interviews with organizers and participants of both groups.

The pandemic has served as a catalyst for new ways to organize ritual around women and girls' religious needs and circumstances. Online delivery is a significant factor in drawing much larger numbers of participants than similar events did on local premises before the pandemic: a geographically limited local community is unlikely to include many like-minded women and

girls who value female-led prayer. Virtual access is particularly important for members of small Jewish communities outside London where women's and girls' prayer groups are very rare.
Many regular participants of the online Hallels who had never or only very occasionally attended any kind of ritual in synagogue before the pandemic have become regulars for two reasons. First, the current urgency to move online addresses a wide range of physical access issues in synagogues that pre-date the pandemic and that are likely to continue into the future. Added to this is the organizers' careful attention to scheduling that takes into account women's common daily routines, care work and employment, concerns which are not normally prioritised in mainstream ritual programming. The ritual's short duration and monthly recurrence makes it a more manageable commitment than main synagogue rituals which are more frequent and significantly longer. Second, those disaffected by women's and girls' marginalisation in Orthodox synagogues value this rare opportunity to be close to and fully participate in the ritual action, and to exercise and experience female ritual leadership of all ages within the authorised liturgy in a public Orthodox setting.

"I think there was something very powerful about hearing women lead prayer, especially when it's fine [i.e., acceptable according to Jewish law], and they can, and there's not an issue about the quorum [i.e., the ten men required to conduct many forms of formal Jewish worship]. And also it's unique because you don't get to hear women leading prayer often." Although the Hallels are conducted according to Orthodox expectations, many participants value that the virtual space enables a more diverse gathering across Jewish movements and observance levels than what they commonly encounter in Orthodox synagogues. The online Hallels do not require formal synagogue membership, and they remove the perceived barrier of crossing the physical threshold of an Orthodox synagogue where some participants – non-Orthodox as well as Orthodox – feel uncomfortable. In both online formats, all attendees are encouraged to use their prayer books and to sing along. Because Orthodox women and girls are discouraged from singing aloud in mixed-sex prayer, many appreciate being 'on mute' while building up their confidence. The interactivity of Zoom, while not perfect for singing together, works well enough for the majority to feel a sense of community and active participation.

Since most recruitment is by word of mouth, a sense of community emerges in the digital space by virtue of existing links as relatives, friends or fellow synagogue members join in. While travel is severely restricted, especially abroad, the Hallels allow dispersed family members and friends – a common feature of Jewish life – to pray together. Participants' locations are announced and celebrated in order to give all a sense of connection to the Jewish people as a world-wide community.

While the two groups have developed a large following very quickly, they are not for everybody. Some participants see the female-only virtual space as second-best to being together in synagogue with a minyan, the quorum of ten males, and a male rabbi presiding. Conversely, others are not satisfied with active Orthodox female participation being limited to sex-segregated events. Another group prefer private prayer meetings with no institutional involvement.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the Hallels use the exceptional conditions under the pandemic to make significant progress with the normalization of female ritual leadership within mainstream Orthodox institutions. In the face of institutional leaders' reluctance, some women expect that it might require strong advocacy and male support for this to endure beyond the pandemic and to make the exceptional the new normal.

Female-only online Hallel has already become firmly embedded in many participants' observance as indicated by their regular attendance. Regardless of whether they are directly affected or not, many demand not to lose this improved access of women and girls to rituals in normal times. Many Hallel members want to be active participants in communal prayer not only during the pandemic, but at any time. As one participant said, "A women's Hallel group where women get to sing as loud as they want and have women leaders like that would be amazing. And I'm really excited to see what this means for women and women's participation and women's leadership, especially within United Kingdom Orthodox Jewry."

While there is a strong desire for the online events to continue, there are also concerns for their sustainability in terms of attendance and resources. Both events rely heavily on the organizers, prayer leaders and participants' access to technological infrastructure and the competence required to use it, none of which is fully available at present and secured for the future. Since the Zoom group is entirely volunteer-run, its continuity depends on the critical mass of women being willing and able to step up. Keeping the format responsive to needs, linking the events with other like-minded initiatives, providing education and mentoring, and receiving institutional endorsement in the form of policy changes and resources are all cited as vital for sustainability.

Intimacies and Affects of Buddhist Networks

Paulina Kolata

Introduction

In this case study, I explore the experiences of Buddhist practice under the COVID-19 pandemic among the members of a London-based Japanese Buddhist temple. In the interest of protecting my interviewees' privacy, I will refer to it simply as London Temple and use pseudonyms for my interviewees. The temple belongs to the True Pure Land[1] tradition and is an example of a community that successfully supports both Buddhist converts who have come to Buddhism in adulthood[2] and the local Japanese diaspora community. Prior to the pandemic, the temple had run a robust programme of activities including daily morning and evening services, weekly meditation classes, bi-weekly preaching service with a social gathering, a bi-annual weekend retreat, a monthly women's group meetings, and monthly children's dharma sessions. The temple is also home to a Zen garden where several community members perform daily or weekly cleaning duties as part of their Buddhist practice. Following a Japanese temple management system model, the temple is run by a Buddhist temple family, supported by a board of trustees. The head priest of the temple, who I will refer to as Rev. Toda, is in his seventies, and he is supported by a younger priest and his wife, who together with their two children live at the temple, which is an unassuming Victorian semi-detached house with a spacious garden at the back. located in a residential area of the London suburbs. The only indication of the Buddhist purpose of the house is a stone placed in the front garden with graceful calligraphy of the temple's name carved and painted into the stone. The services take place in the living room that has been adapted into a worship hall. The temple is therefore both a home for the temple priests and their families and the site of the community's socio-religious relations. I will refer to the younger priest as Rev. Nakamura. The temple also maintains a strong relationship with their head temple in Japan, with various Buddhist priests visiting the London temple and some convert members visiting the head temple as a form of pilgrimage. What makes this Buddhist temple community interesting is the fact that it gathers and caters to the needs of the Japanese diaspora and convert members, thus bridging the gap between the prevailing narratives of "two Buddhisms" which refers to two different routes for the development of Buddhism in the West, that of majority-Asian diaspora temples and majority-White sanghas.[3] However, this case study also reveals how the pandemic has challenged those efforts to bring people together and, instead, has shown how focusing on the needs of different internal groups that may have different linguistic and spiritual needs (rather than trying to establish a "false" sense of collectivity) can offer a viable pathway for navigating this and other future crisis.

1 True Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū in Japanese, also known as Shin Buddhism) is one of the main and largest Buddhist sects in Japan today. However, it remains a minority within a minority of Buddhist institutions in the UK. Shin Buddhism emphasises salvation through faith alone whereby enlightenement is ensured through rebirth in the Pure Land created by the Buddha Amida.The primary form of devotional practice is the nenbutsu, the meditation on or chanting of the Buddha's name in the form of "*namu amida butsu*" (meaning 'I take refuge in the Buddha Amida').

2 In the scholarly discourses on Buddhism in Europe, the term "convert Buddhist" is often a proxy for white. While the majority of the convert community members at this London Temple are white, they are not the only ethnicity among the members. A much more universal characteristic of the convert members of this community is their socio-economic and education background. Therefore, I use convert Buddhist here to refer to a person who became Buddhist in their adult life.

3 See, for example, Charles Prebish 1993 on "Two Buddhisms Reconsidered".

At the end of February 2020, I attended one of the London Temple's last in-person events. A month later the temple ceased all activity. One of the reasons behind this wholescale closure was to protect the health of the head priest who was in a high risk demographic group and shielding. This meant that all members could no longer use the temple for any social or religious purposes. A Japanese model of a Buddhist temple usually assumes a complete "open door" policy when it comes to access to the temple's shared spaces, so this was not a decision that the priests took lightly. The complete stop of all activities without an option for alternative forms of access online came as a shock to their members, especially when the temple activities have not resumed after the first lockdown restrictions were partially lifted on other places of worship. After the initial shock, convert members of the board of trustees started reaching out to their local Buddhist priests to resume some activity. In time, many services transitioned online, and individual members were able to access the Zen Garden for cleaning work. By exploring this slow transition from paralysing shock to restarting spiritual activity, I draw on Buddhist priests' and convert members' voices to show the importance of mobile and flexible ritual networks, as well as robust networks of support for generating a sense of meaningful engagement in ritual practice. In doing so, I explore the affects and intimacies of digitally enabled Buddhist practice that also point to the processes of re-enforcing distinctive internal identities and modes of belonging for diverse cohorts of community members. By focusing on the voices of Buddhist priests and convert members, I do not wish to silence the voices of the lay diaspora community. I was not able to interview them in time for the data collection completion and therefore the absence of their voices is partially due to the project's temporal constraints. However, these interviews are ongoing and will be included in any future write ups of this research.

Methodology

The data for this case study was collected during semi-structured interviews with self-selected community members. The interviews were conducted on Zoom with Nakamura Kenshin, the assistant priest at the London Temple, and four community members. In addition to the interviews, I conducted digital ethnography while attending online preaching sessions and a couple of selected sessions of the spiritual retreat programme. By drawing on these methods, I explored the ritual spaces and ritual narratives, as well as socio-religious support networks that sustain them.

Key Findings

Community networks. Access to communal practice during the pandemic has become a huge issue for the London Temple. In Nakamura's words, "We closed down to protect everyone's health, and especially the head priest's health. We started attending live streamed services at our head temple in Japan. (…) But we didn't feel comfortable running an online service – we didn't know how, and we didn't want to get it wrong. Buddhism is about codependent existence and practice, so we wondered how we could emulate this online?."[4] At first the community went from regular and diverse access to Buddhist practice to nothing. The main concerns were the nervousness of Buddhist priests over the use of technology, limited skills, the aesthetics of digitally mediated experience, and their ability to create a spiritually efficacious environment online without the technical and economic means they thought they required. With time, convert lay members stepped in to support the temple activities and create some opportunities for engagement:[5] "We haven't heard from anyone for months. The shock of it all was understandable but there was a real reluctance to do anything with an intention to wait it out. We needed to get the community online." Andrew, as one of the trustees, offered his help with the technological set-up and training. The hierarchy systems within Buddhist institutions are strong and so the London Temple relied to a great extent on support and guidance from the head temple in Japan, but the head temple in Japan were also in the midst of upskilling and moving online, so the progress was slow.

The support of the Japan-based head temple and the push from the London-based convert members accelerated the move online. Drawing on their

4 All quotes from Nakamura are translations from Japanese. All translations were done by the author.

5 Japanese community members also developed their own structures of support and took on leadership roles in organising online spaces for community encounters. However, before the pandemic, such roles of community leadership have already been occupied by lay Japanese members, thus resembling temple-parishioner structures of dependence and governance across Buddhist temples in Japan. Japanese-language ritual provision was also delivered with the support of the Japan-based main temple, but the language barriers partially excluded and, at times, discouraged convert members from participation.

expertise of software and hardware options that they have encountered through remote working in their professional working environments, they offered solutions which soon led to reinstating Monday meditation service, Sunday morning meetings, and to migrating the spiritual retreat online. However, there was still a disparity and a time lag in access to the online spaces of worship. Some members who happened to reach out directly to the temple priests and ask were informed about them, while others learnt through the grapevine and missed out on some earlier opportunities to connect with the community sooner. Maria, for example, admitted that “[the temple] had the Sunday meetings running regularly and the retreat happened, and I didn’t know any of this. My son got in touch and asked me why I haven’t been attending.” Maria was a new member of the community when the pandemic restrictions were introduced and had not been added to the mailing list for the online events. As Nakamura explained, due to his own nervousness around providing people with a meaningful online experience, they did not necessarily reach out to all the community members, and kept the gatherings small. Maria’s experiences speak to the broader experiences of other newer community members, who I have interviewed throughout this project across the UK’s religious spectrum: some newer members struggled to connect or plug deeper into their communities’ ritual lives because much of the socialisation into ritual structures comes through social interactions over a cup of coffee that frame congregational ritual experiences and open doors to new ways of engagement.

However, transnational, diasporic, and small minority religious communities are often characterised by a highly mobile and eclectic membership. The London Temple is no different, with members all across London, the UK and internationally. Despite the delays, the pandemic created significant opportunities for some members to reconnect with the community and re-engage with it on a regular basis. Maximilian, who is currently living in China, has incorporated the London Temple’s services into his daily Buddhist practice and he joins Sunday Dharma friends’ meetings every week. The meeting begins with communal chanting, which is followed by members sharing reflections about their daily struggles and concerns and reflecting on them through the Buddhist teachings. They are supported by fellow community members and one of the priests who usually offers a short dharma sermon to reflect on a given weeks’ discussions. At the London Temple, dharma friendship support networks have always constituted an important mechanism for community building. While the Sunday service is not open to the public due to the sensitive nature of matters discussed, the transition online during the pandemic has allowed for a more geographically inclusive practice. Nonetheless, as has been the case for some smaller communities, the pandemic has not been a period of growth for the London Temple. Instead, community leaders – lay and ordained – have focused their efforts on consolidating and maintaining the existing community and reconnecting with more geographically dispersed members.

Lay Authority. Lay authority is partially linked to the issue of access discussed earlier, but it also has to be viewed through the importance that my Buddhist interviewees in this and other Buddhist communities across the UK ascribed to individual practice. Nonetheless, in traditional Buddhist temple communities, the ordained community (sangha) are spiritual community leaders and ritual decision makers. At this London-based temple, lay convert members have long been negotiating their place within those pre-existing power structures, but the pandemic enabled them to take on more authoritative roles in communal ritual-making through their knowledge and familiarity with online environments.The spiritual retreat that usually takes place bi-annually has also transitioned online. Instead of two intense nights spent communally at the temple, chanting, and listening and reflecting on Buddhist teachings, the priests drew on the experiences of the head temple and developed a month-long programme. As Nakamura explained: “We divide everyone into groups and each group has four weekly discussion sessions, which culminate with a two-day online conference with chanting and personal reflections on Buddhist teachings.” Spreading of the programme has meant that the lay members could step up to lead the discussion groups. For Andrew, this experience was both more accessible and valuable because “it has forced me to make sure I reflect deeply on teachings, so I can lead the discussion and support others as they work through their issues, spiritual and otherwise” but without the necessity to travel and stay away from the responsibilities of daily life. For Christopher, the pandemic has also been a source of spiritual and emotional exploration due to a less intense access to the priests but also because they asked him to lead a few sessions. The pandemic has created multiple opportunities for lay leaders to emerge in their communities.

Tech aesthetics. The pandemic has led to the emergence of new forms of online intimacy and technological and aesthetic landscapes that have critical influence on people’s experience of communal worship. Chanting of Buddhist sutras has proven problematic across all UK Buddhist communities, but community leaders have experimented with ritual formats to address those issues and guide people’s senses in practice.

For Ruth who is a new community member, while she is missing the embodied presence of sound resonating through everyone's bodies and the spaces around them, she appreciates the way the online spaces give her greater anonymity and invisibility in practice: "My Japanese does not exist and I don't know how to chant well yet, so I quite like to just listen to the priests and their family chanting because their execution has much more merit than mine." Christopher, on the other hand, noticed that his chanting got louder during the pandemic as he has been missing the emotional and the embodied encounter with the sound produced during a collective act of sutra chanting: "I enjoy the chanting [online] – it's not the same. (…) Ten people chanting together is a powerful thing emotionally. (…) I am able to hear it over my phone when the priests are chanting and we're on mute. It's not the same as being there. (…) I think I feel I need to fill in the space around me with sound, so I can feel it in my body." He also recognises the importance of how his body behaves during online communal practice and chooses to sit in *seiza*[6] during services, so his body recognises the discipline of practice: "Sitting at my desk would be like any other activity. If there is a talk, I'll sit at my desk with a computer, but with practice… I do need to be kneeling on the floor, in front of my Buddha." Akin to Christopher, for Maximilian, communality in chanting matters: "You do get a bit of that, because they're broadcasting from the Buddha Hall, the Buddha room. There are the priests and their family and so you get a bit of choral thing going on, but everyone else has to mute themselves which isn't as gratifying, right? I'd like to hear everyone else. (…) even if it would be a bit chaotic." Maximilian, however, believes that the spiritual and emotional benefits of communal chanting outweigh any aesthetic concerns related to time lags, echoes, and overall sound dissonance.

From distorted sounds of communal chanting, to disciplining the body for practice and the smell of incense, all of my interviewees reflected on how their domestic spaces became important locations for curating those sensorial affects. All, except for Ruth, have a domestic altar set up at their home. While the altars are not new additions to their homes, their importance has increased. Even during the live streaming when the London Temple beams out their Buddha room altar to their members, Christopher places his phone or iPad in front of his domestic Buddha altar to find an appropriate location for the mediated presence of the Buddha. The pandemic has made Buddhist ordained professionals and lay members pay closer attention to how technology makes the sacred feel, sound, smell, taste, and look, and this attention is of value for nurturing experiences of ritual discipline, efficacy, and satisfaction.

But online ritual spaces, while empowering for some, can also challenge the authority of others. Rev. Toda, the older priest at the temple, relied heavily on the support of the younger priest and the other community members for technical support for teaching the dharma and facilitating communal religious practice online. While he remained central to the communal unity, the pandemic made more readily visible the support structures, practical and otherwise, that enabled and nourished his position of authority. While the pandemic created spaces of new meaningful engagement for convert members, it also potentially widened the gap between the diaspora and convert Buddhist community or, alternatively, it highlighted the pressing need among the convert members to create opportunities where they feel empowered in their practice.

6 *Seiza* refers to a formal way of sitting with one's legs neatly folded, feet tucked in place underneath the body and with one's spine erect.

In Between Institutional and Personal: Green Lane Mosque

Paulina Kolata

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on mosques, Islamic centres and Muslim communities that they serve across the UK. The report "Together in Tribulation: British Muslims and the COVID-19 Pandemic" produced by the Muslim Council of Britain in November 2020 was the first attempt to understand the scope of that impact. While the report focused on a rich set of examples of how British Muslim communities strove to embody the Islamic principle of acting in service of others through their social welfare outreach initiatives during the pandemic, it was also a chance for our research team to begin understanding the grassroots level efforts and challenges faced by the mosque communities in providing their members with spiritual support when congregational prayer had become impossible.

Focusing on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Green Lane Mosque (GLM) community in Birmingham, this case study seeks to understand the efforts of British Muslims to continue fulfilling their spiritual needs and obligations from two interconnected perspectives: the institutional responses to the pandemic and the personal experiences of Muslim worship under COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Methodology

Data collection took place from November 2020 to May 2021. The data for this case study comes from semi-structured qualitative interviews with four members of staff at Green Lane Mosque, including the mosque's Chief Executive Kamran Hussain. The staff members reflected on the impact of the pandemic on the ritual life at the mosque, but also about their personal experiences of the pandemic. To learn about the experiences of other members of the mosque community, I relied on a survey that was co-designed in collaboration with the mosque to replicate a format of an in-person interview. I would like to acknowledge the mosque's support in adjusting the language of the survey so it resonated more closely with the experiences of their members. The survey was not intended as a large-scale project and it produced nine responses, which led to further four follow-up interviews with the mosque members. The final element of that data gathering and analysis was online data mining and content analysis of the mosque's online presence including their website, email newsletter, and across their social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (including its "Lockdown Diaries" campaign). The name of the mosque has not been anonymised but I use pseudonyms for all our interlocutors to protect their privacy, except for the members of staff who gave permission to be named. I do, however, use pseudonyms for the GLM staff members when they reflect on their personal experiences of the pandemic.

Key Findings

During national and local lockdowns many mosques remained closed for congregational worship. Jumu'ah, the congregational worship which takes place at mosques during Friday midday prayer time, is the holiest prayer of the week for Muslims. The closures of mosques meant that when the call for prayer (*athaan*) sounded from their local mosques during the pandemic, Muslims were unable to attend. Back in March 2020, Green Lane Mosque in Birmingham was among f the first mosques to close after a consultation with their in-house Islamic scholars, medical practitioners, and public health officials. The closure came earlier than the national lockdown measures and, for Azaan, this decision reassured him that his mosque was serious about protecting Muslim lives. Kamran Hussain, GLM's Chief Executive, said that it was a necessary decision to protect the mosque community and lead others by example. While it was a necessary and appropriate decision, bothIslamically and medically, he admits

that it nonetheless affected the older members of the community disproportionately because the mosque is both a religious and social axis in their lives. Amira, who used to attend mosque daily, admitted that she suffered from extreme isolation and loneliness during the pandemic, and worried about the cost of lives lost during the pandemic due to the strain it has put on people's mental health, as they had been unable to experience the communal sense of spiritual belonging that attending mosque gave her.

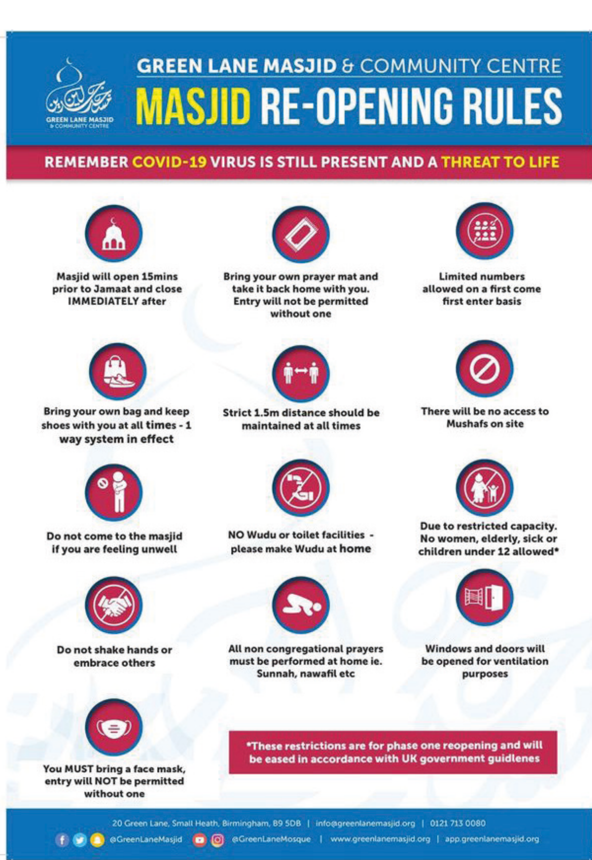
In their pandemic response, GLM were following the Islamic guidance and teaching from the Prophet Muhammad about protecting individuals and communities. A well-known Hadith that was often quoted by my interlocutors reads as follows:

> *If you hear of an outbreak or plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place*
>
> *Sahih Bukhari Book* 76, *Hadith* 43

Islamic scholars were crucial in reassuring people about the meaning of the public health restrictions on access to places of worship and congregational prayer. But in Islam, the principle of protecting life is as important as the principle of protecting the faith. As Adil, one of the GLM Imams, explained: "Masjid's role is to facilitate worship (…) to inspire people to instil the love of God in their daily lives, and that's a service we must be able to deliver." While congregational daily prayer and Friday Jumu'ah became impossible, the mosque needed to find ways to support people's spiritual journeys both remotely and with social distancing measures in place. The online updates and provision of content dedicated to Islamic teachings and advice was an important source of spiritual nutrition for many. All survey respondents and interviewees said that they connected with the mosque daily via YouTube and dedicated WhatsApp channels.

GLM quickly developed a whole range of safety measures that could be applied to make in-person worship safe and feasible: strict social distancing measures and sanitisation procedures, members using face masks at all times, bringing in their own prayer mats, as well as performing pre-prayer feet ablutions at home and bringing in plastic bags for their shoes. The guidelines were developed with the help of in-house and external medical experts and shared widely with other mosques. When I first interviewed Kamran in mid-November, he said that those procedures enabled them to provide their community with a limited access to prayer. Haseeb, who went back to praying at the mosque as soon as it was safe and possible, said that the safety measures introduced were very extensive but they did not interfere with his worship: "if anything, it made me feel safer and focused on my prayer because I knew all the precautions have been taken."

GLM and other mosque communities in Birmingham and beyond have also been faced with exceptionally high COVID-19 mortality rates. Through a partnership with the Birmingham Central Mosque, GLM developed purpose-built morgue facilities for the dignified handling of bodies of the dead that waited for ritual washing (*ghusl*), dressing, and burial. At the beginning of the pandemic, when little was known about the transmission of the coronavirus from the dead body, an Islamic decision was made to allow for a dry washing of the bodies of the dead. As medical knowledge about COVID-19 developed, the ritual washing rituals returned under strict social-distancing measures and with the use of extended PPE and sanitisation protocols. Two survey respondents who volunteered to do the ritual washing during the pandemic remarked that it both terrified them and made them think of death care rituals as an important spiritual practice because they "helped others on their journey to Allah." The pandemic has therefore



Poster explaining the safety measures for phase one reopening

created opportunities for people to connect with their faith differently and participate in ritual lives of their communities in new and more diverse ways.

However, as the mosque doors closed for congregational prayer, 3000 people who previously attended Jumu'ah every Friday and on average 200 people who attended daily prayers had to find new ways of practice, and GLM needed to prioritise other ways of providing their members with spiritual nourishment. While GLM's online presence and provision expanded, it did not involve worship online. At the start of the pandemic, the GLM staff team decided to put online videos of the Friday Prayer recorded last year in order to give people a sense of place and reconnect them physically with the mosque community. However, Kamran explained, they soon realised that people were following the prayer as if it was happening in real time, which looked as if the mosque sanctioned the practice being mediated online. Kamran explained further that congregational prayer that is mediated via online tools, including live streaming of Jumma online is "an incorrect Islamic practice because participating through a mediated means does not meet the congregational requirements." Streaming of a pre-recorded Jumu'ah is also an incorrect Islamic practice for the same reasons and it also became a source of emotional distress. Some members were getting upset that they were not able to participate while others were permitted to take part. The mosque decided to stop putting up those videos in order to avoid the confusion and upset, and to ensure that their members follow Islamic practices correctly.

Instead, the mosque expanded their online provision, using the mosque's actual pulpit to make announcements, give lectures and motivational religious speeches (*khutbah*), issue reminders in order, in Adil's words, "to encourage people to carry on their religious duties, but doing it in a safe space, doing it at home." He explained further that although congregational worship at the mosque, a sacred place for worshiping God, carries with it greater spiritual reward, there are many ways of doing it in the safety of one's own home during the pandemic including individual prayer, joint prayer as a family, reading Quran, studying Islamic teachings, attending preaching online, while children can attend classes through online madrasah. Danah, a GLM member, said that she transformed a corner of her bedroom into a designated prayer place and found a great deal of spiritual nourishment in the content provided online by GLM such as sermons of local imams and speeches of imams from the wider global Muslim community. This broader access to Islamic teachings allowed her "to feel a greater sense of global communion, and a sense of togetherness." Assima, GLM marketing lead who has been coordinating the mosque's online presence already before the pandemic, admits that GLM found it easier to ramp up their activity online because this was already something they were doing and experimenting with. The pandemic accelerated these efforts and helped GLM members like Danah "to remain connected with my faith during very uncertain and difficult times."

However, another important way that Muslims can work towards accumulating spiritual merit is by doing good deeds and piety through volunteering (e.g., death ritual care, food bank donations), involvement in social welfare support to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, spiritual and emotional guidance (including mental health support through campaigns such as the "Mental Health Monday" campaign on Instagram that encouraged people to share their struggles), helping with household chores, and through charitable donations to ensure that the mosque remains operational when it is able to reopen and to support its social outreach programmes during the pandemic. In our interview, Amira said that social outreach is precisely where she found her form of "worshiping God by helping others." What we are seeing here are the limits and opportunities of online spaces: not all meritorious rituals can or should be translated into online spaces, especially when the religious context allows for alternative ways of living out one's Muslim values and duties, and with a recognition that these measures are temporary and justified. Kamran made it clear that it is the mosques job to inspire people and show them that there are other things they can and are doing that are thawab (spiritual merit) and keeping one's own worship alive and one's mosque afloat are part of that.

As noted earlier, once the mosque finally reopened for Jumu'ah, it opened with reduced capacity. Multiple sittings (two or three a day) were scheduled to spread the numbers, while attendance was monitored through a booking system, strict social distancing measures and a compulsory track and trace QR code registration at every entrance. When I interviewed Kamran again in April 2021, he explained that GLM were using this experience to plan for Ramadan 2021 (which began on 12 April). While the mosque closure during Ramadan in 2020 came to many in the community as a shock, GLM's resident imams issued a joint statement preparing people for changes that they should anticipate and safety rules that they should adhere to in 2021. They used their platform as the community's spiritual leaders to reinforce public health advice among their members through guidance around worship.

While all the respondents and interviewees expressed sadness that they could not come together as a community during Ramadan in 2020, they also admitted

that it was a moment of greater personal reflection and more personally and spiritually rewarding time of celebrating with their closest loved ones at home. In our interview, Eliza reflected that the online content kept her engaged more because she could access it more freely, while her children could try fasting during Ramadan because homeschooling allowed the whole family to share that experience and encourage the children. Farha also said that focusing on Islamic practice at home also meant spending more time with children, reading the Quran and rediscovering her own faith anew through teaching them. Ramadan 2021 was also celebrated and delivered at a distance and with strict social distancing measures in place, but to aid people's spiritual preparations, GLM organised an online winter conference in the run up to Ramadan , while during the holy month GLM delivered over nine hours of content broadcast online via GLM's social media platforms and the website, including special lecture series and Quran classes.

One of the survey respondents who only attended mosque during Ramadan and Eid did not feel that she could find time to access any of the content produced online due to an extremely busy work life as a medical professional. For Fajr, physical attendance at the mosque during that period was the only time when she could really connect with her faith and community. By concluding with this example, it is important to recognise once again the limitation of online spaces for facilitating worship, and highlighting the importance of other ways for keeping people engaged with and rewarded through their faith and religious practice.

Local And Global Catholic Worship Communities

Paulina Kolata

Introduction

Roman Catholic communities across the world have been among some of the most divided on the issue of church closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first national lockdown in England introduced on 23rd March 2020 meant that church buildings closed for worship. During the first lockdown, England's Catholic bishops officially supported the closures. However, on the eve of the second national lockdown in October 2020, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales opposed the closures and demanded that the Government produce the evidence justifying the second wave of church closures. While the first lockdown saw Catholic churches close their doors to all acts of worship including funerals, the second lockdown restrictions banned communal worship, but allowed them to open their doors to conduct funerals (with a maximum of 30 people), to broadcast acts of worship, for individual prayer, for formal childcare and education, and for essential voluntary and public services (including blood donation, food banks, and later vaccination centres). In the turmoil of various changes and restrictions, clergy and lay staff serving their local communities scrambled to support their congregations' spiritual needs, while the lay community were struggling to reconcile those spiritual needs and public health concerns. Local churches had to respond quickly to the restrictions and find new ways of caring for their congregations. Mass is a central aspect of Catholic ritual identity and multiple lockdown restrictions considerably limited the sacramental life of the UK Catholics. However, it also created new opportunities for spiritual growth and engagement with new means of local and global worship when most of ritual life has been relocated online and into people's home environments.

This case study draws on the experiences of worship among the members of a Roman Catholic Church in the North of England, that I will refer to as the Church of Saint Sebastian. To protect my interlocutors' privacy, the name of the church community has been anonymised and I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees. Saint Sebastian's supports three socio-economically diverse rural and suburban communities in Cheshire. It is a relatively new community established as a result of a merger of two parish communities in 2010: two struggling parishes came under the pastoral care of Father Thomas in 2003 due to the demographic and economic challenges. He was tasked with the merger and building of the new church community. It supports a diverse community of Catholics in the area comprised of locally rooted members of the other two parishes, as well as a considerate contingent of newcomers including a sizeable community of Polish Catholics. By drawing on the community members' experiences, this case study explores the notion of ritual communities as local enterprises and the challenges that this pandemic has posed to the authority of Catholic clergy and spaces as intermediaries in people's ritual lives. Through the prism of this Catholic community, I focus on people's choices around local and global church community participation, and the role their domestic spaces play in shaping those experiences.

Local Pandemic Response

During the pandemic, the church stayed closed for communal worship from late March 2o2o until September 2020. Between September 2020 and January 2021, three services were held in-person during the week, instead of daily Mass during the week and four Mass services on Sunday. Father Thomas explained that not reinstating the full schedule of Mass was intentional as it was an opportunity to prepare the congregation for a reduced ritual schedule, a change that was due to happen even if the pandemic never happened. In April 2021, the church held its first live streamed in-person Mass for Easter celebrations. The church building's capacity for in-person worship has been set at 50 (down from the pre-pandemic capacity of 300), but people have been reluctant to return to in-person worship due to shielding. Drawing on medical expertise of community members, the church established a group of volunteers to serve as Mass stewards who have been supporting the safety measures in the church (cleaning, managing booking systems and track and trace records). Prior to resuming limited Mass services in September 2020,

Father Thomas decided to prioritise the funeral services over congregational worship. The pre-pandemic order of weekend worship returned at the end of July 2021 with one Saturday and two Sunday Mass services, while the pandemic safety measures including social distancing and sanitisation remained in place.

When the church closed for congregational worship during and partially in between lockdowns, Father Thomas did not opt for live streaming Mass from the church building because of the highly unstable Internet connection there. Instead, he led shorter and more creative Mass services from his home that were live streamed to the Saint Sebastian's Facebook page, where parishioners could interact with each other and leave comments, including participating symbolically in prayers and putting forward prayer intentions. Instead of daily Mass, however, there was only one Mass service on Sunday morning. Soon, these services began to focus on preaching and storytelling (including a special series of videos aimed at children), often reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on people's health and wellbeing. With time, Father Thomas diversified the ritual provision including a more interactive Zoom Mass, prayer and meditations sessions, as well as Bible study sessions via Facebook and Zoom. On other days, parishioners were encouraged to attend online Mass at other local or national churches, or in other locations globally. Father Thomas communicated with his congregation via a regular weekly newsletter that he circulated to his parishioners via email and post. He also used the church's website and Facebook pages for regular updates and guidance. For more orthodox Sunday Mass services, he advised his parishioners to tune into online Mass at another local parish in the same diocese, while focusing his own efforts on live steamed homilies, pastoral care, and individual sacramental support, especially as part of the Last Rites (including the sacrament of anointing of the sick for those facing death during the pandemic, and Viaticum, the Eucharist given to a person nearing death or at a risk of dying). While interviewing other Catholic priests across the UK, the collaboration between the local churches was quite common: not all clergy had the skills to produce and deliver live streamed quality Mass services, so often members of one congregation were encourage to join online Mass at another local church in the meantime, as these included the Eucharist where the presiding priest was able to receive the Holy Communion on behalf of the congregation and the remotely participating congregation were able to receive spiritual communion (Catholic Bishop, Interview, 7 January 2021). When the Mass services returned to the church building on 1 April 2021, the community invested in the live streaming equipment and with the support of a tech savvy family of parishioners, all in-person services were simultaneously live streamed via the church's YouTube channel, which continues as of August 2021.

Methodology

This research is informed by data collection through digital anthropology methodologies. The data was collected from February to May 2021 through:

- **Ritual experience (local and global perspectives)**: Semi-structured interviews conducted remotely with the use of online conference software (Zoom) and phone with self-selected participants including Father Thomas (the priest leading the Saint Sebastian's congregation) and five lay members of the congregation. I interviewed Father Thomas twice (in February and April), while the lay members of the congregation were interviewed in April-May, when the church still remained closed for communal worship. As part of the interviewing process, I asked participants to share with me a photograph that represented their pandemic experience of ritual life. These images provided a springboard for our conversations.

- **Ritual landscape (local perspectives)**: Content analysis of the online content on Saint Sebastian's Facebook page and website, as well as its YouTube channel including homilies and Masses, as well as digital ethnography of Facebook-delivered services.

Key Findings

The authority of people, places, affects

The pandemic has challenged the way rituals happen and deemphasised the authority of sacred spaces for ritual-making. Churches, with their doors closed, became distant, while people gained opportunities to rethink who makes worship and how they do so. Clergy and lay communities alike strove to consider their own role in shaping worship, propose new formats and means of ritual participation, as well as to engage with new spaces for spiritual encounters. Matt, who has been engaged in the local division of the Order of Mary through his local church, connected to fellow members of the Order in Northern Ireland via online prayer sessions. For him, the online gatherings of the Order provided "a new safe space for worshiping together online and across geographical distance." For Father Thomas, such reorientation of leadership in worship was an important outcome of the pandemic. He explained that having a priest as a central figure in the Catholic Church is both its strength and weakness because "when a priest is removed, people are able to explore a more adult development of their own faith" and he saw the pandemic as an opportunity for his parishioners to do

Image 1. Su's designated space for online worship attendance, prayer, reading and music. (Image used with the permission of the owner.)

just that. In other words, the pandemic has made people take charge of their own spiritual growth.

It also made Father Thomas reflect on his own ability to use the craft of the Christian teachings and ritual and values to create meaningful experience for others, to bring community together, and to bring a sense of shared emotional state in ritual practice: "As a minister of religion, I'm not the one who feels that I'm the administrator of or a custodian or a police officer for a set of values (…) I conduct the liturgy and ritual, not with the gifts of an artist, but with a perspective of one because I believe we're creating something in a ritual." He believes that during Mass, people collectively "make the presence of Christ realised" and technology can only offer a degree of that, but it also pushes people to experiment with different ways of finding that presence elsewhere. The pandemic has both challenged and triggered this ability to craft belonging and spiritual value through ritual.

For Father Thomas this pandemic has been a disturbing experience for the whole of humanity that has also "created a different, much more universal set of empathy that we're tapping into together." Therefore, Father Thomas decided to prioritise funeral services and support for the bereaved over Sunday Mass congregational worship. Because he had to rely on volunteers to help him open the church and keep it safe for people to come together, he felt that the lack of appropriate death care support could lead to greater psychological and spiritual damage overall. At the same time, he designed and delivered an online series of interactive sessions which incorporated elements of liturgy, prayer, and preaching entitled "Blessing on our homes" in order to support people in finding their "home time" rewarding: "I wanted people to not feel in any way incarcerated in their homes (…) I wanted people to develop a much greater sense of the home as a place of the religious. (…) And without pushing it to people, offer people a perspective of home as the domestic church."

This exploration of the domestic space as a site of religious practice also brought the community into Father Thomas's personal living spaces, which before the pandemic, he had protected. It prompted an acknowledgement that the parish and the church are a collaborative project, and it is the parishioners who are "the owners" of the community and the priest's role is to guide them, rather than lead them, thus empowering people to get involved or explore their faith more broadly.

Su, one of newer members of the Saint Sebastian's community, has felt that the pandemic has given her a great degree of anonymity in her new community while empowering her to explore her own faith within and beyond what the church had to offer during the pandemic. Her home and the natural environments

played a vital role in this “self-authorised spiritual quest” (Su, Interview, 21 April 2021). In the photograph that Su shared with me as part of the interview, she showed me a special space in her house that she has carved out for religious practice. Among other things, it includes a desk with a laptop – a common point of access to the sacred during the pandemic, but what caught my eye was a blue ceramic wine cup and a dish on a small shelf above the desk. She explained that she used these items to receive the body and the blood of Christ when she attends an online Mass: “I know that the communion I receive online is… theoretically, spiritual. But I also receive it in real life. Symbolically of course but it’s more… true that way.” Su gave herself permission to create optimal conditions for her own participation in the Eucharist and the Holy Communion when the physical disconnect from ritual spaces is depriving them from embodied encounters with the sacred. Su felt that she had the right to shape her own ritual experience at times of crisis: “It’s just about the kind of relationship we want to have with God or not. Sometimes, that’s the kind of different choices that we can make around our faith or our practice.”

On the other hand, for Matt and Tamsin, online spaces, while fruitful, present serious limitations. Their inability to “witness” the Eucharist has been the greatest challenge during the pandemic: “Because the Eucharist, as the Catechism says, is the source and summit of our faith, and you’ve really got to be… the Mass is where heaven and earth meet. And we can’t see that (…) Each Mass transcends time and space, and although it is not like Calvary re-enacted but somehow in a time loop it happens again and again, and again. And it is the same Calvary, but we can’t see that physically.” Matt explained that not having access to the Holy Eucharist is to their detriment, but there is no sin attached to that. They, however, accepted that the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic were only a temporary obstacle through which they ought to persevere, but this is not the first time when Christians had no access to the Eucharist, so their experiences are aligned with those of the greater Church community across time and space. While Su’s and Matt and Tamsin’s perfectives clash, both raise interesting questions around the importance of sacred spaces and objects and the authority of ordained clergy in mediating access to the sacred encounters. At the same time, these perspectives highlight the importance of embodied practice and the inherent limitations of online ritual-making: essential aspects of the ritual are conceptualised through physicality in such a way as to be non-translatable into digitally and audio-visually mediated spaces.

At the start of the pandemic, Father Thomas recorded greater attendance at his online live streamed Mass on Facebook than in-person attendance in the pre-pandemic times. Admittedly, these numbers also dwindled as the novelty of the online attendance wore off, but one of the demographic groups that reconnected with the church during the pandemic has been young people: “through the Internet, that generation, I think they feel re-enfranchised with the community. (…) Just reading their comments on Facebook, the feedback you get, you can sense that they are appreciating being a part of this. They’re responding to prayer requests.” A greater demographic spread among the community’s engaged members also means greater access to skills and expertise that could support the church’s ability to stage ritual worship, while engaging lay communities in a crucial process of ritual co-production. When Saint Sebastian decided to stay closed even when other churches opened for congregational worship, it was as a result of community-based consultation where they have relied on the medical expertise of their members: “We’ve taken a more cautious approach than other church communities because we felt we had the knowledge in our community to justify our position.” Jane and her husband are medical professionals and they collaborated with Father Thomas and other members of the parish board to design safety protocols for how in-person Mass could be conducted safely, including the church seating plan that takes into consideration the church’s specific architectural features. As part of this process, Father Thomas recruited safety stewards from among the parishioners to implement the guidelines and support in-person congregational worship. Another couple of videographers, who have previously nominally belonged to the church community, became more involved in the church activities during the pandemic because of the Facebook live streaming. They felt that Father Thomas’s “home-made style of delivery” gave them an insight into a different kind of “Catholic church” that was more accessible. Therefore, when the worship returned to the church buildings in April 2021, they connected with two other families at the parish to volunteer their professional skills to equip the church with live streaming capacity of an in-person Mass that would allow for more diverse delivery (e.g., zooming in on different speakers, which for my interviewees felt more personal, setting up cameras to show the church spaces from different angles during Mass).

Others, while engaging locally, explored global networks for Mass participation. Matt and Tamsin reported that they have been able to experience Mass through the Internet in nine different countries including India, Australia and the Vatican. For Tamsin, regardless of whether it is a local or a global experience of Mass, “it’s the next best thing [apart from in-person participation]” that “certainly connects people. When you’ve got the Internet, it breaks down the isolation. It makes you feel

that you're still part of the Catholic community." Lack of embodied presence within the traditional ritual spaces during the pandemic, alongside the move into online spaces, gave people greater freedom to explore other worship communities and provided an opportunity for diverse kinds of spiritual stimulation. Su, a new lay member of the community, spent a lot of time tuning into other communities' Mass services to see how they compared: "It felt familiar because the liturgy in Catholic Church is the same, so I knew where I was. But the Homilies and the music, they managed to add music, you see, they were so evocative, I felt… as if the Holy Spirit himself arrived within me." She felt reassured by the familiarity of structure that Mass services across the globe have in common, but the pandemic allowed her to find other communities whose style of worship resonated more closely with her own spiritual and aesthetic needs. In the end, she committed to attending live streamed Mass online at another community and she continued exploring her spirituality in nature. Although she admitted she started watching the online broadcast from the Saint Sebastian church and was considering rejoining the Mass worship in person when she feels safe to do so, she intends to continue her own spiritual journey using the resources available online. As with Su's experience, the pandemic has allowed people to question the authority of and revealed important tensions between local and translocal spaces of worship.

The experiences of more global online Mass attendance also highlight the affective dimensions of what remote "church attendance" means to people. Exploring the translocal Mass networks gave Clare, one of the church safety stewards, a different sense of grounding. She explained that to reconstruct her daily worship routine, she started logging on to the Shrine of Knock in the west of Ireland to listen to the Mass at noon. Her father was from the west of Ireland, so she visited Knock frequently prior to the pandemic. Having this family and personal connection meant that listening to their Mass gave her a reassuring sense of familiarity and presence, even as she sat with her cup of tea on the sofa at home while watching the live stream. She also explained that the priests presiding the Mass at Knocks made her feel "present:" "they always welcomed everybody and said thank you for being there. And then he always gives us a wave and asks us to wave back. (…) Even though your mind wonders and you have to remind yourself that there is service going on, these little reminders bring you back into the moment." There is also an opportunity to log onto Facebook and participate in prayers and share reactions during the Mass on the Knock Shrine Facebook page. Familiarity with the place, regularity of participation, and a sense of engaged presence allowed Jane to establish a "local" connection with the Knock Shrine community. She laughed that she could tell which priest was going to be funny and which one was going to make her emotional, and it was part of her own sense of belonging. For Jane, the familiar aesthetics of the Mass at Knock also brought spiritual and emotional reassurance at a time of heightened anxiety: "At the time of anxiety, I was amazed at the calmness and the tranquillity that attending mass at Knock brought. Okay. And a feeling of, yeah, I suppose satisfaction, reassurance as well. (…) And I think, as well, it harks back to my childhood, it seemed like the old way of hearing the Irish voices. And, you know, the way they said the prayers and the way they sang. Yeah, that was comforting to me." Both Jane and Clare returned to attending their local church when the services resumed in person, but their experiences with attending the Mass at Knock Shrine highlight the ritual's capacity to do important work remotely when there is a shared familiarity of affects.

Image 2. Clare's domestic shrine that she arranged in her spare bedroom reflects the focus of her prayers during the pandemic, including a guardian angel for her mother who passed away during the pandemic and the figure of Mary. (Image used with the permission of the owner.)

Virtual Pilgrimage–A View from the UK

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Research Background

Virtual pilgrimage has been the cover story of ritual in the pandemic. The media attention it has attracted, both from the religious (e.g.,Tadie, 2020) and mainstream press (Bockman, 2020), suggests it has served multiple functions in public discourse under COVID-19. It has encapsulated somewhat of the spectacular move online, served as a beacon of hope and evidence of survival and adaptation in the face of disaster (mchugh, 2020), and has become a focus of excitement in post-pandemic culture. Media discourse and scholarly commentary has largely posited the authenticity (and legitimacy) of 'virtual pilgrimage' (Boyle, 2020), and there has been less consideration of the ways in which Covid-19 has informed virtual pilgrimage practices, or analysis of its various genres in response to the pandemic. The few studies that have focused on new online forms have emphasised democratising possibilities, arguing virtual pilgrimage makes global shrines accessible for new audiences and increases inclusion (Dunn-Hensley, 2020) and focusing on the agency that technology offers for the creation of 'DIY pilgrimages' (Barush, 2020). This case study assesses the extent of virtual pilgrimage practice, and whether it has proved responsive to the individual and social needs created by COVID-19.

Methodology

This case study engaged two parallel lines of enquiry:

A. **Ritual landscapes**: Social media (Pulsar Platform) and news database (Lexis Nexis) = research to examine the extent and nature of ritual transformation in the UK's multi-faith pilgrimage landscape. This searched for 'virtual' pilgrimage and its various iterations (e.g., e-pilgrimage, online pilgrimage) to identify enterprises, which fed into a novel dataset of communal virtual pilgrimages. In addition, datasets of tweets discussing "pilgrimage" sourced from Pulsar Platform - 42,836 (for 2019) and 39,603 tweets (for 2020) - facilitated analysis of the impact of virtual pilgrimage on social media discussion. This research was supported by some interviews with online makers of virtual pilgrimage.

B. **Ritual experience**: A case study analysis of UK participation within a Holy Land Lenten pilgrimage, constructed online in February to April 2021 by the Magdala Experience. This research was a collaboration with pilgrimage scholar Rev Ruth Dowson, and combined auto-ethnographic and netnographic methods, with data and content analysis of user activity and comments posted on youtube.

Findings

Community

- **Genres of ritual action.** There has been considerable vitality and variation in online iterations of 'virtual pilgrimage', which has operated at different scales of community. It has encompassed 'DIY' pilgrimages (Barush, 2020), where individuals have created and shared their own rituals of pilgrimage, but also created genres of community response, which have allowed pre-existing pilgrimage communities to stay connected. (See Figure 1). The social media discussion of 'virtual' pilgrimage increased in 2020 by 780% compared to 2019,, indicating the significance of this new cultural form.

- **Growth.** There is sufficient evidence to suggest their utility as a crisis response. They have acted as consolations, or place holders for future visits, encouraging people to think beyond the pandemic to a brighter time. However, they have also deepened the fissures in society. Catholic and Church of England communities, for instance, have received considerable theological and scholarly blessing for virtual enterprises, whereas Muslim communities remain uncertain of the efficacy of online journeying.

- Community can look and feel very different online. For some, the experience of virtual pilgrimage has

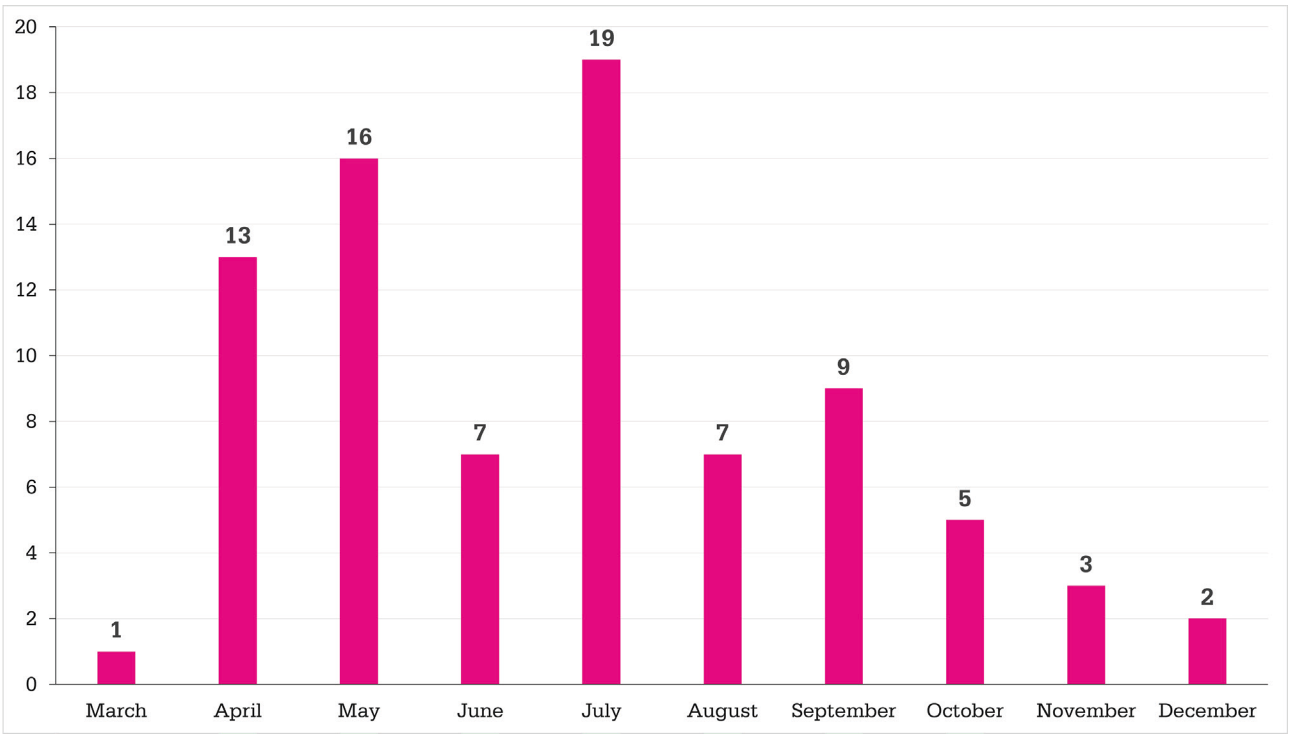


Figure 1. Virtual Pilgrimages 2020 by month - based on 82 communal pilgrimages identified through news database and social media analysis

been profoundly disappointing because of this. For others, such as the Community of the Cross of Nails, who have been able to draw more global partners via virtual pilgrimage than their in situ pilgrimage, it has realised global ambitions and visions of community.

- Social media has remained important for sharing understandings and has played a key part in virtual journeying as it increasingly has done in physical journeying of pilgrimage (Van der Beek, 2021). This has been an essential point of ritual continuity and has helped give a feeling of authenticity to ritual engagement online.

- The nature of "community" varies considerably in each online iteration. However, the pandemic has occasioned a greater use of virtual pilgrimage by older age groups, just as it has led to a downturn in the in-person participation of these age groups at popular or iconic shrines or routes (Mroz 2021). Digital exclusion remains, but pilgrimage online has now greater ecumenical potential as a pan-generational or intergenerational cultural meeting place.

Authority

- **Infrastructures**. Virtual pilgrimage is rooted in existing UK infrastructures, rather than exploring the terra incognita of the internet. Research identified 80 UK-based communal online pilgrimages held between April and December 2020. 77% of this activity came from separate Catholic or Church of England dioceses, demonstrating the strong web-based media and communications expertise already within these networks .

- Virtual pilgrimage has largely supported the existing authority of religious ritual makers: it has furthered brand identities, built trust with, and inspired considerable gratitude towards, religious institutions. For instance, horizontal community building (where pilgrims talk to each other) is much harder to create online amongst a large cohort of strangers, but participants can engage with the host far more easily. Users express considerable gratitude for the journeys they have seen constructed for their use and particular needs under COVID-19.

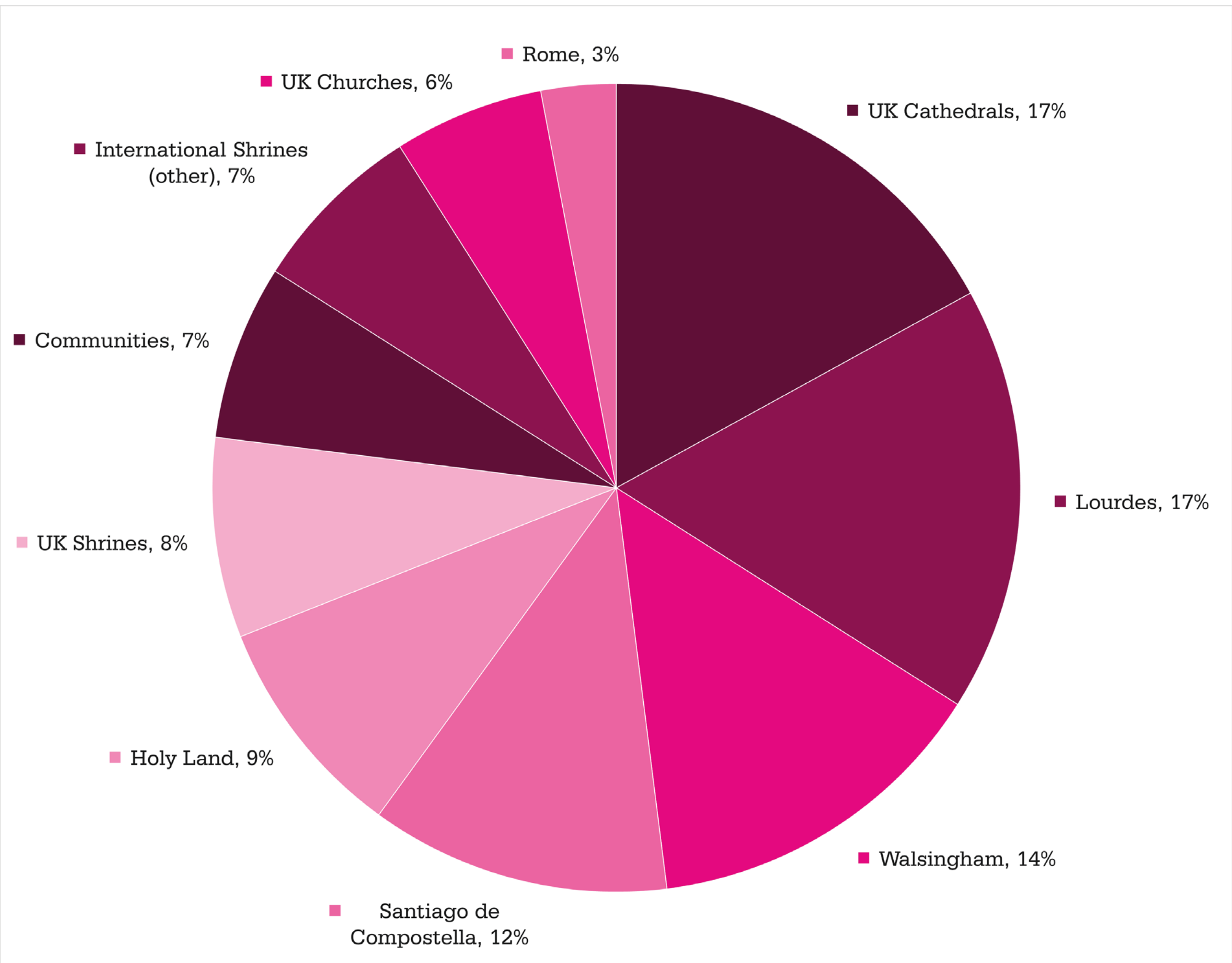


Figure 2. Locations for UK Virtual Pilgrimages

The pandemic Post-Secular turn?

- This relationship to UK infrastructure highlights how 'virtual pilgrimage' furthers strategies of the 'real world'. In the UK, rather than necessarily evidencing a globalised and globalising spirituality, we can understand this phenomenon within a wider domestication of pilgrimage, which has been in evidence for more than a decade. Virtual pilgrimages thus 'replicates secular biases within a networked society' (Campbell & Evolvi 2020, 13) by the fact of their existence (see Figure 2).

- It is difficult to gauge spiritual/secular motivations in individuals for the purpose of this study and compare them to understandings of physical pilgrimages.. Evidently, however, that there remains a spectrum of participation, from the spiritual to the secular, helps create a sense of ritual efficacy.

Emerging Technologies

- The boom in virtual pilgrimage engagement has been facilitated by widespread and pre-existing use of smart technologies, such as mapping tools on watches and phones, which have allowed more people to engage imaginatively with their local landscapes and spaces.

- The construction of collective pilgrimage enterprises (e.g., pilgrimage journeys of dioceses 'to' certain shrines) relied on very little technological innovation:

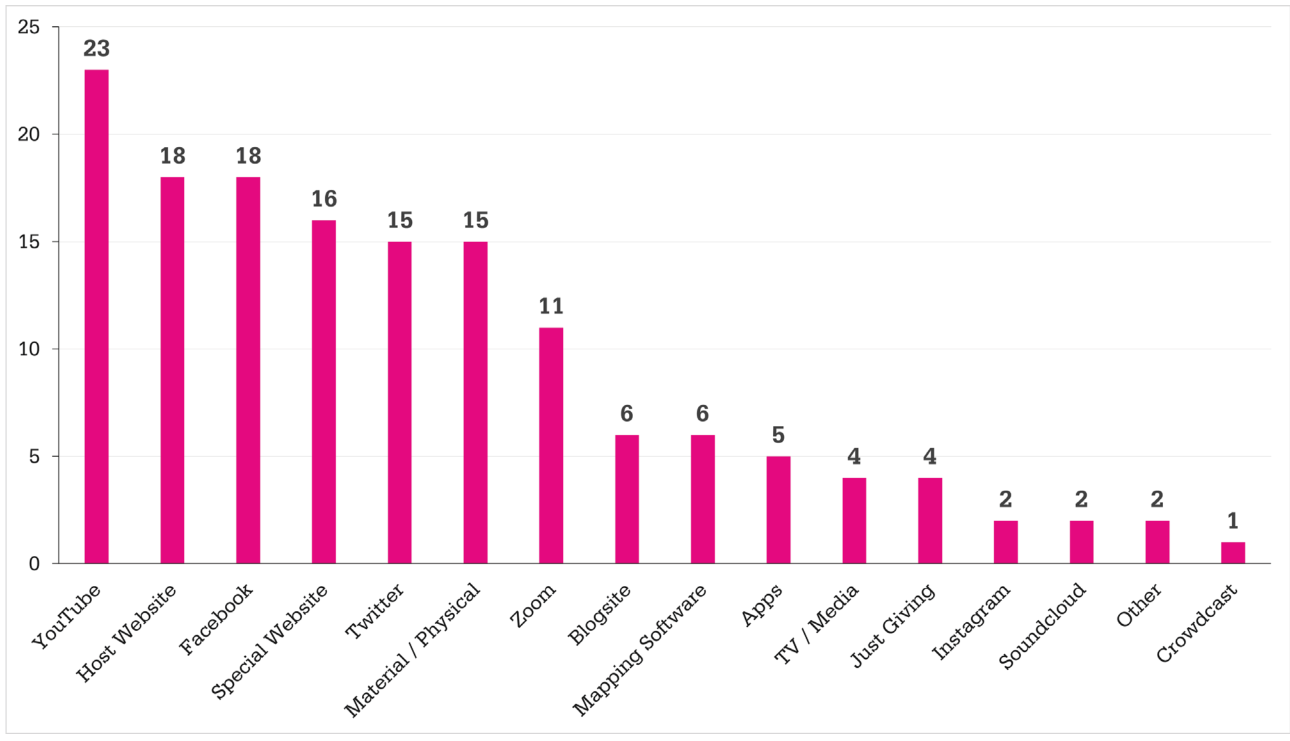


Figure 3. Digital tools used in virtual pilgrimage

video conferencing platforms, youtube, and powerpoint (See Figure 3). However, the relatively widespread use and understanding of these software tools has facilitated enterprises that feel and look communal.

- There is some evidence that paid software services companies, particularly those which re-create the collective experience of journeying, have adapted to the COVID-19 market and are increasingly meeting the needs of congregations and associations through providing more collaborative online 'pilgrimage' products.

- The advanced nature of social media use in pilgrimage is evidenced in this research. The social media conversation around pilgrimage fell 11% between 2019 and 2020, but there is still a significant body of discourse that demonstrates pilgrimage has been an ongoing matter of concern. Part of this conversation reflects shock response, but in the main, the arcs of pilgrimage remain very similar to that of the previous year, evidencing the importance of online ritual action.

Research Focus: The Magdala Experience

Much of this research focused on the constructions of virtual pilgrimage within the UK, and the kinds of engagement evidenced within those online spaces. To appreciate UK participation within the global dimension of virtual pilgrimage, the case study encompassed a detailed analysis of the experience of pilgrimage rituals as iterated in the Magdala Experience. The Magdala Institute is a Catholic religious retreat and heritage centre located on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the Holy Land, on the site of the hometown of Mary Magdalene. Its foundation and growth is part of the recent history of state sponsorship of faith tourism in Israel, which has cultivated religious tourism particularly from the Christian market, since about 2008-10. The Magdala Experience is itself an extension of the Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, built with Vatican sponsorship at the end of the 19th century to encourage Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In the supportive climate of the past decade, its Director, Father Maria Solana, spearheaded a new project to build a tourism and heritage centre on the shores of the Galilee.

The development of the Institute since 2012 demonstrates the considerable responsiveness within religious communities and denominations to wider market trends in religious tourism, particularly increased attention to the experience economy. The Magdala Institute, events centre, and hotel is set within an archaeological park, which is also open to day trippers for a fee. In 2018, it embarked on an ambitious project to develop a multi-media visitor centre with generous sponsorship from an anonymous funder. As well as heritage, Magdala advertises its services as a religious retreat, offering luxury accommodation and a modern events centre for prayer groups and individuals. The Magdala Experience invites volunteers to immerse themselves in the religious significance of the site and Middle Eastern culture. Its online shop sells an array of prayer ephemera, branded clothing, and replicas of its murals, which can be sent around the globe.

Since the effective closure of religious tourism under COVID-19, through the disruption to international travel and the restrictions on heritage sites, Magdala has created two virtual pilgrimages. The first ('Healing and Hope through the Holy Land with Mary Magdalene') took place between 29 September to 2 November 2020') the second ('Pilgrimage In Faith: A Virtual Lenten Journey Through the Holy Land Inspired by Abraham, Our Father in Faith") ran from 15 February to 8 April 2021. There is another scheduled for the end of September 2021. Each day of each pilgrimage offered a guided visit to a different location in the Holy Land, as well as a Holy Eucharist service. The virtual pilgrimages draw on the wider networks around the Magdala Institute. They are collaborations with the Terra Sancta Mexico, which aims to promote and highlight tourism to the Holy Land in Mexico and Spanish-speaking Latin America. Father Solana, Director of Magdala and the Pontifical Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, took the guardianship of the Spanish-speaking pilgrimage; Kathleen Nichols, a consecrated woman of the Catholic Church, guided the English-speaking pilgrims. These separate pilgrimages ran in tandem but are formally separated by cookies on the site.
Magdala's virtual pilgrimages have reached audiences across the globe. Engagement with the two pilgrimages has been exceptionally high, echoing the experiences of UK and European shrines which have embarked on similar enterprises. During the 48 day experience of the second pilgrimage, daily viewings averaged 11,744 for English speaking pilgrims and 116,973 for Spanish speakers. In many ways, the Magdala Experience demonstrates that a global community manifests very differently in online realms. Magdala's audience was unique to its networks. Engagement from the Latin American Spanish-speaking populations dwarfed that of the English-speaking communities. One participant from the former even termed their English speaking brethren as 'hermanos pequenos' (little brothers). Here, UK participants experienced being in a minority, surrounded by a wealth of other European, Asian and North American participants.

For the research for this case study, BRIC-19 collaborated with pilgrimage scholar, Rev Ruth Dowson (who is also a member of our action research group; see p. 89) and future publications will outline these findings in greater detail. We have taken Dowson's approach to pilgrimage and her use of the concept "eventization of faith" (Dowson 2020) as a starting point to dissect what has sometimes been referred to merely as a 'translation' of pilgrimage practices online. Previous scholarship has pointed to the connections made through representations ("mythscapes") which connect physical and online pilgrimages through iconicity. "Eventization" encourages us to appreciate the mechanisms that connect them, and highlight how and why virtual pilgrimages can function as effective ritual practices. This lens has provided new and valuable insights into how the experiential aspects of physical pilgrimage persist through a hybrid and networked array of communications, social media use, cinematography and performance delivery within the online realm. In many ways, we argue that aspects of eventization are necessarily heightened online to gather the sense of journeying through linear time, rather than geographic space.

British Pilgrimage Trust

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Background & Research Context

British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT) is part of, and contributes to, a wider cultural growth and interest in pilgrimage seen in the UK and across Europe. Founded in 2014 by Will Parsons and Guy Hayward, the BPT originally grew a reputation and following from their walking tours and events. Their practices were ecumenical, drawing together a wide range of pre-Christian and proto-Christian ritual practices, centred on landscape and grounded in local heritage. As John Eade has aptly summarised, the BPT model was created and driven by a "network of young entrepreneurs" articulating an "eclectic" blending of folklore and history, landscape, narrative and performance (Eade 2020, 8). The BPT has flourished during a time of cultural revival in pilgrimage in the UK, which has been called by some a "pilgrimage boom" (Sherwood 2017). This describes a range of interlocking cultural phenomenon and social and economic interventions, such as the popularity of television series (e.g., BBC1's series *Pilgrimage*), books (e.g, Robert Macfarlane's bestseller *The Old Ways*), and the increasing recognition of the social and economic value of local faith tourism by the formation of new infrastructures by local government, heritage organisations, and the Church of England.

Audience & Growth

The BPT's presence as a pilgrimage interlocutor has grown considerably since 2018. In May 2018, for instance, the BPT featured as an authority in the BBC 1 hit *Pilgrimage – the Road to Santiago*. A few months later, it launched the "Old Way", a medieval pilgrim path from Southampton to Canterbury, brought to light by the archival research of co-founder William Parsons, who rediscovered the route on the Gough Map (c.1360). Media and public interest in the Old Way has been considerable and it has given the BPT brand identity and authority as an authentic mediator and maker of pilgrimage. The organisation built its profile through commentary contributions to national media, as well as the release of the book *Britain's Pilgrim Places: the First Complete Guide to Every Spiritual Treasure*, which is co-authored by Guy Hayward.

The BPT has not undertaken significant audience research, but we can glean some general information regarding its audience demographics from various sources. Coverage for the BPT is found in a spectrum of broadsheet political opinion, e.g., *Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*. These media articles often emphasise the eclecticism of its gatherings in terms of beliefs and outlooks, although some have noted that these are still largely middle class and white (e.g., Eade 2020, 6). The BPT's website data (see below for discussion) suggests that referrals from broadsheets are important for generating interest, but also that many come to the BPT because they are pilgrimage enthusiasts searching for routes, part of existing pilgrimage communities and networks, or walkers. Whilst it invites a range of beliefs, in drawing together Christians of various denominations and Druids, for instance, with agnostics and atheists, there is limited engagement from minority faiths. However, BPT is clearly not disproportionately focused on London or South East England. Google Analytics data shows a significant following in England's South West semi-rural communities, much larger than this population would suggest.

Over the past two years, and since the departure of Parsons, Hayward has increasingly envisaged the BPT as a hub for walking activists, grassroots volunteering community bodies, institutions and heritage organisations. The core routes created by the BPT remain central, but they are increasingly joined on its site by others created through collaborations, or offered by communities themselves. Most recently, its authority as ritual maker and communicator was recognised by its partnerships with the Association of English Cathedrals (AEC) to make the "Year of Pilgrimage 2020". There are now over 30 routes related to English Cathedrals, raising the routes from over 90 in March 2019 (Walker 2019) to over 200 in 2021 In June 2021, it helped launch the Cathedrals Cycle Route, a 2,000-mile loop linking all 42 English Cathedrals to encourage greener travel and heritage tourism, working in close collaboration with the AEC, Cycling UK, and Sustrans, the walking and cycling charity (Morton 2020).

Methodology

The BPT offers a singular but important perspective on the transformations of pilgrimage practices under COVID-19. The relative nascence of pilgrimage

infrastructure in the UK makes an overarching study of the impact of COVID-19 difficult within a national remit. Whilst pilgrimage routes have been centred on cathedrals, for instance, the impact of COVID-19 on cathedral administration has made keeping data on pandemic practices, whether visitations or enquiries, difficult. It is clear, too, that, whilst cathedral doors were closed, a good deal of pilgrimage activity continued outside, in the environs of sacred spaces, or on less trodden rural routes, which make analysis of activity difficult. Whilst the BPT is not the only pilgrimage hub within the United Kingdom (Cooke 2017), as we have seen, it is closely intertwined with pilgrimage infrastructures nationally and can offer a sense of how the pandemic has impacted on pilgrimage practices across the UK. Has there been a "pandemic pilgrimage boom"(Stanford 2021), as some have suggested?

The case study proceeds to answer this question, and examine the ways in which pilgrimage has responded to the pandemic, via data shared by the British Pilgrimage Trust with BRIC-19. The BPT had been collecting website and downloads data for years and Hayward had been looking for expertise to process it. This presented an opportunity to examine the impact of the pandemic, recognising the significance of this hub model on pilgrimage practices and the potential to study them. The resulting data sharing agreement, created in early 2021, has allowed us to examine three major data sources from the BPT. First, Google Analytics data, which tracks and records website use, audience, and engagement, can help us appreciate the impact of COVID-19 on this model of pilgrimage delivery and use. Second, website downloads data, detailing activity of route downloads over time (10,055 in total), offers insights into use of the BPT routes and where pilgrimages took place, or where they were intended. It provides an opportunity to analyse the geographical impact of COVID-19. Third, a short survey, which BPT attached to the downloading process, helps us unpack some of the socio-economic and cultural factors behind user activity. The survey asked questions about motivation, age, gender, and cultural interest (multiple choice), which users were encouraged to fill out when downloading.

This data is not without its complexities and complications. Four months of user downloads for 2020 were lost due to changes made on the website, impeding the assessment of the impact of COVID-19. Google Analytics data also only begins with the use of the new website from early 2020, but this allows us to capture the immediate impact of the pandemic, if not longitudinal change. However, the ongoing nature of the pandemic presented opportunities to compare the partial 2020 data with that from late January 2021, which detailed the period during the third national lockdown (implemented 6 January 2021), and public behaviour in the context of the vaccine rollout and the gradual lifting of restrictions from April 2021. That we can compare the insights of the downloads, too, with the data on audience and engagement drawn from Google

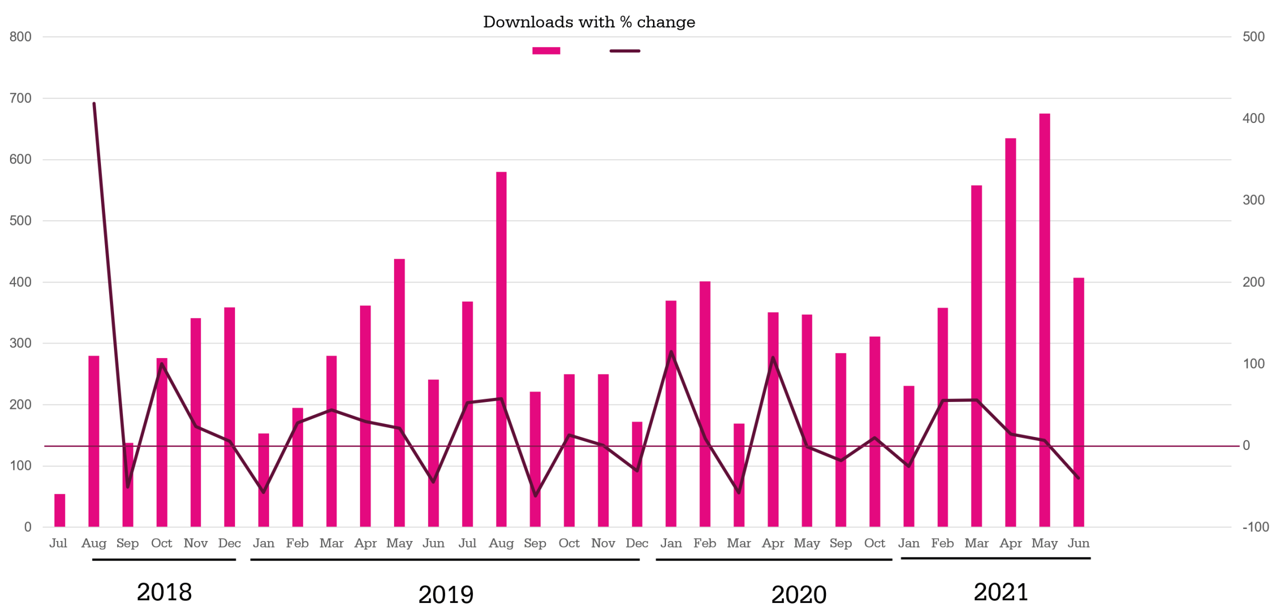


Figure 1. Route Downloads (Total 10,055; Partial data for 2021: up to 19 June)

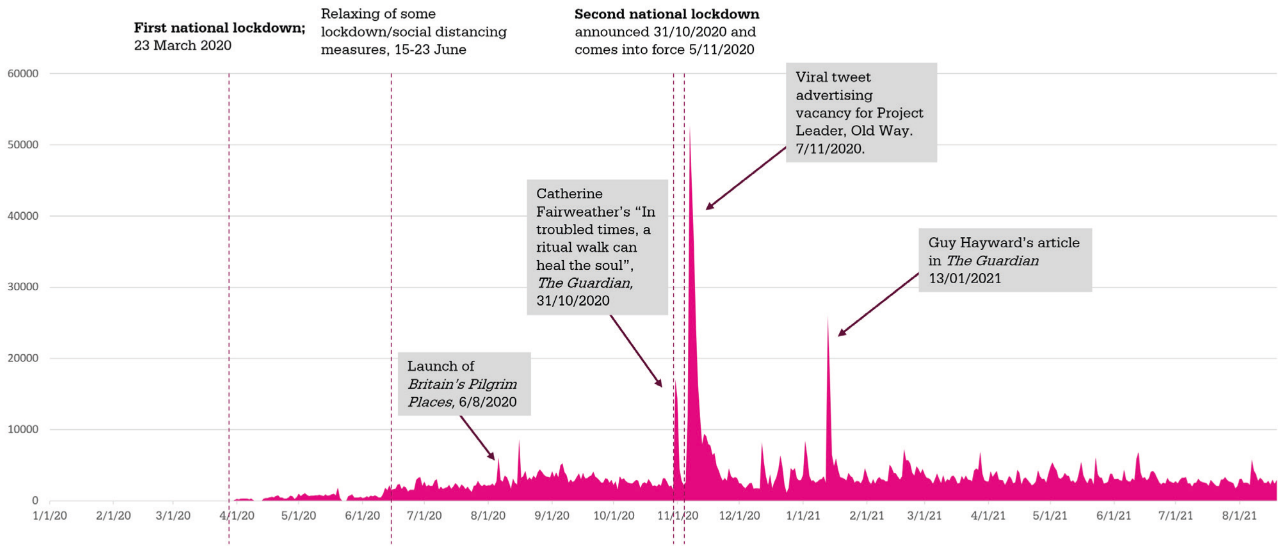


Figure 2. BPT website page views

Analytics allows us to make conclusions about the nature of ritual adaptation and growth under COVID-19.

Findings: the Impact of Covid.

Engagement & Use

- COVID-19 temporarily depressed a longer-term growth trajectory for the BPT in the initial crisis phase. The impact of the pandemic on route downloads in March 2020 is tangible. However, there is a resumption of activity in April and May 2020 in the context of tight restrictions around domestic travel (see Figure 1).

- The announcement of Lockdown 2 created the context for a massive spike in website visits to the BLT, suggesting that the BPT synergised with the unique social and economic circumstances created by the pandemic's restrictions (Figure 2). The immediate cause of the influx was a tweet advertising a job for project manager of the Old Way, which went viral and drove traffic to the website (Figure 3). The interest in the BPT, and the idea that one could work for it, encapsulated the reorientation of working lives and career priorities, as well as a search for meaningful experience, which the pandemic generated.

- **A pandemic pilgrimage boom?** A sharper rise in downloads growth has occurred since lockdown 2, when compared to previous trajectories. There is no compelling evidence of a "boom", as such, but the BPT has certainly synergised with social and cultural concerns during the pandemic (see also geographies below).

Demographics

- **Age**. This more flexible model has allowed older age groups to keep engaging with pilgrimage practices in the pandemic, contrary to the experience of the established shrines and iconic routes on the continent (Mroz 2021). The BPT model has created a pan-generational culture of pilgrimage, which is comparable to other heritage and museum contexts (Audience Agency, 2018).

- **Gender.** There is some evidence of a gender disparity in relation to download use for 2020, rather than website use: 43% women, 54% men. This may reflect the known inequalities of COVID-19 domestic labour, which have overwhelmingly affected women. However, it is difficult to compare to other years due to trace issues and possible gender biases in response (e.g., women may not self-identify to questions of gender).

- **Religion**. There is no evidence that the BPT has widened its audience under COVID-19 in terms of beliefs, cultural background or ethnicity. The audience appears rooted in some religious communities (e.g., Christians, Druids), but not others, such as minority faiths. This data is limited and we have yet to fully understand the social dynamics of the BPT audience.

Further research remains to be done on “non-audiences” for pilgrimage, which might help diversify pilgrimage practices in the UK.

Motivations

- **The Experiential Turn and Rise of Wellbeing.** Evidence from the BPT survey shows that motivational drivers, such as emotional wellbeing and spirituality, and interests in nature and cultural heritage have become more pronounced during the pandemic. These were already the core drivers self-reported by those downloading routes.
- **Social** motivations such as meeting new people or seeing family and friends are not core motivations given by users. Whilst they remain reported by some, they do not seem to have heightened in importance, post-COVID-19 or under lockdown conditions.
- Comments (free text) left by users demonstrate use of BPT as a replacement for planned pilgrimages on the continent (Camino), to escape from domestic contexts under lockdown, and to manage grief. The latter driver is not new, nor more pronounced. The 2019 data records more instances of use of BPT routes for memorialisation.

Geographies

- During lockdown the concentration of pilgrimage activity in the south east and south west of England was further exacerbated, driven by the popularity of core routes, the Old Way and St Michael’s Way.
- However, the BPT data suggests that a growing local audience has buoyed up new routes in the context of pandemic. BPT’s efforts to create and disseminate pilgrimage routes across the UK and its regions clearly elicited local responses during the pandemic. Comparing April & May across 2019-2021, the rate of growth in Scotland, for instance, is high, as well as Yorkshire & the Humber, and the North East regions.

Reflections: The British Pilgrimage Trust

> *I think what this report makes clear is that we need to broaden our message to actively seek wider audiences of diverse faiths and income brackets. We also must be aware of the growing mega-trend towards meaning-based travel and make use of that energy and attention. Grief and stress could increase over the next 50-100 years and we will need tried-and-tested methods of mitigating that increase, so research into pilgrimage and mental health will be important.*
>
> *Guy Hayward, September 2021.*

Apply for a new job with BPT today!
Read this job description to find out if you, or anyone you know, would like to re-establish the medieval Old Way pilgrimage route from Southampton to Canterbury.

Old Way Job Vacancy - The British Pilgrimage Trust
A permanent role starting January 4th, 2021. Working from home or on the path in Hampshire, Sussex and Kent, 4 day...
britishpilgrimage.org

11:04 am · 7 Nov 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 3. Tweet advertising a job for project manager of the Old Way, which went viral and drove traffic to the website

Chaplaincy and COVID-19

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Background & Research Context

Chaplaincy has been uniquely challenging to research during the pandemic. Originally, this case study intended to address chaplaincy experiences in health care settings and to connect only with hospital chaplains working in the context of COVID-19. However, despite widespread communications with associations and through networks, few chaplains volunteered to record their experiences. This is probably because the exigencies of their work prevented them from doing so, or because they found their own means of doing so through the media. With one healthcare chaplain, I reflected on how the terminology of the project might also have dissuaded chaplains from thinking that the research was relevant to their experience; what they did in these settings was different to, and "more than," ritual.

My attempts to reorient the research to other settings, also highly impacted by COVID-19, had mixed results. Fortunately, two hospice chaplains committed their considerable expertise to the project through the Action Research Group (see p. 101ff). However, reaching out to prison chaplains did not prove productive: those who I did manage to connect with felt anxious about the sensitivities of their work. One said that prison chaplains had been told not to communicate with this project, although did not specify where this order had originated from or whether it applied only to his specific context. News coverage has hinted at the impact of COVID-19 on prisons, but it is likely that the full picture of how these institutions coped (or did not cope) has yet to be shared with the public. Whilst hospital chaplains could feel a sense of moral urgency to impart their experiences, prison chaplains may have felt like whistle-blowers.

In the context of other research that has focused on healthcare settings and other institutional arenas of chaplaincy (e.g., Theos 2021), this case study has attempted to recognise the atypical and variety of experience in chaplaincy contexts across the UK. We know more now about how hospitals and hospice chaplains moved online, or adapted their work in other ways (Harrison & Scarle, 2020): how much can their experience be accepted as typical for other chaplains who operate in a variety of contexts and non-institutional settings? This report can only hint at the diversity of experience found in this research, but it attempts to show how the spatial dynamics generated by COVID-19, which affected so many faith and belief communities' ability to fulfil ritual needs, affected chaplains in very different ways – some not at all.

Recognising this variation is important because it is tempting to provide overall recommendations for practice in contexts that can themselves vary enormously according to time and place, person and community. Even in institutional areas where chaplaincy is established and (relatively) well-resourced, like the police, the local arenas of chaplaincy work, and the challenges of COVID-19, can be very different. Whilst it seems like the pandemic has generated a more nuanced appreciation of the different kinds of chaplaincy work, there is still little known of its scope and how it has grown in many different contexts over the past decade. As such, it is impossible to provide an overview of the impact of the pandemic in all these venues. All I have done is point to this fact, whilst also highlighting commonalities within the experiences imparted to me.

Methodology

- **Media analysis** of 1495 reports (between 2015-2020) from a search of Nexis UK, where "chaplain" appeared as a keyword in the headline or by-line. This does not represent the full scope of representations in the media, but it gives a good indication of the main components of how chaplaincy is covered in the UK press and provides a way of understanding how those representations shifted in the pandemic and the contributions that chaplains themselves made to public discourse and understanding of the COVID-19 context.

- **Interviews** with 15 chaplains, all working in different contexts, including railways, police, hospices, hospitals, prisons, and agricultural settings. Additional material was provided from an online workshop collaboration with Chaplaincy Everywhere, an advocacy group and network supported by the Methodist Church, held in March 2021. This invited the chaplaincy community at large to reflect on the challenges of COVID-19 and drew together invited speakers from the world of chaplaincy and public

health with an audience of over 40 chaplains and those working in spiritual support.

Social Presence

- **Coverage of a wider range of roles** Chaplaincy has increased its media presence in the pandemic. Comparing the media coverage from 2015 onwards, 2020 represented a landmark year in public discourse: the media covered a wider range of chaplaincy roles, moving beyond core coverage of the establishment royal/institutional and the Royal Army Chaplains Department (RACD) to detail other contexts and experiences, although with the focus on hospitals, hospices and care homes.

- **Hospital chaplains and personal care.** With this increased presence, chaplains contributed a clear message of caring support, emphasising the personalised and individualised interventions made by caregivers in hospital settings – contexts often seen as dehumanising and traumatic for COVID patients and the bereaved. Their testimonies imparted a powerful counter narrative to the focus on statistics in governing discourse, bearing witness not only to their own care of the sick and bereaved but the care given by other healthcare professionals. They were thus a bridge between the healthcare world and those outside of it, giving them the ability to raise concerns from a standpoint of moral authority.

- **Prisons** This was not the case in prisons, however, where the restrictions on access and operations, in contexts where internet use is either denied or curtailed, prevented many chaplaincy functions from taking place at all. This further cast the experience of prisons and prisoners under COVID-19 into shadow.

- The pandemic has had something of a ripple effect in raising the profile and presence of other chaplaincy roles in non-public health care settings. Clearly the social and organisational value of chaplaincy and awareness of its adaptability across settings has increased during the pandemic – with charities reporting a greater appreciation of chaplaincy's benefits by employers and research highlighting the critical role that chaplaincy has performed in pandemic times (e.g., Theos 2021).

Personal Presence

- **Embodiment**. Many chaplains from different contexts have articulated the spatial problems of the pandemic in terms of presence, which many talked about in terms akin to ritual, evoking ideas of regularity and consistency to describe the ways they established an embodied presence in institutional settings. For instance, police chaplains talked of walking corridors of certain stations at certain days of the week. This was less about raising awareness than about being in the space, providing a spiritual anchoring point in working life.

- **Technology & Social Distance.** Adapting presence to online platforms has not necessarily been welcomed or utilised by all. Some chaplains do not see generating an online presence as a replacement for the embodied presence manifested in a social context, although they recognise it might function to raise awareness of chaplaincy services, create more interest, and serve needs. Many chaplains prioritised social distanced meetings and travelled sometimes long distances to meet people in person, sometimes risking their own health. Others have continued to use phones, text messaging, or WhatsApp as they would have done to provide support before the pandemic.

- **Media presence.** For others, the pandemic has been a landmark moment in developing a web or social media presence. One police chaplain started a daily web newsletter, reflecting on a different element of community life or responding to news. This connects to his social media networks and email lists. Each reflects on an aspect affecting the community. He has been able to develop trust with "my cops" and advocate on their behalf to make their working conditions better known in the pandemic.

- **Community Support.** Chaplains have worked hard to help people face the unique challenges that COVID-19 has presented to their communities. A police chaplain (in Wales) described sending out video messages and a weekly bulletin to staff and officers, iterating key messages about their supporting role in COVID-19, their community work and "helping them to see how they fit into the wider picture". The Railway Mission and its chaplains reported how they have helped individuals through difficult working times, with the transformation of working environments (e.g., few customers to help, feelings of lack of purpose) and the feeling of personal risk that people struggled with, in addition to increased calls for help for anxiety and bereavement. One chaplain observed, "even within the same company it's not been a level playing field, in the same way it hasn't been a level playing field in other places."

- **No new normal?** Focus that COVID-19 has given to hospital chaplaincy should not distract from other settings where chaplaincy has largely continued unaffected or where COVID-19 or public health has not been the most pressing issue. One agricultural

chaplain, whose work already accommodated isolation (he runs a charity that provided phone line support to farmers) reflected on the relative normality of his work. Farmers in his community already lived in a sort of isolation, and, for them, life under lockdown remained similar, even busier and more purposeful, than previous occasions because of the need to support the supply chains as part of a national response. He was worried not by the impact of COVID-19 but the rural impact of Brexit, climate change, and the lack of investment in agricultural research and development. He envisaged this crisis in global food security would destroy livelihoods, families, and take lives in years to come. His work, therefore, was not about adapting to COVID-19 but about planning and resourcing to deal with the human fall out of a looming economic crisis.

Rituals of memorialisation/commemoration

- **Adaptability**. Chaplains who routinely work outside of the traditional spaces of institutional religion, and are adaptive to many different settings, were uniquely placed to support the work of grief and memorialising under COVID-19 because they could respond quickly to changing circumstances and had the acumen to produce effective memorialisation in a variety of arenas and communities. Hospices and care home chaplains, however, should be noted for providing urgent ritual support for communities otherwise marginalised and forgotten in public provision. However, some of these were under-resourced. Some interviewees initiated, co-ordinated, and delivered this valuable work out of vocational commitment and feelings of urgency, at a personal and emotional cost to themselves. We should compare with well-resourced provision of chaplaincy, which has shown how effectively it can respond to crisis situations, even in a pandemic. For instance, the intervention of the Railway Mission and its chaplains in the aftermath of the Stonehaven derailment in August 2020.

- **Ritual continuity and importance for wider community**. Chaplains took an increased symbolic role in expressing ritual observance in important moments of the calendar in institutional contexts: for instance, Remembrance Sunday, or memorial services for the London Bridge terror attacks. Some questioned how efficacious these events were, as they did not accommodate “loved ones” and other regular attendees, but they expressed how important it was to provide a sense of normality to the wider community.

- **Interfaith** cooperation and efforts characterised much of the crisis response that chaplains undertook to help their communities memorialise and grieve together. This interfaith solidarity helped communities to feel and express togetherness at a time of social isolation. This dimension of chaplaincy work is not effectively covered in UK media.

- **Benefits of online formats.** Some aspects of ritual life have been relatively easy to recreate online. Digital means and methods have allowed police communities to recreate that sense of professional solidarity in memorialisation, which is usually imparted through large-scale attendance at funerals, for instance.

Recommendations

- Chaplaincy remains misunderstood and largely considered through accepted representations based in Anglican Christian traditions and privileged institutions. This seems to be changing and the past 5 years has indicated a greater media interest in the social value of chaplaincy, particularly in local news coverage. COVID-19 has exacerbated this trend. Media producers should work with this momentum to highlight the directions of chaplaincy work in the UK and recognise its interfaith and multifaith dimensions and character, particularly, of which there is little mention.

- A government funded UK Network for Chaplaincy would help coordinate chaplaincy experiences, provide a basis to formulate good practice guidelines, and establish a non-theological or institutional ground to embark on formulating training, which can recognise the faith and belief diversity in the field. It would also provide a platform to acknowledge, investigate, and analyse the social value of chaplaincy in its different forms.

Enabling Death Care

Paulina Kolata

Introduction

The pandemic has disrupted and drastically reshaped rituals of dying, body care and disposal, funerals, grief, and memorialization across the UK and globally. It has transformed the materiality, sociality, and timescapes of death rituals and, at times, it has overwhelmed the religious, public, and corporate infrastructures involved in ritual care for the dead. Social distancing regulations and regional lockdowns across the UK have interfered with rites of washing and dressing the dead, restricted attendance at funerals, and limited access to and movement in spaces where death rituals take place. Through this case study, I explore what happens when death rituals are disrupted and consider the ritual infrastructures and interventions that allow them to remain efficacious and meaningful. Drawing on over sixty interviews with death care professionals and volunteers, I suggest that this pandemic created opportunities to document the importance of death care rituals and ritual-makers of all faiths and beliefs. It has reoriented the necropolitical landscape revealing not only the crucial role that death care practitioners play in staging of death rituals, but the infrastructures that make processing death possible. And so, I want to acknowledge their authority and religious literacy in ritual care.

I collected my data from October 2020 to May 2021, when the UK emerged from the first wave of accelerated COVID-19 deaths and was in the midst of dealing with the aftermath of the second wave. From the onset, death has been narrated publicly across the UK with a grim daily count, which surpassed 100,000 total deaths in January 2021. While the fatality rate quickly became a measure of pandemic severity, death care practitioners were the ones who made sense of what that meant on the ground. They have provided a buffer zone, making sense of chaotic guidelines and restrictions, and offering creative solutions to ritual needs of the living and the dead.

In this case study, I refer to death care rituals as being inclusive of the infrastructures and labour that makes them possible, including spiritual and material care for bodies, storage, ritual dressing, displaying, and disposal. Also, I focus both on death care ritual-makers who are and who are not ordained clergy. By taking this approach, my intention is to discuss the (in)visibility of broader death ritual infrastructures and actors. It is not to undermine the work of religious professionals who represent about half of my interviewees. The pandemic has shown how important their labour in death care spaces has been. Yet, I want to highlight the ritual literacy of other actors as well. So, I draw on examples from my interviews with ordained clergy, funeral celebrants, directors, digital tech and audio-visual professionals, as well as local community network volunteers.

To date, the UK has avoided many of the more dramatic impacts on death care experienced around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 brought about extreme challenges for all death care practitioners and ritual-makers, it is thanks to the sector's incredibly resilient response that the UK has avoided some of the most extreme scenarios such as a complete ban on funerals as experienced in northern Italy in March-April 2020 or mass burials as seen in Brazil in April-May 2020.

Methodology

To collect that for this case study, I conducted sixty-four semi-qualitative interviews with self-selected ordained clergy, funeral celebrants of all faith and belief, funeral directors, digital and audio-visual professionals, and community volunteers, including death care practitioners associated with no specific faith or belief, as well as those representing a range of Humanist, Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim, Baha'i, Pagan, Church of England, Jewish, and Black Church worldviews. The interviews have been contextualised by analysing governmental policy and guidelines around death care, regional and national media coverage of death care issues during the pandemic, as well as website and social media platforms of religious, charity, and commercial organisations concerned with

This case study report was presented by the author at the European Association for the Study of Religion Conference in Pisa on 3 September 2021 under the title "From the Shut Crematorium Gates to Virtual Funerals: Crisis and Resilience in Death Care under Covid-19 in the UK"

death care during the pandemic. Finally, I also attended a range of online events organised by and for death care practitioners. My participants gave permission to use their first names in the report and to refer to the geographical and organisational connections they had. I will reveal those whenever they are relevant for the discussion.

Key Findings

Displacement of death rituals. While some funeral directors and celebrants were unable to attend to the ritual needs of others because of shielding, the closure of religious buildings, churches, mosques and gurdwaras also reorganised death care. In many ways, it meant that care for the dead was relocated from the inside of the faith communities into civic and commercial settings. But this "displacement" of care shows how death care is a complex, labour-intense, and collaborative process.

Lisa, a Humanist funeral celebrant in Northern Ireland, looked for alternative venues to ensure a dignified departure for her mother who died in a care home of COVID-19 complications in January 2021. Lisa wanted to arrange a dignified Catholic funeral for her mother but, at the time, Catholic churches and the premises of the Belfast crematorium were closed to mourners, including the grounds. Instead, a small TV screen was placed outside of the crematorium gate where the mourners could watch the funeral proceedings beamed out from the chapel inside. The restrictions were put in place in order to avoid people showing up and congregating outside to pay respect.

However, in Lisa's own words, "My heart was breaking at the thought of saying goodbye to my ma on that wee little screen at the gate. Like some sort of beggar." Among many different restrictions across the UK (from rules against physical contact to limitations on attendance), for Lisa, this little TV screen outside the Belfast crematorium was a symbol of cruelty that hindered her ability to provide herself and others with a safe and appropriate space for mourning. Having witnessed her aunt's coffin disinfected during a funeral a few days prior, she didn't want to give her mother a substandard send-off and she didn't want her own and others' grief televised via webcasting. Lisa used her knowledge of the death care industry to arrange for her mother's funeral to be held south of the border in the Republic of Ireland where the crematorium allowed attendance of a limited number of people. Opting out of tech use, she attended with her husband and children, and a local Catholic priest led the ceremony.

Although they revealed an incredibly unequal landscape of death care, restrictions made people question and inquire more into what might be possible when the basic structures of grieving that they were used to were being challenged. These creative responses, while they partially challenge ritual orthopraxis already compromised by the pandemic, also reveal the non-negotiable aspects of death care and showcase death as a generative force for ritual transformation.

Technologically enabled death care

The above is also true for technological solutions that have been embraced and normalised during the pandemic. Spatial displacement and technology often came together during this period to facilitate access to the dead. What we will see next is how commercial infrastructures become a creative site of practice for ritualising death.

Sarah, a funeral director in England, was tasked with organising another Irish Catholic funeral in February 2021. At the time, local Catholic churches were still closed and did not allow for holding funerals within their premises and the local crematorium only offered fast-track 20-minute slots for all ceremonies. The daughter of the dead gentlemen and the rest of the family were unable to dress and display the body either at home for the wake or for the funeral at the church. The family were not even able to travel to attend the funeral in person. The body of the deceased man was brought into Sarah's care for storing and dressing, while the daughter coordinated with Sarah remotely from Northern Ireland. To facilitate the process, Sarah asked the daughter if she wanted to be there virtually via Zoom to direct her on how she wanted Sarah to take care of her father when she prepared and dressed him. This spurred her on, as she explained:

> *We had to do something. The wake is more important for the Irish than the whole funeral. So, I decided we'd stage the wake on our premises and stream people in and out, so they can pay their respects to the dead. We didn't allow visits in the chapel of rest to protect people's health but, in this case, no one would have been "attending." (…) We prepared the body and staged the wake in our reception room. Flowers, lighting, and the like. We even made some tea and put out some biscuits (…) Then, we set up the tech and we beamed people in from Belfast. One camera on the body, the face... and another on the whole set up. And, so, we left them there for something like three hours or so.*

Sarah provided her clients with a sense of "doing the right thing" and facilitated a meaningful departure for the dead gentleman by providing both the venue and the means of access to attend to the needs of the living and the dead.

Although many crematoria had already been equipped with webcasting equipment provided by Obitus (one of leading UK providers of bereavement technology services), live streaming was rarely offered or opted for, partially because

its quality could be questionable. But as funeral webcasting became familiar and essential, we saw a massive push for infrastructural investment in tech solutions and skills, which further translated into creative ways of (re)structuring the funeral ceremonies to engage with "online audiences." We also saw the popularisation of funeral videography. This became particularly important for graveside funerals and, later, as funerals returned into places of worship, church funerals.

Shaun – a professional funeral videographer – believes that "people became more aware of the work involved in caring for the dead person, so they became more interested in capturing this process". Shaun, who has worked as a funeral videographer for almost a decade, admitted that his clients may never watch the recordings, but they can make the mourners more aware of what death looks and feels like in the moment, and the recordings can be revisited for reassurance if needed. His work is more intimate than webcasting and attuned to the ritual needs of his clients, forcing him to navigate complex and diverse religious landscapes with sensitivity and care. Thus, the pandemic has popularised practices of documenting and digitally recreating and designing death care rituals.

For funeral celebrants and directors, the combination of technology and social distancing meant developing new ways of acknowledging and engaging those attending online. Like many others, Father Peter, a Catholic priest in the North West of England, explained that in his welcome and throughout the ceremony he makes an effort to look in the camera and to address people participating remotely. For Rosalie, a funeral celebrant in London, it means adjusting how she moves through the space. It also encouraged her to think of "small rituals of connection" that would allow people to relate to one another in their grief such as simultaneous lighting of the candles. Joanna also observed that this newly emergent practice also extends to people opting to send to funeral attendees some symbolic foods or drinks that the dead person might have liked. The idea for it is to be consumed after the funeral at a specified time, either collectively during a video-conference call or independently as a token gesture of shared grief and memory of the dead person.

Resilience of Death Care Community Networks.

Technology and other means can also support the coordination of death care rituals through local community networks, highlighting their importance and resilience in providing local solutions to global pandemic problems. Shoayb is one of the volunteers in Preston Muslim Burial Society (PMBS). He and his fellow volunteers got involved in cross-regional efforts to recruit volunteers for the ritual care of the bodies and have drawn on medical expertise and spiritual authority within the Muslim communities to develop online training sessions for performing the required ritual washing (*ghusl*) in a medically safe and spiritually efficacious way, and to foster a greater death care literacy among mosque members.

As Shoayb explained in our interview, PMBS have been also keeping people up to date on public health advice: "Usually, if someone dies, everyone visits their family with food and prayers. It's an open-door policy. All are welcome. We couldn't do that. We started giving people posters to put in their windows to let people know not to enter and to pray at home instead." This and other PMBS poster campaigns aimed to prevent the spread of the virus and to protect people from the pressure of receiving people in their homes. Shoayb offered an Islamic explanation: "the Prophet teaches, peace be upon him, if there is a plague in a city, do not enter and wait until the plague passes before you enter [to protect life]."

In March 2020, the PMBS also joined Twitter. They have been using the platform for reliable information sharing. Each entry is either a piece of public health advice about death rituals or an obituary for a deceased member of Preston Muslim community. It is also an outlet for communal mourning prayers and a trustworthy source for confirming deaths at the time when people cannot come together. It informs the community who may need their practical or spiritual support. And all this work is also believed to be meritorious, allowing people to accumulate spiritual rewards (thawāb) through good deeds and piety, at the time when they are unable to congregate for prayers at mosques. PMBS's work highlights the practices of knowledge sharing, community mobilising, and resilience of the local death care (and, in this case, religious) infrastructures that ought to be recognised as essential to maintaining ritual care in crisis.

Conclusion

This short introduction to the challenges death care rituals and ritual-makers have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic does not fully address the depth and complexities of my interlocutors' experiences. However, it allows me to highlight that the pandemic has thrown into the spotlight the work of death care professionals and volunteers across religious and secular contexts, highlighting that death care rituals are indeed a collaborative process. One important consequence of the pandemic and of this research has been the acknowledgment of death ritual-makers and their work. By focusing on ordinarily invisible aspects of ritual death care, we are not only able to consider the death rituals' transformative capacities, but also their own capacity to transform and accommodate limitations of the COVID-19 crisis.

Digital Memorialisation under COVID-19

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Research Background & Aims

Digital means and methods are recognised as increasingly significant in rituals of memorialisation. This research examines whether, and how, digital forms have responded to the special context of COVID-19 and what affordances they have offered to ritual practitioners and participants who engage in memorialisation during this time. There have been widespread assumptions that digital methods would (or should) have lessened the burdens of government restrictions on social behaviour and the concomitant impact on ritual practices around mourning and deathcare. There are also long-standing beliefs that digital memorialisation can increase the efficacy of rituals of mourning; widen community support around the bereaved; and allow individuals and families to maintain bonds with the deceased, whilst personalising mourning practices.

This case study aimed to combine an overview of these transformations, and assess whether they took place at scale, with a detailed investigation of their influence on how memorialisation was enacted. What consequences did digital adoption have on ritual efficacy or grieving? What were the implications for faith leaders and communities? Considering the potential scope of this exercise, the focus remains on the creation of memorialising spaces online, recognising the significant impact of COVID-19 on the spatial dynamics of social life. It does not attempt to capture all the transformations within online mourning, but those that accompany or constitute the making of new memorialisation rituals in response to COVID-19. Understanding the impact that COVID-19 may have had on all online memorial practices – of whether there has been a general increase in Instagram memorial pages, for instance – is an important question but beyond the remit of this research to fully answer.

Methodology

This case study consisted of three parallel lines of enquiry:

- **Media & social media research** (LexisNexis, Nexis UK, Pulsar Platform) to identify memorial efforts (i.e., plans to create memorial spaces) in the UK from March 2020 to the end of May 2021 and to examine the conversation around digital memorialisation. This research fed into a dataset, which can point to the extent of collective memorialising activity, and identify wider trends in the form and nature of memorialisation response. This gives us a clearer picture of how much communities have turned to digital memorialisation in response to COVID-19.

- **Empirical research into ritual making online** including netnographic research and interviews with practitioners.

- **Analysis of St Paul's *Remember Me* online memorial** to understand how institutions create, and users engage with, digital memorialisation, what opportunities it affords, and meanings it produces. This included a collection of six research interviews of project contributors, as well as data and content analysis of 4,000 memorials made by members of the public, examining thematic concerns, language, and social representation in the submissions.

Findings

- **Growth in digital memorials.** There has been a rise in digital memorial creation and increased interest in (and use of) digital memorial forms. We can point to the tangible rise in social media discussion regarding virtual memorials and online books of remembrance, which have increased 1059% and 622% respectively from 2019 to 2020. But we should note that this remains a small subset of the social media conversation of overall memorialisation, and of the collective memorial projects that were announced or covered in the UK media. Digital memorialisation has been seen as a crisis response, rather than shifting longer term expectations.

- **Politics of COVID-19.** Increased digital memorialisation was not driven solely by public interest

in, or need for, new personal and familial memorialising practices. The wider context of the politics of memorialisation also influenced that conversation. A sizeable proportion of the social media discussion of books of condolence, for instance, was created by collective and anti-racist memorialising initiatives established by councils in response to the deaths of George Floyd in the US and Noah Donohoe in Northern Ireland. We can also point to other advocacy initiatives (e.g., Nursing Notes) in response to the government's handling of the pandemic.

- **Acculturation.** One established and well known UK-wide provider of digital memorialising services made an important distinction between a 20% increase in uptake of memorial webpages (i.e., relatives choosing to create webpages to memorialise loved ones), but a far more significant rise in engagement within the memorial pages themselves. A relatively small rise in the use of memorial pages by the primary bereaved has met with considerable engagement from wider networks. Users feel more comfortable with, or feel impelled to use, communication tools available on memorial pages (e.g., lighting a digital candle, offering a virtual hug) in lieu of direct social forms of consolation or as ways of maintaining a daily solidarity with the bereaved.

- **New memorialising spaces?** COVID-19 has not prompted new technologies or software development for memorial initiatives. However, the *scales* of ritual action have been transformed. In some ways, we are seeing a democratisation of collective digital spaces in response to the pandemic, just as the First World War inspired a democratisation of collective monumental forms. Online books of condolence or remembrance still have associations relating to status (celebrity, royalty), but St Paul's *Remember Me* – an online book of remembrance in memory of all "ordinary" COVID-19 deaths - is historic as a first attempt to construct a site of national symbolic significance online, essentially through crowdsourcing methods.

- **Digital memorialising infrastructures.** Most collective or public memorialising efforts in response to COVID-19 have *not* employed digital methods in a significant way. Those that have built cultural technologies for memorialisation, particularly those that can engage with mass participation, have pre-existing technological and communication infrastructures or can create them (e.g., councils). This includes not only technical and digital skills (e.g., software development), but communications expertise, events or project management, as well as cultural authority to speak on behalf of the community. In short, cultural institutions, such as cathedrals, have become more powerful ritual communicators under COVID-19, but (partly) as an extension of their existing communications practices.

- **The changing nature of ritual interlocution.** Yet, the nature of ritual mediation online has changed under COVID-19. Software and website developers, and amateurs with similar skill sets, have become more prominent and active in constructions of public memorialisation forms since March 2020. However, online ritual action has thus far looked for authorities in memorialisation in the offline world: digital spaces with religious authority have generally been more successful in engaging communities. Faith leaders, particularly from the Church of England, have found their wider social role not only confirmed, but enhanced by the platform of digital memorialisation.

Research focus: St Paul's Cathedral and *Remember Me*

In May 2020, St Paul's Cathedral in London created *Remember Me* – a digital memorial, or 'online book of remembrance' for those who had died of COVID-19. Its intention was simple, in responding to the emergency situation of the first initial weeks of crisis and offering comfort to the bereaved in the context of the restrictions on funerary and grieving rituals. However, St Paul's construction was also a landmark moment in the history of UK digital memorialisation: the first attempt to create a national space of memorialisation online. The project drew deeply on the cultural associations of St Paul's as an historic memorial space over centuries of national history, from the memorialisation of 'great men' (e.g., Nelson) to more recent endeavours to coordinate and express national grief for tragedies, such as September 11th or the Grenfell Fire.

Analysis of the memorial shows that submissions made to *Remember Me* were integrated into offline memorialising practices for the primary bereaved. However, clearly not all bereaved people have memorialised their loved ones through these means. Although this is a matter of choice and preference, there is also a question of communications to consider. Communications have been even more critical for digital spaces of memorialisation in facilitating access, raising awareness, and offering encouragement. Media has always been central to the construction of memorials, creating communities of grief around them, and offering spaces for memorialisation themselves. However, without communications, digital memorials are entirely

space-less: there is no other cultural activity around them to give them context and meaning, to position them within daily life, or local heritage, for instance. Communications thus play an increasingly powerful role in the ongoing creation and mediation of the digital memorial space.

Remember Me involved the input and expertise of communications strategists, as well as relationships built with grief charities and advocates, such as the Yellow Hearts campaign, which is largely co-ordinated on Facebook. Submissions rose and fell with media attention. In the immediate crisis response, the memorial neared a representation of 1 in 8 UK COVID-19 deaths, which was aided by considerable media coverage and the synergies drawn in press releases (and picked up on by the media) between St Paul's and the Blitz. At the end of April 2021, St Paul's announced a partnership with the *Daily Mail*, a crowdfunding initiative to support the physical memorial in the Cathedral, within which the digital memorial would be integrated. This generated another rise in submissions, rising from just over 6,500 in April 2021 to over 10,100 individuals as of the time of writing in August 2021.

The interviews and analysis of the uses of this significant cultural intervention demonstrates several important things about digital memorialisation and the impact of COVID-19. What follows is a description of some of the main findings from this analysis, which will be outlined in full at a later stage:

- Advanced acculturation to social media memorialisation has created an informal, democratic online discourse of memorialisation that can be used in different online spaces. Languages of memorialisation in *Remember Me* were thus varied and drew on discourses of remembrance created on social media as well as other established conventions.

- Evidence suggests that digital memorialisation has integrated into familial memorialising practices and has been undertaken by the primary bereaved. However, certain communities (ethnic groups, faith communities, older generations) were underrepresented in the memorial.

- Local and national media audiences created the community of grief seen in *Remember Me*. An important, but probably secondary, audience came from the relationships St Paul's built with social media grief communities. These sources shaped the demographic constituency of the *Remember Me* memorial.

- There is a clear socio-political engagement articulated in a significant number of the submissions, which should be accepted as an important part of the memorialising process.

Recommendations

- **Learning more about working partnerships.** The imperative for digital memorialisation at a larger scale has created new multi-disciplinary partnerships, between faith, tech and communications, as well as increasing the closeness of existing collaborative relationships between faith communities, arts, charities, civil associations and the death care industry. Ritual leaders and institutions alike must reflect on these working relationships, how they functioned, and the opportunities they provide by continuing discussions regarding the efficacy of digital memorialisation outside periods driven by crisis.

- **Expertise in multidisciplinary projects.** Similarly, there is clearly a need to create bridging roles between academia, tech and communications, religious institutions and heritage organisations going forward. Implicit cultural biases within the processes impeded the considerable inclusive and ecumenical ambitions of online memorial spaces. Existing knowledge of digital memorialisation scholarship, as well as cultural memory, would have helped the project team to avoid some of these pitfalls.

- **Future Research.** To create effective national spaces of memorialisation requires further research into the uses of different forms of digital memorialisation and how they integrate with offline practices for distinct needs or different communities. Further discussion of the benefits and challenges of interfaith memorialisation, for instance, from across the UK's faith communities would provide guidance material to support future initiatives. There is also a necessity to appreciate the politics of erasure in trans identities in the digital space, or model how different family structures and relationships navigate these processes.

- **Ethical Remembrance.** In terms of COVID-19, and the unequal burden of grief, we need a model of digital memorialisation that can fulfil the socio-political needs of many different communities, express their sense of injustice and loss, in a way that clearly articulates these issues at a societal level.

Remembrance under COVID-19

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Background & Research Context

Remembrance Sunday remains one of the most significant rituals in the UK, an important meeting place for religious and secular communities, and an enduring platform for religion in public culture. The effective conduct and delivery of Remembrance Sunday was also a significant area of public uncertainty and controversy in the months leading up to November 2020. Whilst the UK government insisted to the media that the usual rituals could "take place at the Cenotaph in a COVID-secure way"(Hope 2020), and modelled a socially distanced ceremony, the nationwide experience of the ritual varied enormously either because advice came late in the day or because the uniquely local contexts, spaces, and communities activated within Remembrance could not meet social distancing guidelines. This case study has enquired into the social impacts of these changes, attempting to understand contexts of adaptation and nature of ritual failure from the perspective of those who make the ritual for members of their community.
This case study also asked whether the meanings accorded to the ritual, which is predicated on notions of sacrifice and the remembrance of mass death, shifted in the context of an enfolding, nationally experienced tragedy. Previous research has highlighted the conservative nature of discourse within Remembrance Sunday: e.g., how the ritual has remained steadfastly focused on military deaths in war (Macleod et al. 2019). However, since undertaking of this enquiry (2015), there has been an official shift to a more inclusive remembrance of civilian deaths. It seems legitimate to ask whether, in the context of media reportage which consistently drew on mythologies of the First and Second World Wars and described NHS and care home staff in the language of military sacrifice in wars (Millar et al, 2020, 18), this effected a shift in meaning or use. Did Remembrance Sunday become employed for COVID-19 memorialisation? How much was it influenced by COVID-19 governance?

Whilst offering an overview of public discourse, this case study focused on ritual makers and their role translating the ritual to local audiences. Most participants understood theirs as an active role in continually remaking "Remembrance Sunday," although some saw liturgical adherence as a way of managing diverging outlooks of congregations. They saw that Remembrance Sunday always occasioned some modification, a 'joining of the dots' between the past and present, although they had difficulty remembering the minutiae of those adjustments. A few ritual makers had made purposeful interventions to rebalance the ritual in response to what they saw as the recent rise of nationalist expression in their communities, which had occurred alongside the revival of interest in the ritual. A good example of this is a chaplain for a rural British Legion branch, who described constant negotiations over the years regarding what he saw as militaristic symbolism demanded by his congregation.

Methodology

This case study conducted two lines of enquiry:

A. **Public discourse and media analysis**: Analysis of a novel dataset of 701 UK media stories, sourced from Nexis UK, as well as a longitudinal contextual examination of the extent of media reportage of the past 20 years to understand transformations in patterns of coverage. Additional social media analysis of Twitter via datasets obtained through Pulsar Platform searches on Remembrance Sunday and associated keywords. This compared the patterns of user activity and thematic content of two datasets of 192,122 tweets (2019) and 185,730 tweets (2020) to examine the impact of COVID-19.

B. **Ritual action**: Interview research of 18 ritual practitioners and how they approached the organisation of the ritual in 2020. Most of these participants had been contacted by dint of their contribution to the BRIC-19 survey.

Practitioners

All participants have been anonymised for the purposes of this research. There are too many participants to list

in detail, but for the purpose of the report, the following have been quoted or referred to in detail:

- A minister in an Ecumenical Church (also British Legion chaplain) in the East of England.
- Two ritual makers (laity) from a Church of England rural community in North West England.
- A Church of Scotland minister from a village in Renfrewshire, western Scotland.
- A Church of Scotland ,minister from a town in the Angus area, on the east coast of Scotland.
- A Church of England team vicar, with oversight of three parish churches within a market town in West Yorkshire.
- A Church of England deacon with responsibilities in rural communities of Lancashire, North West England.
- A Church of England vicar in a rural Cambridgeshire community (Eastern England), also Royal British Legion chaplain.
- A Church of England vicar of two parishes in North West England.
- A lay reader in a Church of England inclusive church, based in an urban community in Yorkshire & the Humber region.
- A Church of England vicar of two parishes in Derbyshire, East Midlands.
- A rabbi of a Liberal synagogue in North London.

Findings

Spaces & Places

- **Local differences**. Remembrance Sunday has been seen and experienced as a national event, despite its considerable local basis and variation in practices according to community contexts. COVID-19 highlighted the regional differences (e.g., tiers) through the consequent disturbances in ritual making. In some cases, this contributed to a sense of unfairness and ritual failure, when ritual makers did not undertake any measures to recognise the observance of Remembrance Sunday.

- **Comparative basis for decision making**. Ritual makers understood their efforts in relation to others in a regional context. For instance, if there was a larger civic service nearby, or if a church's normal remembrance service was not deemed large scale or important, ritual makers felt less obliged to make efforts to provide a smaller scale or online service. One participant, for instance, noted that his parish church, on the fringes of a small market town, would always have been secondary to the town centre "big event" – he did not feel that his intervention was necessary, as the civic service would be streamed online. Smaller congregational services may have been worse affected by COVID-19.

- **Political contexts**. The political and cultural dynamics of local spaces played an important part in decision making and balancing safety concerns. A few ritual makers lacked confidence that they could control the ceremonial space, in contexts where people were "big on poppies" or "Poppy-Mad". For others, Remembrance was not seen as the most important use of ritual space. One Anglican ritual maker put his energies into organising Holocaust Memorial Day because he felt its anti-racist message was clearer and more relevant to his community, where COVID-19 had sparked a rise in Islamophobia and hate crime against the Muslim population.

- **Spectacle and isolation**. In some ways, we can understand COVID-19 as an extension of the First World War Centenary. From reportage, evidently many congregations have drawn on methods and practices they created for the centenary period (e.g., knitting poppies, painting poppy pebbles), which had previously activated the outside environs of the church and created a spectacle of remembrance in local spaces. From media research and testimony, these practices were not widespread – they were activated through existing networks, rather than occasioning new ones – but they offered clear solutions to community isolation and had already been discursively connected to the project of "remembrance" (e.g., involving children).

- **Unification of remembrance**. The introduction of online formats, however, did not revolutionise the spatial dimensions of ritual, but facilitated a unification of remembrance's geographies, which many ritual makers found satisfying. Two ritual makers reflected on how online realms allowed them to unify spaces of ritual, without the physical disruption caused by venue changes. Another reflected on the benefits of pre-recording a walk from the Church to the local war memorial in the village. They felt they could give everyone a complete service through these means, whilst in "normal" times, the spatial dynamics can be fragmented: some congregants don't attend the war memorial ceremony, and those who gather around the war memorial might not attend the church service.

Ritual Authority

- **Ritual performers**. Social distancing, and the impossibility of large gatherings, changed the conduct of the ritual, which was often expressed as a matter of size. Gatherings were "reduced" or "smaller", "scaled back". Effectively, however, social distancing removed one key participant from ritual discourse ('the crowd'), whilst increasing focus on ritual participants such

as local government, representatives of the British Legion, clergy and other religious ritual makers.

- **Focus on ritual makers**. Ritual makers also became central to online services, such as live streaming or pre-recorded videos, which tended to focus on key participants in the laying of wreaths. In some ways, then, some ritual makers felt their role had been heightened or increased in significance. They were aware of the greater emphasis or focus on their interventions, such as sermons.

- **Competition for meaning**. The increased emphasis on local spectacle as ritual observance, which happened under COVID-19, has furthered the role of other ritual makers and interlocutors to contemporary remembrance. Whilst the Church was once a clear voice of moral authority in Remembrance Sunday, it now competes, or interacts, with construction companies, traffic management specialists, thermoplastic markings companies, retail and hospitality establishments, and households, whose understandings of remembrance are communicated through the spectacle within the local environment.

Media and Social media discourse

- **Implicit Religion**. The context of COVID-19 has generated a firm iteration of "Remembrance" as an implicit religion. This is part of a historical development, but it received its clearest articulation through public health advice and ritual management, particularly when expressing the need to adapt to social distancing restrictions and asking people to "remember at home". In issuing these guidelines, local government or other ritual makers articulated a discourse of a remembrance "spirit", which they saw themselves harnessing or channelling, rather than creating.

- **Contestation** Remembrance Sunday represented a significant site of contestation regarding lockdown restrictions, which was notably absent elsewhere in British society (Millar et al, 2020,19). The ritual prompted considerable and sometimes tense conversations about the nature of COVID-19 governance and restrictions. In some respects, social media coverage in 2020 was depoliticised compared to 2019, when the ritual had come soon after the announcement of the UK election. However, Remembrance Sunday provided a language and a venue to posit moral and political claims about the nature of regulations, and comment on the 'topsy turvy' nature of COVID-19 society. The ritual generated new symbolic relationships and juxtapositions, such as police barring veterans from gathering around war memorials, around which anxieties became articulated.

- **Tensions & Anxieties** In some ways, the wider use of war frames in the media, and the "heroization" of health workers (Cox 2020) encouraged people to use Remembrance Sunday to express supportive feelings towards those involved in COVID-19 healthcare (e.g., the sacrifice of care givers). In this way, it became an extension of various cultural responses to the effort, such as Clap for Carers. This caused a concomitant backlash, particularly from military communities and supporters, who defended the claims of service personnel on the space. The dichotomies reinforced through war frames, therefore, exacerbated tensions between military and civilian identities.

Congregational meanings

- **Not the time for change**. Online formats did not necessarily provide a means or impetus to introduce new meanings. Many interviewees reflected on the difficulties of altering a ritual in the context of dramatic change and the need to reassure or satisfy congregations. One chaplain reflected on the necessity of making the ritual and the season feel normal for his British Legion branch. He wanted a "hint of normality" in delivering an online service and felt a need to "hold them together with something they recognised and feel comforted by". He added that this wasn't the time for change – "there are other times I might want to challenge." Some felt that the core meaning of Remembrance Sunday (sacrifice) had become more relevant, and therefore it was important not to change its discourse, as one ritual maker said: "it spoke for itself".

- **Moral imperative & community cohesion**. Nevertheless, others used the prevailing cultural climate to make connections between the wartime generations and the present in more pressing or personal ways to help their communities navigate difficult times. One interviewee, who had otherwise noted the necessity to keep to the traditional liturgical components, found the nature of a pre-recorded service enlightening and empowering. His sermon reflected about losses in the current COVID-19 context, drawing parallels between the bereaved of the First World War to highlight the long road of reconstruction ahead and encourage sympathy and solidarity with the bereaved. Others used the history of post 1945 reconstruction to illustrate the importance of collective commitment to building a fairer society with audiences they felt had "pulled together" during the pandemic. A rabbi noted the importance of the ritual in expressing interfaith solidarity, Jewish integration within the wider

community, and emphasised how, in their pre-recorded service, he'd highlighted the positive story – of how good things can emerge from dark times.

- **The Elephant in the Room**. Another participant (lay reader) felt that in the COVID-19 context, the need to have the structure and be "recognisable in an online format" stifled an otherwise exceptionally creative parish team. He reflected that the online format of a Remembrance Sunday service highlighted the absence of normality even though "we know we're not socially distanced and we're not gathering". In this context, a "lot of the thinking [behind the ritual] and the message includes an aspect of COVID-19, but almost without it being spoken…almost like the elephant in the room."

Chronoscapes

- Public discourse (examined via media analysis) suggests that COVID-19 extended the Remembrance period, dispersing but stretching out ritual activity. In some ways, the arc of coverage, for instance, looks much more like the First World War Centenary period (2014-2018) than periods before or since. The spectacle of remembrance created in local spaces also contributed to this, although this was not replicated in social media discussion.

- This sense of remembrance as an ongoing project, however, meant that in some cases the ceremonial aspects were not observed because of the ongoing availability of remembrance elsewhere. For instance, one ritual maker in the Church of England noted that his local village communities "did stuff during the day" around local memorials, because they had been asked to do this for social distancing. In some ways, all times became Remembrance times. He also felt that during the whole COVID-19 period, the opportunity to talk about service and sacrifice" in his homily made it "quite a common theme".

Tech Support: Have Online Ritual Makers Reshaped Ritual Practice and Meaning?

Eleanor O'Keeffe

Background & Research Context

The burst in production of online rituals has captured the public imagination and scholarly attention during COVID-19, with many seeing in the participation figures evidence of a new burst of spirituality (Mance 2020). This case study illuminates this phenomena from a different vantage point, examining the social and spiritual implications of online production for ritual making and the makers themselves. This case study highlights experiences of individuals from different religious backgrounds who found themselves either increasingly or newly involved in ritual making because of the digital or technological formats employed by their communities. It explored the opportunities that these new inputs afforded for the individuals themselves and for the efficacy and meaning of the rituals made by their communities. It examined whether digital technologies had democratised ritual making, as much as it has been seen to democratise ritual participation, and how individuals themselves interpreted and understood their contribution and role in relation to the ritual and the community at large.

This case study attempts to illuminate how varied ritual-making roles have become due to the work moving online, which differed according to the nature of ritual needs, but also the scales of community: online requirements of one parish required different solutions to contexts where communities shared services with two or three other parishes, for instance. Some participants belonged to organisational contexts, whether charities, religious institutions or community arts groups. In each case, technical or technological ritual-making also generated new social relations in the delivery of ritual, whether that was the expansion of voluntary networks, or the creation of new partnerships, or a reorganisation of administrative working roles, in the case of institutions.. Developing online ritual was about working, in some way; it related to the individual's working life in terms of skills or practice.

In some cases, the ways in which the individual came into ritual making also related to the wider economic context: some had been furloughed, some made redundant, some lost their jobs, and had been looking for new roles or opportunities. Others found that online ritual work was easier to balance with other demands, in the context of the pandemic.

As we shall see, the transition online facilitated the involvement of many different forms of expertise in ritual making, not just digital expertise. New ritual makers and practitioners drew on their backgrounds and experience, which ranged from TV production, science education, heritage work, the creative arts, and events project management. In these roles, they had acquired enough of the necessary digital skills to be of use to their communities in the pursuit of online worship, but they were not computer experts or digital specialists. For others, the transition to working on online ritual demanded working in new multi-disciplinary project partnerships. Contexts of authority mattered too – individuals were not chosen simply because of their skills, but because their unique contexts, whether congregational or institutional, allowed them autonomy.. This is an important consideration when interpreting some of this testimony, which emphasises agency and posits an inherent inclusiveness to online ritual work.

Methodology

The theme of what technical support, or technological innovation, meant to individuals and communities, emerged in all the interviews I undertook for BRIC-19, for both this case study and others. I have summarised three ritual contexts within this case study because they provide an insightful comparison of the differences in nature and scale of this activity. Some of these interviews took place over several weeks or months. Some became a series of less formal conversations over the phone and (once) in a socially distanced person-to-person meeting. All interviewees have been anonymised, although important elements of their background or testimony, such as their religious affiliation and specific function, remain specific to context. In the main, however, this should be read as a series of subjective accounts of experiencing the processes of change in ritual making from the perspective of those who made the rituals. This short case study cannot do justice to the considerable variation in roles and expertise that the move online has generated in ritual making within different religious communities.

New Knowledge and New Meanings – The Fellowship

Two ritual makers, both of whom are laity, reflected on the opportunities that setting up an online lay-led services hub for the pandemic. The parish church shared a clergy team with other parish churches and had a pre-established culture of lay-led services to fill gaps in provision, but these had only been taking place once a month. They found considerable excitement and energy in the work because the new online worship format allowed a greater freedom and interaction between spirituality, religion, and other forms of knowledge. One said that online worship had allowed people to review or relax expectations:

> *Once you're physically present in church there are different confines… online is such a different offering. As lay presenters, we've been able to come up with our own way of doing it.*

She enjoyed being creative, but also the process of offering her knowledge to others and found spiritual satisfaction in hearing the responses and reflections of the congregation. She also felt it enabled people to express their faith to each other and allowed their own experience of faith to inform wider understandings of spirituality. She saw for the first time how people integrated their own spirituality within different cultural forms, knowledge, and experience, which she found valuable. Removing the usual work and meetings demanded by a normal ritual calendar, such as meetings to organise carol concerts, also removed existing established patterns of thought: *it provided an opportunity to think what do I really want for my advent preparations from a faith point of view? What's been quite nice is we've been able to hear other people's reflections on their faith based on a particular prompt* – and that included film, music and science (she is a scientist by training), as well as stories from the Bible.

> *I'm very much a pragmatist so hearing how people see their faith through non-faith material has been really interesting and valuable because it helps to understand how my faith is lived in a real world, a modern world.*

Dreaming up other ways to gather online has also generated a lot of creativity in approaches to outdoor spaces in the environs of the church, too. In the Fellowship's case, the two are closely linked, organised via networked social media sites.

Both participants structured their work using their professional expertise. Both reflected that the network included many people from teaching or training backgrounds. In some ways, the move online in faith paralleled the move online in work and educational environments. One reflected on *preferred learning styles* of the congregants and ensured that delivery of services met a variety of needs. In some ways, she said, *there's a lot of parity between what I'm doing in my day job and what I'm doing for my faith community* as she planned it very similarly to how she approached training and development.

Gratitude & Community - The Congregation Tech Team

One interviewee had come to work online because of his existing support of services in a centrally located congregation within a city in the north-east. This was a well-known civic church in the Church of England, although he described his background and upbringing in non-conformism: *I'm also a bit of a Pentecostal*.

He is a TV and audio engineer by training and had been drawn into support for services prior to the pandemic because he could manage to change light bulbs and provide AV support for the PA system for services, including weddings and Christmas, although he had also recorded the sound on a funeral service. He described his role simply:

> *I look after the technical side, if something breaks down, I will look at it, and recommend equipment to purchase.*

To meet the initial needs of the congregation, he worked with the 'tech team' to identify approaches: *none of us had been involved in streaming before – a lot of research went into what was available out there*. He helped identify software, which he noted had been designed by a Christian, and *cobbled together* a means of streaming the service from the church, involving one camera, a computer and a sound feed from the existing PA system at the church. His broadcasting background gave him a sense of what was involved to produce a new ritual space for online worship in the church, but it was still a lot of late nights to get the streaming up and running. For a few weeks, he worked with another volunteer to edit the material together, including the pre-recorded content from the church and material that congregants were sending in. He streamed it from his own computer at home through Facebook, YouTube and the church website. *To do a Sunday service took about 7 or 8 hours, to pull it all together…there were some early mornings and late nights.*

He reflected on how the work had brought him gratitude and an increased recognition for his own skills and those of others. Sitting with the material for each service for such a long time, whilst editing, gave him time to reflect more, not just on the nature of each sermon given by the vicar, but what the congregants themselves had sent in. He noticed the changes in people, as they acclimatised to recording themselves; their growing confidence in addressing the camera. For him, this was a powerful way of creating a congregation and a sense of community: there were no issues with masks, it had a better visual effect, and it reminded people that *the church is the building, it's people that make the church*.

> *I was grateful to God for the skill that I have and the technical ability I had to put it together to glorify God and for the edification of his people…. I think what this has done for me is that I feel thankful for being in a church where we have gifts – people are gifted in doing lots of things. People whose oratory is excellent, amazing intercessions, stuff that I can't do but I can do the other bit.*

Managing online worship - Quaker education organisation

In some contexts, ritual adaptation involved = scaling up and rethinking management processes, rather than developing new technical skills or entirely new online formats. One interviewee, who worked for a Quaker education organisation coordinating their programmes, emphasised that the organisation had been developing online worship for some years. This provision had already led them to think about the potential of the Internet for connecting Quakers across the world. *When the pandemic started, we were in a good position.*

Having the set up, however, did not lessen the impact of COVID-19 and the scales of change that had ensued. Despite the learning centre's expertise and knowledge, most Quaker communities, he said, *did not know that online worship existed*. In the first few weeks, many meeting houses had closed doors and were trying to find online solutions for worship. There were people looking for advice about how to conduct worship, as well as those seeking an online meeting house in the context of closure.

> *In the beginning it was very intense…A need arose, and we tried to meet that need and we tried to meet it with the people and the capacity we had.*

The interviewee reflected on the demands of these early weeks, and particularly how the Communications Manager put in *a huge amount of work* to expand the online offering of worship from twice a week to practically once a day, via Zoom. In this early stage, it was felt that this would be an interim measure, whilst Quaker meeting houses acclimatised. The question was less about technological adaptation, than about how to accommodate an expanded online meeting culture, as well as collating summary advice and guidance from their existing experience. Unlike the previous example, the needs of Quaker meetings online did not include manufacturing the feel of an online service through production techniques; there was no need for labour intensive editing work, for instance.

Moving online made the cultural operations of meetings, the social etiquette which had developed in each meeting house and become implicit, subject to collective conversation. There was a clear need to manage the social aspects of the Zoom room. Starting the meeting had usually been conveyed through the physical space, and online worship required some sort of transition, as all came straight through to the zoom space and needed an opportunity to greet each other. Similarly, Elders might have undertaken some management of the social aspects of the meeting house, but worshiping at home presented new conversations regarding the inevitable interruptions of domestic life: how acceptable was it for pets to enter the frame? Did ambient noise help create the feeling of silence, or should zoom rooms be muted? Quakers felt they had autonomy to create their own embodied online practices, however. Some sat with their eyes closed to appreciate the silence better, for instance, but comfort and finding space for stillness was the highest priority. The question of "zoom backgrounds", which had erupted in public discourse during the pandemic, he said did not become an issue in Quaker

online meetings, although this may have reflected the relative class and generational coherence of Quakers themselves.

Managing online worship required a reorientation of roles within the institution to deal with, or diffuse, the ramifications of the impact of increased demand. The institution worked collaboratively with national Quaker associations to produce considerable guidance material and offer advice to meeting houses. The interviewee became responsible for managing the online services and making them sustainable. Whilst they had initially been seen as an interim measure, demand did not decrease, and *they soon took on a life of their own*. He set up a network of volunteer facilitators who ran the meetings and who he connected with in monthly meetings. These allowed them all to reflect on the ways in which the online cultures were developing and overcome particular challenges (such as if members' contributions became too lengthy) with the wider team. He surveyed online worshipers to understand more about their needs and response to the online cultures, which demonstrated that considerable enthusiasm remained for online worship, even after the initial crisis phase, and their desire to continue. However, this also had consequences for the institution. They wanted this provision to continue, but could support online meetings only to a point, as increased capacity necessitated greater oversight and management. Balancing resources was thus a key issue in his role.

The interviewee was a considerable advocate for online worship and the benefits it could bring to people, particularly those who found themselves excluded from physical worship, those who suffered mental health challenges, for instance. He also looked ahead with excitement.

> *Online worship is here to stay and people can't ignore it anymore. The pandemic has made us aware of global Quakerism…and now we can't look away from it. I'm excited about the possibility of learning from one another.*

Introducing the Action Research Group

In the humanities broadly, and in the study of religion in particular, there can be something of a disconnect between researchers and professional practitioners. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, of course; clergy and other religious leaders are busy serving their communities, and do not necessarily have the time, desire, or skill set to do the archival, ethnographic, theoretical, and administrative work required for academic research. But when academics are tasked to respond to urgent cultural and social change, their own methods are often insufficient. The need to adapt rituals in the face of COVID-19 and its restrictions was confronted first and foremost by clergy and other religious leaders. They faced the challenges, and, with necessity as the mother of invention, they were the ones who adapted their work to meet them. That is what the BRIC-19 project is about, and so it was clearly necessary to include ritual professionals not just as research subjects, but as research partners.

As is the case for many research projects, we had a helpful academic advisory board who helped us to maintain our academic rigour and engagement with contemporary scholarship. But we were also looking for a practical contribution: to incorporate the knowledge of those closest to the ground into our work, and to help us make sure our statistical, archival and ethnographic findings were sensible and reasonable to those who were best placed to make use of them. We were attempting to analyse an emergency, and ritual professionals were the front-line workers addressing it.

This was the genesis of the action research group, which is represented in this part of the report. Through our networks, partners and interviews, we set up a group of those who either conducted religious rituals over the course of the pandemic or supported or taught those who did.

In recent decades, academics have started to take practical knowledge more seriously, and to integrate it into their own research. In theatre and performance studies, two of the most important figures in this area were two Brazilians, both of whom echo the ideas and concerns of liberation theology in their work. The theatre maker and theorist Auguto Boal (1975) developed a set of methods of methods of theatre-making that centered on the ways by which the Brazilian working class addressed the challenges they faced in society. These techniques of the ‘theatre of the oppressed’ aimed to make these patterns of thought and action clear to a wider public, and subject them to public scrutiny and debate. Similarly, the educational theorist Paulo Freire (1970) developed a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ that sought to upend the ‘banking’ model of education which treated students as passive receptacles for knowledge, and replace it with a mode of learning that was self-

reflective, critically attuned to social inequality, and treated students as equals in the learning process.

Of course most university lecturers had always worked as both teachers and researchers, and with their teaching hats on, they took very seriously their need to train the next generation of professionals. For lecturers in religion, that meant training the next generation of clergy and religious leaders; for those in theatre, it was the next generation of performing artists. But this research and teaching work has often stood in professional and intellectual tension. Something akin to the relationship between practical theology and systematic theology, theatre studies has always had an uneasy tension between training the next generation of performing artists and examining theatre as a tool for social or philosophical analysis. The same people often engaged in both, but struggled to find ways to articulate their relationship. The work of Boal and Friere, as well as other sources, such as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'practical logic (Bourdieu 1990), served academics as an invitation to integrate practical knowledge into their research.

Few fields took up that invitation with as much gusto as theatre studies. There were two primary ways the field tried to integrate practical knowledge into its research. The first is what was called 'practice as research,' or PAR. This generally involved those who were both researchers and theatre artists using their own creative work as a means to investigate the questions they were pursuing in their research. PAR gave them a methodological framework with which to integrate the practical, embodied knowledge they have as performers with the written, theoretical or historical knowledge they have as scholars. (See Nelson 2013 for more.) In a different vein, applied theatre practitioners developed techniques to bring their practice and scholarship outside of the arts and into the service of communities, especially marginalised ones. Applied theatre practitioners developed ways of respecting the local wisdom and understanding of those they work with, and facilitating the transition of that knowledge into a theatrical form for any of a number of purposes, such as celebration, self-reflection, or community-building. (See Taylor 2003 for more.)

All these methods have their strengths and weaknesses, of course, but they were inspirational for us in setting up this project. Yes, we felt an ethical obligation to include those we studied as partners and collaborators. But more than that, these professionals hold a great store of practical wisdom and understanding that we wanted to tap into.

In setting up the action research group, we tried to recruit a broad range of individuals of different faiths, backgrounds, and relationships to ritual life. Quite a few declined, both out of a lack of time—many clergy members were overwhelmed with the need to take care of their communities during COVID, of course—and, perhaps, because of the difficulty of explaining the group and its work. We had reached out to many people we did not in fact know; as a group like this is necessarily built on a level of mutual trust, that proved to be a challenge. Group members were not paid, out of ethical concerns, but we did set up a small fund to help group members' communities engage with the technology they needed to try out some of the project's ideas. It is true that more 'conservative' clergy, of all faiths, were somewhat less likely to engage with this work than their more liberal counterparts. This is often the case with interfaith dialogue—which seemed to be the paradigm that this project most easily fit into in many people's minds—and the only solution we can propose to that is the slow, painstaking work of relationship-building.

The group met (via online conference call) once a month for the latter two-thirds of the project. Simply arranging these meetings was quite difficult, because of everyone's schedule. We sometimes had to have two half-group meetings in the month, or hold a meeting with many absences. (An email list, designed to encourage discussion between the sessions, never really took off, though many members did exchange ideas through the project blog.) We discussed the project's work, its methods, and its provisional findings. Group members discussed their experience with ritual under the pandemic, what had worked well, what had not, and what this might mean for the future. The group had many rich conversations about what this crisis would mean for religious communities in the UK going forward, and what could be done about it. When the research team presented its findings to the group, it was useful to receive feedback on what interpretations of that data made sense, what was interesting, what was surprising, and what seemed like the artefact of a methodological error. Some findings were fascinating to the group, and some seemed ridiculous. Group members also supported one another, listening to the challenges each one was facing, comparing notes, and offering suggestions. The differing backgrounds of members was not a major barrier to useful discussion. Though each person was operating in their own context, they were dealing with common problems—the difficulty of reaching people and holding communities together in the pandemic, an uncertainty about the future, a lack of time and resources, and a deep desire to address their community's needs. That the specific needs and challenges were different did not matter much; the analogies were easy to draw.

The useful feedback that the action research group provided will continue with this report itself. At the launch event in late September 2021, the action research group has been invited to hear and respond to the project's findings. We hope that this response extends beyond this single day, and that their engagement with this project has a positive influence on the group's members for some time to come.

Because of the action research group's nature, as discussed above, there is something slightly artificial about representing that contribution in written form. Nevertheless, it is important to capture the knowledge and experience of the action research group's members. In compiling this report, we had challenged each of them to reflect on the adaptations they had made and seen in their own practice over the course of the project. For some, this was a more straightforward task than others; for many, the idea of a single, discrete 'adaptation' did not really make sense in the context of an ongoing practice of care, worship, and community. Clearly, there had been changes, but they were sometimes viewable only in retrospect; at the time, they were simply one more decision of the many taken every day. What follows are the (lightly edited) texts produced in response to that call. Their variety demonstrates the diversity we had present in the group.

We appreciate the generosity with which the group's members approached this task, just as we appreciate all of their thoughtful and diligent contributions to this project over the months. We are grateful to all of our action research group members for their insights. Working through questions of religion, ritual and community with this group has been a fruitful joy, and we hope to have the chance to do so again.

Thank God for Zoom!

Stephen Ansa-Addo

The main adaptation that has affected worship due to the pandemic is moving all services online.

We *do* thank God for Zoom! However, some aspects of worship do not translate as well onto an online format. Much prayer and thought has to go into deciding what remains in person and what moves into an online-only or hybrid format. There are many reasons for this, ranging from appropriateness, to strength (or loss) of wi-fi connection or the cacophony of sound (sometimes negative feedback) from more than one voice speaking at the same time. Zoom is a fantastic tool, although at times it is difficult to balance the needs of both the in-person and online attendees. This has made me feel frustrated and at times inadequate. I am aware that Zoom is *not* for everyone in the community. With this knowledge, it can feel nearly impossible to bridge the gap.

With the easing of restrictions around May 2021 for many, 'Zoom fatigue' had set in. This was probably the result of too many online gatherings ranging from work meetings to personal meetings with family. For some people, attending worship on screen via zoom was a tough ask after having spent so long online during the week. I could empathise with their feelings as some days I had been online from 8am till 10pm

Life and ministry have certainly changed as a result of the pandemic; I have been ordained to serve in ministry in a completely new era. This is a time of great change, where the church has been consistently asked to respond to great needs in order to serve the community. It has been a great honour to serve God in these tumultuous times, however the honour that is felt does *not* make it easy. Some days I felt completely spent of all energy due to the amount of pressure to discern the best ways to lead my community, especially with an older congregation, some of whom do not want to engage with new ways and practices. Other days I can only define as soul enriching, seeing different generations of people interact in a meaningful way where they may not have had the opportunity to do so otherwise.

I've learnt so much from serving in a new era. Some might describe it as a baptism of fire or a sink-or-swim situation; I have learnt to embrace this time and view it as a season of growth. I have learnt to appreciate more the time spent with God, crying out and leaning on him for wisdom and understanding in order to move forward and make sense of the word I received and preached on in 2019: "See, I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?" [Isaiah 43:19]. I don't think any of us could read the signs of times in relation to COVID.

My testimony and personal encouragement over the last year has been the faithfulness of God. In this season and in the ones ahead of restructure, reengagement, reconnection and gathering whether virtually or in-person, it is vitally important to remember God has been faithful and He won't stop now!

Stephen Ansa-Addo has been newly ordained to serve at Hungerford URC and Park URC (Reading). He trained at Westminster College (Cambridge) for 4-years studying mission, ministry and theology. He has been a member of the URC since being a young person and has served as an Elder and a volunteer youth leader.

Image. The ordination of Rev Stephen Ansa-Addo.

Developing the 'Cultural Risk Assessment' through Learning from Faith Leaders

Bernadette Albert and Ruth Dowson

Our participation in the BRIC-19 project has emerged from our teaching events management at the UK Centre for Events Management at Leeds Beckett University. Since 2013, we have developed and taught an optional module for second year events management students, Celebration Ritual and Culture, which has a focus on diverse faith communities and their events-related needs. The module has, until the past year, been open to ERASMUS and Study Abroad international students, which enhances diversity within the cohort. As the wider BRIC-19 project examines how British religious communities have adapted to living in the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions that have been imposed on our society, our participation in this group has encouraged us to undertake primary research into this vital aspect of life.

In our module, and later in their final year dissertation research projects, our students study funerals, weddings, birth rituals, and other religious events including pilgrimage, which are vital to people's psychological wellbeing and sense of community, which is especially important given the sense of deep unease created by the pandemic. The module has always been taught by a culturally-diverse team and commences each week with chocolate and dancing.

Through this module we have aimed to enable the students to:

- Analyse the historical and cultural roots and scope of global celebrations and cultural events
- Assess the role and purpose of ritual and performance in cultural and celebration events
- Apply theory to practice across a range of religious, ethnic, political, geographical and national event contexts
- Develop and plan an event to celebrate a special occasion.

We have 'eventized' the module delivery by introducing specific activities to focus on different events: Wedding Week, Memorial Week, Pilgrimage Week, and Carnival Week. We have introduced visits to faith and cultural venues in order to facilitate the building of relationships and enabling students to experience diverse cultural practices. One of the assessments requires individual students to plan an event, producing detailed proposal documentation to meet a specific event. In 2021 there were three event options to choose from: a wedding; a memorial (end-of-life) celebration (religious or non-religious); and an event to commemorate the COVID dead.

The broader scope of the module is to:

- Identify and appreciate the impacts of undertaking a Cultural Risk Assessment
- Facilitate repositioning of students' thinking
- Actively model and build cultural capital
- Teach students how to build their own cultural capital
- Engineer inclusivity

- Prepare students to have difficult conversations within and outside the classroom – on religion, race, cultural heritage, LGBTQ+, ability-disability
- Experience and appreciate other people's culture through engaging and observing how people live their lives
- Collaborate with external organisations to develop and share learning.

The BRIC-19 research project has fed into this wider scope of our module. As events professionals and as events academics, we also view this area through the perspective of faith, as believers (and for Ruth, as an ordained priest, licensed in the Church of England). We have identified a continuing need for event creators and planners to provide equitable event spaces for diverse groups of people, and as practitioner-academics we work to assess the impacts of failure to create culturally sensitive or culturally aware spaces that are able to meet the ethical, moral and legal obligations for equality, diversity and inclusion. The pandemic caused all events to either go online or be cancelled, as in-person events were initially banned and then highly-regulated. However, the eventization of faith continues to evolve in the post-pandemic world, as event spaces have moved online.

Through our teaching, we have developed an innovative Cultural Risk Assessment model that supports the practical identification and management of cultural risks in an event. We introduce the students to the Cultural Risk Assessment through a workshop approach in which the students act as consultants advising invited guests. For several years our guests have come through the Church of England's local Leeds Diocese.
We have utilised our involvement in the BRIC-19 project as an opportunity to undertake research with faith leaders, through an ongoing series of interviews, in order to study how British religious and faith communities have adapted their practices in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Image. CRC Teaching Team

We identified specific individuals to contribute to our research, to provide purposive broad and diverse perspectives. This interview research has resulted in the further development of the Cultural Risk Assessment tool and deeper appreciation of the varied responses of different faith communities to the pandemic. Our conversations brought unexpected insights as we explored the interviewees' experiences through the pandemic, ranging from the impact on funeral practices to developing a sense of community and belonging through online events. For example, there were benefits as well as limitations to moving online – as online connections enabled the privacy of deep emotional moments. These conversations brought into focus new aspects for us, but we would have valued the opportunity to interview more faith leaders from a diverse range. Our interpretation of 'faith leader' was very broad, enabling us to capture some unusual perspectives. Much food for thought!

The eventual aim of our research is to develop policies, procedures and guidelines to support faith organisations in applying a practical cultural risk assessment to their physical and virtual spaces, events, and rituals. We aim to support diversity, equality and inclusion planning and provision and to deracialise religious and faith related spaces, whether static, virtual, or those created by venuefication. This research is enabling us to develop deeper perspectives of people's lived experiences of navigating cultural and faith event spaces. The Cultural Risk Assessment is a valuable tool in any diverse context where inclusivity, equity and equality are fundamental to delivery, such as events. Although there are many potential applications across a broad spectrum of organisations, institutions and sectors, the Cultural Risk Assessment provides tangible actions that can support policy and procedure delivery in the context of events and event venues.

In July 2021, we presented some of our BRIC-19 research headlines to the annual academic conference of the Association of Event Management Educators (AEME): 'Developing the Cultural Risk Assessment: teaching events management with a focus on diverse faith communities'. The outputs of our research are feeding into our ongoing teaching and into our research agenda, as we: explore lived experience and how diverse groups navigate their own lives and spaces; create awareness of implicit bias, stereotypes and potential prejudice; provide tools and strategies to build cultural capital, cater to diverse needs and to facilitate provision of inclusive event spaces; and engineer inclusivity into classrooms, event spaces and into more broadly institutionalised spaces.

It has been an honour to participate in this vital research project as we look forward to continuing the development of a new and useful tool for faith communities and event managers.

Rev Ruth Dowson has over 25 years' professional experience in events management. Ruth has taught events management at the UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Beckett University since 2007. She was ordained in the Church of England in 2012 and is Assistant Priest at All Saints Parish Church in Bingley, West Yorkshire. Her research focuses on the eventization of faith, and she is lead co-author of: Event Planning and Management (2nd ed. 2018); Spiritual and Religious Tourism (2019). Ruth is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Ruth has a forthcoming book on Death and Events (2021), edited with Dr Ian Lamond.

Bernadette Albert has worked in events since the age of 15 with extensive experience in State and Civic Events, State and Civic and Cultural Protocol through her work as Aide de Camp in the Office of the Governor General in Saint Lucia. Bernie joined the UK Centre of Event Management in 2007 as a Senior Lecturer and has focussed extensively on Black and Minority ethnic Student support within the HE space, she is also a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her area of research interest focusses on Critical Race Theory, how minority groups use their cultural capital to navigate racialised institutional spaces and the development of Diverse, Equitable, Equal and inclusive spaces. She is currently seconded to the Centre for Teaching and Learning within the university to support their University with their Inclusivity and Decolonisation of the curriculum objectives.

Dialogue on Mute? Social Isolation and CCJ's Interfaith Work

Nathan Eddy

The Council of Christians and Jews is the UK's oldest interfaith charity, established in 1942. We have a structure of local chapters that typically held meetings in person in towns and cities across the country; this fact, and our dedicated but ageing membership, made the transition to online events especially challenging.

We are still transitioning from the pandemic, but it appears that we lost two branches and possibly more. However, the pandemic and social isolation have also fast-tracked our development into a network that is both local and national. In this report I'll focus on a conference we held for students and a new twinning programme.

We had planned a conference for 2020 on faith and identity for students: the intersection between ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and other protected characteristics and religious observance. We brought together speakers and practical workshops to empower

Image. CCJ Campus Leadership Programme Manager Katharine Crew presenting at the conference in June 2021

students to make their university faith and interfaith spaces more inclusive. The keynote brought together Anglican priest and writer Rev Rachel Mann and Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah, Rabbi Emeritus of Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue, to discuss leadership. The final plenary was a panel of recent graduates who had successfully created lasting change at their universities.

Workshops included True Accessibility: what it means to be an inclusive society, which encouraged students to find ways they could make their university societies explicitly inclusive. It was led by the Student Christian Movement. Another workshop was entitled Faith Inclusion in Liberation Spaces, and offered support for students who experienced prejudice in liberation spaces. The year 2020 has been hugely challenging for students, and we struggled to get students to book in for the conference. We guess this is because so many were simply trying to finish courses and graduate. The conference, however, was a success, and helped us build bridges to students in a challenging year.

A second initiative has had moderate success. The Black Lives Matter movement and the reflection by Jews and Christians on racism and diversity drew our gaze inward and helped us to look at our diversity. We developed a twinning programme between Black majority churches and synagogues in part to redress the imbalance in our membership and reach, and we hired a new member of staff on 1.5 days a week to lead the programme. It seems to me, as Director, that the isolating effects of the pandemic have brought about a level of self-reflection that we wouldn't otherwise have undertaken.

Perhaps the biggest change has been less visible. Our charity has always struggled to balance the local with the national and to move outside our London base. At the start of the pandemic, we rang all our members to check in, and as the pandemic progressed we held monthly meetings on Zoom with branch leaders. As a result, we have more contact with our branches, more shared conversation, and more chances to plan together. Our charity feels more flexible, ready for future shocks, leaner, and more fit for purpose. We have sadly lost many members, including a key trustee, to the virus. But the experience of COVID-19 has also clarified our sense of mission and brought us closer together as national leaders. In many ways, dialogue has been placed on mute during the pandemic. But we have come through it stronger.

Nathan Eddy is Interim Director of the Council of Christians and Jews. He lives in London with his family and regularly teaches Hebrew and Bible at St Mellitus College, London; and he serves as part of the ministry team at a local United Reformed Church congregation.

Reflections on 2020 and 2021

Andrew Goodhead

I had hoped that, by July 2021 St Christopher's would be inviting bereaved relatives into the hospice for Thanksgiving & Memorial Services and opening the Pilgrim Room so that men and women could come to the hospice to light candles and/or write in the Memories Book.

I am pleased that the opportunity to visit the Pilgrim Room has come about. But, we are asking everyone who comes to wash their hands, sign in using our visitor's system, wear a face covering and visit the Pilgrim Room only. The pre-pandemic open access to the building has gone, and may remain so for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, the opportunity to gather a group of people indoors for a Thanksgiving and Memorial Service has not yet presented itself. The service planned for April 2020, for which invitations were sent prior to the lockdown announcement, was the first to be run on zoom. Since then, every service has followed the same format; a shorter event, lasting around 20 minutes at most with no shared in-person Act of Remembrance. The attendees are passive on zoom, listening to the leaders and watching. Sadly, there is no opportunity to engage with other attendees, or participate in an Act of Remembrance. A highlight of the event is the opportunity to have tea or coffee together and this allows individuals and family to support each other and tell stories of bereavement.

On two occasions, invitation letters have given two possibilities to recipients; virtual attendance if restrictions remain in place or coronavirus case numbers are high, e or, if there is a removal of restrictions and case numbers are low, face to face participation. For July 2021 the decision was made to remain a virtual event. Invitations to the October Thanksgiving and Memorial Service again make the dual offer, but the uncertainty of how coronavirus will be within the community at that time continues to make a virtual service likely.

This has led me to think more about what memorialising is, how it happens and what circumstances are required to make memorialising possible. Robert Neimeyer is right that 'human beings are inveterate meaning makers' so men and women will make meaning in any circumstance. That is reminiscent of Viktor Frankl's writing on his experience of the concentration camps of WWII. Making meaning is in the hands of those who wish to create that meaning.

The role of external agencies in memorialisation is to be a conduit; to make possible the chance to memorialise. What they can do is bring people together, creating the communal event which allows personal, familial and community meaning-making through shared memorialisation.

St Christopher's have been fortunate this year to have successfully run a remembrance event, 'Remembering with Ribbons'. Organised by our fundraising team and myself, the offer was to write the name or names of relatives who have died onto a ribbon and either return it to St Christopher's or come to the hospice to tie it to a tree in the garden in person. Visiting was arranged over specific days and times and, of course, was outside. The event was supported by a streamed recorded service that could be watched on Facebook or YouTube. In person I think we managed to blend personal, familial and community meaning-making together. How far that was carried into the streamed event I am not certain.

Over recent months, I have wondered whether an innovation in rituals has taken place, not through choice but by circumstance. Although a generalisation, there is truth that we have become used to Zoom and FaceTime as ways to keep in touch with friends and family and to hold meetings for business or attend religious services. For some, however, this technology remains a mystery to fathom.

Making meaning is not dependent on an external organisation saying 'here is your chance …' Nor is it dependent upon the place in which it is offered. Meaning making remains, as Frankl suggests, an undertaking through the adoption of an attitude. Neimeyer is clear that we cannot help but make meaning in any

circumstance. I wrote in my first published article in *Mortality* that men and women are able to create and take meaning without the intervention of others (usually professionals). People can, and do, act independently to find ways to remember those who have died and to ensure those ways are meaningful. I wonder, then, whether the closure of some ways to create and take meaning simply led to other avenues being found; maybe through personal Zoom events, or through a promise that when coronavirus is 'over' that a more suitable farewell will be held.[1]

I am writing of continued restriction at a point when the government has lifted all social restrictions. In January, the numbers of people permitted to attend baptisms, weddings and funerals were small; now they are restricted only to the personal wishes of individuals or the stretching of finances. The hospice recognises the easing of lockdown rules, but has to balance these against its primary function as a provider of end of life care, which may prevent gatherings of large numbers of people in one place.

When the pandemic began and virtual memorialisation was all that St Christopher's were able to offer, I wondered how long the pandemic would last and hoped that face-to-face events would be possible in a few months. Today, I can see the benefit in offering virtual memorial events; people do not have to travel to attend, and the cost of attending is minimal. But I also miss the communitarian value of gathering together; recognising loss, understanding the shared nature of bereavement, and enabling an act of remembrance that all can participate in.

Being inveterate meaning makers does mean that we will always take up new opportunities which arise to create and take meaning within the context of bereavement. While some elements of gathering in person are lost, there remains the golden thread of memorialising, even online; that an individual or family can recall their relative or friend and recognise their continuing bond to that person. There has been much lost in the period since March 2020, but there remains the need to remember and human beings develop new ways to do so, even in isolation.

Andrew Goodhead began work at St Christopher's in 2005 as Spiritual Care Lead. He has written on the areas of spirituality and spiritual needs at the end of life and has a special interest in the way bereaved men and women remember those who have died. Andrew currently manages a small Spiritual Care team and children's and adult bereavement. He remains Spiritual Care Lead.

1 A recent paper by Selman *et al.* (2021) describes clearly the societal effects of not being able to say goodbye to a family member or carry out the rituals of grief as normally expected. Selman L.E., Sowden R. & Borgstrom E. 'Saying goodbye' during the COVID-19 pandemic: A document analysis of online newspapers with implications for end of life care. *Palliative Medicine*. 2021 Vol: 35(7) 1277-1287.

Enforced Change at Synagogues is Not Always a Bad Thing

Leo Mindel

How do you bring a 5,000-year-old religion, which has spent the last 2,000 years refining and distilling and fixing its core practices, into a world where everything has changed? The last 18 months have provided opportunities for all dominations of Judaism to try new ways of delivering worship and possibly creating new traditions.

For the Progressive Jewish movements, the explosion in growth of Zoom and streaming has been massive. For many it has manifested in moving the same service online, keeping the same format and length. There is comfort in familiarity, not least for the clergy who were able to continue to deliver the liturgy and flow that they had used for as long as they could remember. For others the opportunity to experiment has been intriguing and has facilitated the chance to try out new approaches. This split can be seen in a recent survey on Facebook Group "Dreaming Up 5782"—a group of over 3,000 professionals involved in creating Jewish worship services in the Jewish year of 5782.[1] When asked about the length of their High Holy Day morning services, most respondents, including those from the most Liberal synagogues, indicated that pre-pandemic services had lasted for more than three hours. For 2021, over a third of the respondents stated that their services are now under two hours. While changing the length of a service might be regarded as radical by some, it is still a fairly straightforward process. Other changes, such as exploring new ways to deliver services are significantly more complex. The desire to include pre-recorded videos especially of music with people singing in harmony, which was almost impossible to do live due to lockdown restrictions, has brought forward the willingness to use videos for other elements of the service as well. This has seen some Synagogues becoming creative and delivering services featuring recorded elements that in the past may have been more at home in sermons from the evangelical Christian tradition. Progressive communities have also used the opportunity to reach out and either share services with likeminded synagogues around the world or to expose their way of worshiping to large audiences outside of their normal geographical reach. An example is Central Synagogue in New York City; some of their services attract a live audience on YouTube of over 20,000.

Even those at the orthodox end of Judaism, whose observance of Shabbat and Festivals mandates the restricted use of electricity and technology during those times, have found creative ways to deliver meaningful connections. For example, life cycle events traditionally held on Shabbat, such as Bar Mitzvahs, were moved to mid-week to allow for the use of technology. Another good example is the World Sukkah Hop, which allowed people to virtually travel around the world visiting different Sukkahs (temporary huts that are constructed for use during the week-long festival of Sukkot).

For all streams of Judaism, the pandemic provided the opportunity to connect with people in new ways. Whether it was the addition of daily meditation services, tea with the rabbis or new online learning opportunities, these programmes enabled the community to feel connected with one another even when physically distant. Traditional home ceremonies, such as Havdalah marking the end of Shabbat, have been turned into

1 The group initially started in April 2020 with the name Dreaming up High Holy Days 2020 to help the Jewish community explore solutions to the challenge of High Holy Day services during a pandemic. It's resounding success led to a renaming of Dreaming up 5781, which was just changed with the beginning of the new Jewish year in Sept. 2021 to 5781. Survey available at https://www.facebook.com/groups/234422391238554/permalink/565854538095336

meaningful ways of creating community. Maybe most significantly, the ability to connect with family members for lifecycle events such as weddings and funerals has been a source of joy and comfort during an otherwise extremely challenging 18 months.

While many synagogues are likely to return largely to their pre-pandemic practices as soon as it is safe to do so, there will certainly be continued demand to enable these types of connections into the future. What started as a response necessitated by a pandemic has allowed the Jewish community to establish new traditions and practices, many of which will likely be seen as a fundamental part of Jewish worship delivery in the future.

Leo Mindel has been involved in the professional sports online streaming industry for over 20 years. In the religious world, he has assisted The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the JCM interfaith dialogue conference, The Council of Christians and Jews and over 50 houses of worship in developing ways to interact online. Leo can be found in the online self-help communities Synagogue Tech, The Hybrid Ministries Tech Forum and Office Hours.

Yotzeir Or | יוֹצֵר אוֹר

Baruch attah Adonai,	בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵֽינוּ
Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,	מֶֽלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר אוֹר
yotzeir or u-vorei choshech,	וּבוֹרֵא חֹֽשֶׁךְ, עֹשֶׂה
oseh shalom u-vorei et	שָׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא אֶת־הַכֹּל.
ha-kol. Ha-mei'ir la-aretz	הַמֵּאִיר לָאָֽרֶץ וְלַדָּרִים
v'laddarim aleha	עָלֶֽיהָ בְּרַחֲמִים, וּבְטוּבוֹ
b'rachamim, u-v'tuvo	מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל־יוֹם תָּמִיד
m'chaddeish b'chol yom	מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית.
tamid ma'aseih v'reishit.	

We praise You, Eternal One, our God, Sovereign of the universe, Maker of light and Creator of darkness, Author of peace and Creator of all things. In Your mercy You give light to the earth and all who live on it, and in Your goodness You renew creation continually, day by day.

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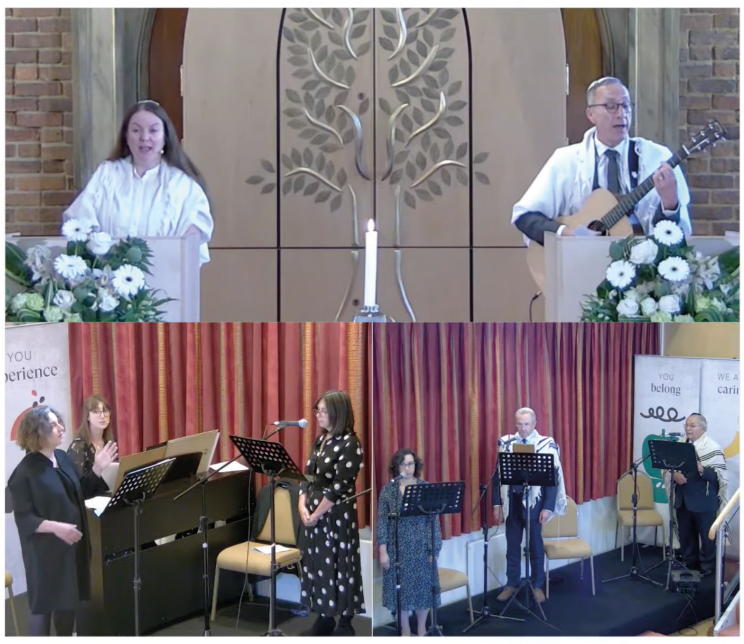

www.arksynagogue.org

Image. Online worship at the Ark Synagogue, northwest London

Taking Mosques Digital

Ayub Seedat

In March 2020, the Muslim community in the UK and around the world faced an unprecedented situation with COVID-19, where mosques and community centres needed to be closed to reduce the spread of the virus.

Islamic Network, a registered charity in England and Wales, works to empower and support community organisations to engage and nurture young people of faith and no faith in their community. In response to the pandemic, we developed a strategy for Mosques in our network and others to engage and empower their local communities online, on radio, and across social media. So far, we have been able to impact 258 Mosques in the UK and around the world. Some of those who benefitted from our strategy said that before engaging with us, they felt a little lost and needed guidance to cope with the uncertainty of the lockdown.

The closure of mosques, especially during the holy month of Ramadan (which took place from April - May 2020), posed both a spiritual threat, where the vast majority of Muslims were cut off from their local Mosque and also a practical threat to the financial continuity of the mosques as Ramadan is a crucial fundraising period in a mosque's annual calendar.

Our guidance included training on communication tools for mosques and helping them achieve four core objectives in this uncertain time.

These four areas are:

1. Keeping the community informed: During this uncertain time, we encouraged Mosques to take the lead online in keeping their local community informed via, in many cases, their newly established website and social media channels.

2. Moving essential services online: Knowing that Mosques are more than just a prayer space, we showed them how to shift their essential services online. In this heightened fear due to the global pandemic, we helped them establish new programmes such as "Ask The Imam" Online Sessions and quarantine/self-isolation online sessions.

    a. The "Ask The Imam" online sessions were an open virtual meeting room where the community would have open access to the Imam at a set time every day or week where they could drop in for advice or have a chat.

    b. The Quarantine/Self Isolation session was a bespoke offering for the community in response to the pandemic explicitly designed for those who were shielding, in self-isolation due to close contact or testing positive for the virus to see a friendly face. This was more pastoral as vast numbers of the community were cut off from seeing loved ones and so not being alone to deal with that had a marked positive impact on their mental health.

3. Online Fundraising Tools: Helping to shift the mosque presence online and establish the groundwork for new digital fundraising channels to help communities manage without Jummah (Friday) collections, madressa (supplementary school) fees and Ramadan collections. This included an introduction to crowdfunding and establishing a direct debit strategy to cover ongoing fixed costs like wages and utilities. This was very well received, especially the strategy on direct debits or generating regular income. This was a revenue stream that most mosques were not taking advantage of before the pandemic.

4. Inspiring and educating the community: With the mosques being closed, we developed a daily content calendar to keep their local community focused on using this time to keep spiritually connected. Every day had a different area of focus to help inspire the whole community. The content calendar was a mix of shorter reminder topics (2-5mins), weekly live Q&A sessions, and social and physical activities. The topics suggested were thought over in great detail, taking into the current situation and needs of the community. Topics included:

    a. Stories Of Generosity

    b. Your Personal Relationship With The Quran

    c. Honouring Parents - Not Even Saying 'ufff' In lockdown!

d. Stories Of Repentance And Change

e. The Importance Of Having An Islamic Will

f. Stories Of Courage

g. The Importance Of Morning And Evening Adhkar (Remembrance).

In addition, we made the following services available to anyone in our network that requires it:

- Global Network - Access to our global network of Charity experts, digital marketing experts and imams/ mosque leaders from around the world to share and collaborate with in the process of going digital.

- A personal coach - An experienced member of the Islamic Network team to help them implement this plan during this lockdown and beyond.

As things eased from September 2020 onwards, the project changed tack to help mosques re-open in line with social distancing guidelines. This resulted in another change in ritual behaviour when Islamic jurists permitted prayers to be performed with social distancing between congregants.

In addition, due to space constraints, attendance had to be strictly controlled, resulting in some difficult situations with Mosque volunteers having to explain to congregants that the capacity has been reached. Registering to attend the Mosque was a new phenomenon, but the Muslim community responded well with minimal difficulty after the initial learning period.

In summary, the feedback we received from mosques and other community organisations across the country was that this project filled a gap, and the impact was that engagement went up across the board.

Going digital made mosque services, aside from ritual prayer, open to all community segments, including working individuals, parents, and children. We advised ‘councils’ of mosques like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Muslim Council of Wales (MCW) and the UK Islamic Mission (UKIM) on how to improve the digitisation of their affiliates, as well as delivering training for them. From small shopfront mosques like Harlesden Ummah to purpose-built mosques like Cambridge Central Mosque or the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre, this project gave direction at such an uncertain time in our collective history.

Ayub Seedat is a digital marketing, fundraising & operations consultant with over a decade of experience in charity and non-profits. He can be contacted at https://www.linkedin.com/in/ayubseedat/.

The Trials of Hybrid Worship

Mark Skelton

The parish in which I work consists of three churches, all of which would be considered small to middle-size. Prior to the pandemic and lockdown we had, on average, approximately 240 regular attenders and very little outlet for any kind of outreach. The whole situation of lockdown forced us, as with so many other places of worship, to try to reassess the way we worship and move that forward.

The live streaming of Masses, the use of Zoom and Teams for meetings and for talks and prayer times were appreciated by those who attended. Not hugely adventurous or far reaching in their approach they were a sign of a 'stirring'. By that I mean we were recognizing that what we had always done, though not in and of itself bad, was perhaps not enough and that we needed to 'step out of our comfort zone' and be prepared to try new and uncharted avenues. Thus we were beginning to make use of new ways of communicating and One of the things I noticed was the opportunity these adaptations gave for people who were on the periphery of the parish family or perhaps even totally unknown to 'dip their toes' into what might otherwise appear alien and even hostile situations. The online streaming on social media meant there was no immediate sense of obligation or commitment. It gave people an opportunity to test the water. This opportunity has continued and will do so as it is definitely a help for those seeking and wondering or revisiting or returning.

There are two downsides to the live streaming of worship. It can create a two-tier or split congregation, between those who worship in the Church and those who worship remotely online. These two groups do not necessarily interact. Secondly, there is the struggle to find ways to bridge this gap without being intrusive, invasive or judgemental regarding people's 'unwillingness' or inability or still-present fear of attending in person.

That is why we have trialed the hybrid Zoom Mass on a Friday evening where anyone can come to the Church,and anyone can participate via Zoom. In all honesty since we began this hybrid form, the numbers have not been huge. When it was Zoom by itself we had up to 25/30 separate devices, some of whom were from outside of our geographical parish, (another lovely aspect of this phenomenon, the extended virtual parish family) but once I attempted the hybrid with congregation it has been rather clunky….a technical term. One of the criticisms from those present within the Church building is they feel I am more reactive with those onscreen whilst those remotely worshipping feel they don't always hear what I am saying when I try to more overtly draw those in the Church into the worship. This is evidently a part of the learning curve which all of us have had to manage. People, I find, are very patient and understanding of my inept attempts, but I am conscious that if this outreach is to continue then we must find a way of enabling both groups of participants to feel included and present to each other. At the moment it can feel rather as if I am the pivot point of a seesaw where one or other group are 'up or down' whereas, to continue the playground analogy, my hope would be to enable it to be more like a roundabout where all feel involved and invested in the same way and at the same time . Online streaming enables people to observe and pray but there is no interaction with those physically present, the zoom hybrid does, to an extent enable that interaction but, at the moment in our experience, is imperfect and a slight cause of frustration.

The very last thing one wants in worship is frustration with the technical means of communication. Lockdown taught us the importance and need for outreach and finding new ways and means to welcome and enable new experiences and encounters. The Parish of All Saints is in its very early days of this new state and I have found the discussions and wider and deeper experiences of others in the BRIC-19 group really helpful and inspiring. We, in the parish, have a long way to go but will keep trying and I am really grateful for the encouragement and support from all the other members of the group and especially for the facilitation of Josh and his team.

Ordained as a catholic priest 33 years ago, since then I have worked in parishes throughout the Diocese of Plymouth, (Devon, Dorset and Cornwall) and am, at present, living and working in Teignmouth on the South Coast.

Projecting Presence

Chris Swift

Context

This report spans several areas of Christian ministry in which I am involved:

- Methodist Homes (MHA)
- Volunteer Chaplaincy at an NHS District Hospital
- Leading Worship for Local Congregations
- Personal commitment to a weekly blog

Events and Practices

In March 2020, MHA closed its doors to visitors. This involved 90 care homes and 70 retirement living schemes. In different ways, 140 MHA chaplains were impacted by the restrictions designed to combat SARS-COVID-19.

As a recent employee of the NHS, I was able to re-join as a volunteer via a fast-track process. This led to regular overnight on-call ministry with some attendance in the hospital, including a COVID patient in intensive care. I also shared in conversations with the Lead Chaplain about the department's response to the changing situation in the hospital, including ways to support staff.

Local churches moved online, mainly using Zoom. Services ranged from Morning Prayer to the Eucharist. As regulations changed, this moved to a mix of online and in-person ministry.

At the start of the pandemic, I decided to commit to a weekly blog to capture my thoughts and feelings as events unfolded. This became 'Swift Reflections' and has enabled me to bring together theological reflection, experiences, and the use of photography in order to discipline my thought and feeling as we journeyed through the crisis.

The Challenges

In ordained ministry for 30 years, physical presence has been central to my work. This has included attendance in the middle of the night to patients in the NHS, pastoral one-to-one meetings in churches and similar places, and presence at conferences and clergy meetings.

While occasional remote support has taken place (e.g. funeral preparation with a relative living a long way away) this has always felt second-best. Physical presence in a pastoral situation allows for a wide range of observation to take place and has the added benefit that physical positioning (posture, expression, location) adds considerably to the verbal expression of compassion and care.

Consequently, the challenge has been to find ways of projecting and communicating qualities of spiritual care, compassion and 'presence' even while physically distant.

The Innovation

BRIC-19 has provided an invaluable opportunity to hear a wide cross-section of ministers and worship leaders from a range of faiths speak about the similar challenges that they face. Through both the lived experience of ministry in a pandemic and the sharing of insights from people in similar circumstances, it has been possible to make the most of alternative and innovative ways to develop religious expression.

- Video became crucial to communication. At the start of the pandemic, I was able to obtain new audio equipment (Saramonic) to enable wireless and higher quality audio capture and a Canon 5D DSLR camera suitable for the work I needed to do. An example of the way technology was used to connect with chaplains in the field can be seen here in my 2020 Easter Message, available on YouTube.
- **Zoom worship**. This was improved by looking at other examples of services online. This enabled greater care to be taken using lighting and becoming more aware of how to frame the presentation. In small 'congregations' informal discussion was possible and pastoral support could be offered in a group context if this was the wish of a participant. For example, one parishioner shared his feeling about the impact of the pandemic on two planned family weddings
- **Combining physical and virtual worlds**. In 2019, at the MHA managers' conference, the leadership team

for chaplaincy reflected on how to connect residents and managers more strongly in a sign of appreciation for the work the managers do. We set up a project where residents and supporters knitted angels so that one unique figure could be given to each manager at the 2020 conference. At the event, no physical conference took place but the angels were sent in a conference 'box' to each manager participating remotely – and this was linked to a reflection for the conference about angels which I presented live online

- Using imagery to generate connection. In the pandemic care homes and hospitals became closed institutions. As it became possible, using digital media (such as Twitter and blogging) became a way to allow connection and insight (see below)

- The blog developed my skills in using WordPress and how imagery can complement the written word. This has provided me with an important record of thought during the pandemic and may have been useful for others. Blogs are publicised through my Twitter account and the two platforms have worked well together. An example of the blogs can be found here: https://chrisswift.blog/2021/01/17/lonely-sits-the-city/

Finally

The BRIC-19 project has been a crucial reference point for discussion and discovery during the pandemic. Hearing the way others have responded to the changing circumstances of worship, care, support and funeral arrangements has enabled both sense-checking and the development of new ideas.

Chris Swift is a director at Methodist Homes (MHA) and an Anglican priest. At MHA he provides spiritual leadership for the organisation and works with 140 chaplains to develop the work of pastoral care. Chris was awarded a PhD for a thesis exploring the development and practice of chaplaincy, resulting in Hospital Chaplaincy in the Twenty-first Century (2nd edition 2014). Chris served as president of the College of Health Care Chaplain (2004-7) and wrote the national chaplaincy guidelines for NHS England in 2015. He continues to be an active researcher and author and in 2019 was made a Visiting Professor at Staffordshire University in pastoral, religious and spiritual care.

Image. MHA Chaplain the Rev'd Alma Fritchley speaking with a volunteer during her pastoral duties at Laurel Court Care Home, Didsbury

Music in Rural Church Weddings during the Pandemic

Deborah Walton

I am the vicar of a three-parish benefice in rural North Shropshire. I have been in post since the end of August 2020. Before that, I was curate in a two-parish benefice in rural South Staffordshire.

In both contexts before the pandemic, the churches were very busy with weddings, with many local couples getting married in church. As well as the essential legal requirements of a church wedding, the ceremonies usually also include a Bible reading, a poem, a short sermon and music. Music is an important part of a church wedding. Music is usually played as the bridal party arrives in the church, a few hymns are sung by the congregation during the service, music is played while the register is being signed or the marriage document witnessed and music is played as the newly married couple depart the church. Church bells are often rung as the bride arrives at church and before she enters the church and as the couple leave the church at the end of the wedding.

Traditionally in rural churches, music is played on an organ sometimes with a church choir but it was not uncommon pre-pandemic for some couples to have other musicians or singers playing as the bridal party arrived or during the signing of the register. In addition to the music chosen for the church wedding, music is often an important part of a wedding reception.

As churches reopened after lockdown, it was possible to hold weddings again on 4 July 2020, although numbers of guests were significantly restricted and singing was not permitted. From that date until the middle of July 2021 numbers of those permitted to attend church weddings were restricted and for much of that period couples were not able to invite guests to a reception following the ceremony.

These changes had a significant impact on the music used at church weddings. We adapted by creating Spotify playlists downloaded onto a mobile phone and played through the church sound system or a freestanding speaker. This meant that couples were able to choose from a very wide choice of music available on a music platform with which they were familiar.

I observed that couples planning weddings during this period of restrictions thought about music rather differently than couples marrying before the pandemic. They seemed to want to include the key elements of what would have taken place in a pre-pandemic wedding into the 45 minutes or so of the church wedding. This led to brides choosing to come into church to music that might otherwise have been part of the music played at the reception rather than to some of the more usual classical pieces played on the organ. Hymns were chosen, but often couples chose more interesting or more complex arrangements of these hymns; for example, John Rutter's arrangement of 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. Often the arrangements chosen would have been difficult or impossible for a congregation to sing.

The music chosen to be played while the register was signed included songs which were important to the couple and which reminded them of key moments in their relationship or important moments for those members of the family who were able to attend the wedding. Quite often couples chose to leave church to the song that they would have chosen for their first dance had they been able to have a wedding reception for their guests.

Couples seemed to embrace the opportunity to shape their marriage ceremony using the music which had already been significant in the history of their relationship together. It seemed to me that these weddings reflected the personalities and experiences of the couples in

a new way. Weddings included a greater mixture of sacred and secular music than before which gave them a more contemporary feel.

Common music choices for brides arriving at church before the pandemic were the bridal chorus from Wagner's Lohengrin, 'Trumpet Voluntary' (also known as the Prince of Denmark's March) by Jeremiah Clarke, 'Trumpet Tune' by Purcell or Pachelbel's famous 'Canon in D'.. Examples of music chosen by couples for the bride's entry in recent months were quite different: 'A Thousand Years' by Christina Perry, 'The Wonder of You' by Elvis Presley, 'One Day Like This' by Elbow and 'Marry You' by Bruno Mars.

Before the pandemic, common organ music choices for leaving the church were Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' from Midsummer Night's Dream,, Handel's 'Arrival of the Queen of Sheba, from Solomon, or the 'Toccata' from Widor's 5th Symphony in F. During the pandemic, couples chose to leave church to 'Bring Me Sunshine' (the theme to The Morecambe and Wise Show), 'Summer' by Calvin Harris, 'On Top of the World' by Imagine Dragons and Then by Brad Paisley.

I very much hope that this is a new trend that will continue with couples in the future feeling more able to choose music that is part of their day to day lives in their church weddings. The changes in music choices have given the ceremonies a more contemporary feel. The music choices have given the bride and groom another way of shaping the ceremony to reflect their personalities, experiences and preferences.

I welcome this change. While there are obviously couples who enjoy listening to classical organ music many do not. Giving couples greater freedom to choose music which is their preferred listening reflects more deeply the Christian belief in welcome and hospitality in places of worship. It also speaks of how precious and special each individual person is in the sight of God and the importance of engaging with people for who they really are, the person that God sees and loves.

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Image. The church noticeboard, with photos of 'lockdown weddings.'

Themes and Patterns

Ritual life is complex and varied, and even during this crisis, we have seen a great variety in the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic was received, processed, and addressed by different communities. This is especially demonstrated by the sheer variety present in our case studies. Nevertheless, we can observe some themes and patterns in the project as a whole. While these are not definitive, they do offer both a shape to our current findings and, we hope, useful conclusions about ritual life under and after the pandemic that professionals will find useful in shaping their future work.

Chronotypes

Our research suggested that the pandemic's effects can be divided into, and analysed within, three time frames. These were discursive, partly created by media discourse and governmental "roadmaps", rather than experience, although the immediate period of lockdown is largely accepted as a real and largely national experience of the crisis. Interviewees participated within these discourse time frames, but they found the lines between them blurred: sometimes they would progress backwards, rather than forwards. However, they remain important to order the conversations about change and refer mostly to the contexts of ritual adaptation under review.

One was the immediate: dealing with the immediate shock of the reality of the pandemic and the imposition of social distancing measures. For most, this happened in the spring and summer of 2020, and by the time our project had begun, our interviewees were looking back at this period in memory. This period was characterised as a crisis response, with a focus on doing whatever was possible to continue ritual life using whatever tools were first to hand. Some of the most consequential innovations were in fact set into motion at this stage, despite how little planning had been done and how little anyone knew about what the course of the pandemic or its legacy would be.

The second, medium-term, time frame was the context British society found itself in for the majority of the time when the survey and case study research was done for this project—that is, late 2020 and the first half of 2021. This is where conscious planning and strategic thinking emerged. Communities and organisations started to think about what was likely to come next for them and for British society as a whole, and further developed or refined the adaptations they had made in the short term to make them more effective and better tailored to the needs of their community. This could involve investments in training or equipment, or building new facilities or institutional structures—such as buying streaming equipment or building up an online presence—to facilitate and enable the new work.

And finally, in the long term, we see those who have made adaptations start to think about what will happen once the pandemic is over and the 'new normal' begins to emerge. Here, rtitual leaders are thinking about the long-term sustainability of the adaptations they have developed, and how their continued and widespread use might change the ritual landscape of Britain as a whole. Here, communities and other organisations think about their institutional longevity and self-positioning, about how to build their reputations and make enduring partnerships that might last years or decades. We are only now emerging into this time frame, and the legacy that the pandemic and the adaptations it encouraged will have for ritual life is not yet something that can be seen clearly.

These latter two time frames were never clearly time-delineated. During the interview research for the case studies, the sense of these time stages could shift regularly, depending on the media context, hospital admissions and deaths, and the progress of vaccine rollout. Participants could roll back from optimism about any future expressed just the week before, and some felt stuck in stages of the pandemic that never seemed to end. This was particularly the case in the spring and early summer of 2021, as the magic bullet of the vaccine failed to realise a quick exit out of restrictions. At this time, some case study research notes indicate a sense of malaise, a lack of confidence in the future, and, for some people, conversations about ritual work were put on hold.

To the extent that we can, we will address the importance of the themes and patterns below for all three of these time frames.

The Problem of Narrative and Scale

We have noticed that the responses to the pandemic depend to a significant degree on the scale of the story of the pandemic being told. The pandemic was a tragedy for the individuals who were sickened or killed by it and for their families and communities, of course, and for many ritual leaders, this was the most pressing issue. Responding to the pandemic meant finding effective ways for a great many individual people to grieve, and for families and communities to come to terms with the magnitude of that loss. That work remains ongoing and likely will for some time.

But, in many cases, there is another scale at which the pandemic is understood as well: as a national (or even global) tragedy. Many people we spoke with saw themselves as participating in a *national* story, one shared across the UK and thought about in the model of the First and Second World Wars, which are both very common reference points for British nationalist narratives. Ideas like banding together to support the National Health Service, supporting one another through sacrifice and mutual aid (as we did during the Blitz), and so on, were tropes that were used in the media and elsewhere in public discourse to take the unnerving experience of the pandemic and place it within a known and valorised narrative.

Our research is characterised by this factor. We found in our interviews that many people were more comfortable talking about experiences that fit into this narrative than they were with aspects which did not. When we probed further, or asked them to focus on their unique situations, they often ordered their own experiences in reference to this narrative. In their terms, they were always "better off" than others. A hierarchy of sacrifice has arisen through this narrative form, which has had contradictory effects. On the one hand, it gives people a social comparison that helps sustain them; on another, it prevents acknowledgement of a spectrum of other difficult experiences.In many cases, being interviewed for this project gave our partners a time out opportunity to reflect on their experience of the pandemic. When they did so, these reflections were complex and emotionally nuanced.

This narrative was often oversimplified by the national press, who treated stories of faith communities as either 'good news' or 'bad news' based on whether they were or were not examples of the country coming together to cope. Our media analysis, which will follow this report, has demonstrated how socially important faith community action was in the pandemic and, particularly, how the ritual story became a cipher to talk about human ingenuity, endurance and continuity in the face of disaster. But this had knock on effects for faith communities. Like others, they enjoyed the limelight and appreciated the praise. But their stories of difficulty, of challenge, of complaint, were left by the wayside. Worse, this pattern encourages faith communities to work - and think of their work - in ways that can fit into this story.

The problem here is not just that the power of this narrative discourages an honest confrontation with how difficult it has, in fact, been for religious communities to cope in these conditions, but this insistence on storied good news ('coping') or bad news ('not coping') obscures the tensions and adaptations that are actually happening. Almost every community we have come into contact with has made some adaptations to its ritual and communal life, and while some of those adaptations have been helpful, the overall experience has been worse. It is more useful, we would argue, to ask questions about how adaptations and new technology can be used to support the grieving and bring communities together, not whether or not it has. These adaptations are more effective for some people than others; they assist some forms of coping but not others. Thinking of this as part of a form of national coping (or not) is a barrier to understanding the important specifics of what adaptations do well and how they can do it better.

A key aspect of that national narrative is memorialisation, and of course, this is a ritual task in which faith communities are especially well placed to participate. Our work on memorialisation and death care shows, however, that the needs of individual mourners and the politics of national memory are not always compatible. While personal remembrance is often grounded in the details of a person's life and identity, national

memory can tend towards a bridging (if not erasure) of that difference. When practices and cultures of memorialisation go online, however, they necessarily get entangled with the patterns and power structures of digital culture, with everything that comes along with that. While dignified remembrance is possible online and socially distanced, those who work in this area at either a personal or a national level need to be aware of the cultural and political currents at play so that they can be dealt with appropriately. Sometimes ritual practitioners have actively tried to keep memorialisation at the scale of a more local understanding of community to try to avoid these conflicts and dilemmas. Many of our interviewees expressed worry about when, in the volatile present and uncertain future, an appropriate moment for designing rituals for collective mourning might arise.

Faith groups' rituals are also sometimes battlegrounds over national policy, as was the case concerning public health policy during the COVID-19 crisis. When rituals are scrupulously and visibly conducted in compliance with government guidelines—as was the case, for example, for the Green Lane Mosque's worship— they can become a means of teaching and demonstrating government guidelines. This is not the only possible relationship; when government guidelines prevent ritual from taking place, that void serves to make the loss caused by the guidelines all the more painfully felt. This means that rituals did become flash points for contestation against guidelines, restrictions, and the manner in which they were implemented, as seen in the case of Remembrance Sunday. The government's sensitivity (or lack of it) to effective ritual provision, and the comparison between the ritual treatment of one community over another (e.g., the cancellation of Diwali and Ramadan vs the narrative of 'saving' Christmas), had profound effects on community well being. Ritual thus provided a locus for talking about the overarching question of identity and societal treatment of minority groups.

But this dichotomy—rituals either implementing guidelines or serving as a loss in the face of them—does not perhaps take account of the adaptability of ritual practice in the face of new obstacles. The truth is that effectively implemented rituals can be a powerful means by which government policy objectives can be brought into the emotional and communal life of people. But this, too, needs to make space for adaptation. In their relationship with faith communities, public bodies should not make the assumption that guidelines will either be implemented or not; the nuances of how guidelines will be responded to, and how guidelines can adapt themselves to ritual needs, should be taken seriously. Policymakers need a far more nuanced appreciation of community structures and the nature of authority in different religious contexts.

We can see the pandemic, then, as disturbing the established scales of ritual action and recasting its narratives and performances. Differing scales (national, local, global) sometimes interlock, compete, or hover over each other, but they come together in the dramaturgies of online ritual spaces. Some rituals actively seek a global audience. Many have no such aims and use technology to create a powerful spiritual or communal experience for a small community. Most balance these two audiences somehow, but in different ways and with differing ambition. The practices and techniques used to frame ritual making are different as a result. Understanding the shape and function of ritual requires attention to the scale on which its operation is spiritual, socially, psychologically, or personally meaningful.

We should also note, however, that the scales of infrastructure remained the same and those more powerful institutions in the UK have been able to command better ritual provision online It is, for instance, more appropriate to think of "virtual pilgrimage" in a national context, rather than a global one, despite the narrative of shock global transformation we see in the media. Existing power structures within the UK provided the impetus for a genre of virtual pilgrimage production, which was unique to a national, and not just religious, context. To a considerable degree, then, ritual provision has weathered the pandemic because of the resources on which it is based.

The Nature of Communities

One clear theme which emerged very early on in our analysis of survey data, and which carried through in the case studies and the work of the action research group, was the important role of ritual in creating and maintaining a sense of community. Indeed, the sharp drop in overall satisfaction with rituals conducted during the pandemic was most clearly observable as a drop in the sense of community created through ritual activities (see Ch 2, fig. 4, page 18). This finding opened up consideration regarding the nature of communities themselves, and the relationship between communal belonging and spiritual support, highlighting the complex relationship between believing and belonging and troubling the influential "believing without belonging" paradigm (Davie 1990) of modern British religious life. Indeed, our results suggest that belonging, rather than believing, is a key element of ritual satisfaction which individuals seek out through communal engagement.

The importance of belonging as a determinant of ritual efficacy leads to another set of challenges to existing ideas about successful religious communities. As shown in our survey results, smaller communities have been considerably more successful at cultivating a sense of belonging and connection through the pandemic period than larger ones. In a religious landscape that has been characterised by the amalgamation and closure of smaller congregations, this finding suggests that such congregations have a heretofore underappreciated resilience. Smaller communities were better able to maintain a sense of togetherness and mutual support through their rituals during this crisis, and that their convivial, small nature was a source of resilience rather than a weakness. This was expressed particularly well by a pastor of a pentecostal church in the South East, who talked of the power of that community, and communal knowledge, in the context of lockdown in providing support: “if you have the finger on the pulse and you know your people, you know what people need. I know my saints by name and by face, I know which ones have lost their jobs, and will need help.” We would urge those making decisions about the mergers and closures of communities to take this into account.

The rise of online engagement has also led to a re-thinking of community as a naturally bounded geographical phenomenon. Instead, participants are increasingly able to seek out participation in communities which best align with their own religious outlooks and spiritual needs. Many communities report online attendance numbers that are vastly higher than their in-person, pre-pandemic counterparts. Attendees are also much more likely to experiment, visiting communities that are geographically and religiously far more diverse than they had been before. These pressures may have played out differently in more ‘networked’ communities that have more experience maintaining connections at a distance, such as Pagan and Buddhist communities and those located in rural areas.

Such increased access has not, however, been without its problems. In some cases, communities found themselves increasingly under attack. Online formats disturbed the protective barriers that communities had established in local contexts, and the sudden potential of a global dimension to ritual work suddenly undermined what had been decades-long work to integrate and achieve a standing in local spaces. Future research will lay out the full impact of COVID-19 and Brexit on issues of hate crime, but some religious communities we spoke to, especially BAME communities, had painful and direct experience of such instances. Some of these were from online trolling - racist or pornographic zoom bombing, for instance; one black majority church in south-east London we spoke to experienced graffiti that can only be described as a desecration attack, which left the entire congregation struggling to understand motivation.

For the majority of survey participants in BRIC-19, this kind of disturbance or attack on their sense of community had not been a feature of their ritual lives under COVID-19. But the influence of online forms, particularly, did generate conversations about identity, cohesion and - sometimes - *choice*, which could be threatening to the fabric of that community. As Dr Kolata demonstrates in the case study of the Inclusive Church, digital formats have created the impetus for new community endeavours but, in doing so, they have sometimes dissolved other community structures. We can refer, too, to the description of the impact of global possibilities of ritual in the Quaker community, described by one participant in the Tech Teams case study. This interviewee found the possibility of a global community of Quakerism, one that united the mainly English-based community with the somewhat more Evangelical communities of the African continent, incredibly exciting, although he acknowledged that some Quakers might not feel the same.

Returning to narrative, media reportage of the pandemic’s impact on religious communities describes a certain trajectory—a small congregation experiencing a sudden (global) growth— but the story is never that simple. Take, for instance, one blunt response to the question of “what has changed” in our survey: “the dawning realisation that it was time to leave my church after 30 years.” The loss of access to local gathering places has also led, in some cases, to a renewed appreciation of them which is not easily substituted by online events. As one interviewee stated, “The online lectures and talks have been a great source of spiritual nourishment, but it is my local mosque where my practice is grounded. That is where I belong and where I pray.”

There is some evidence, too, of how fulfilling ritual needs prompted a reconfiguration of generational relationships, and a renewal of intergenerational relationships. This applied across denominations and faiths. A number of our case study participants remarked on the extent to which they relied upon younger, digitally skilled, members, to communicate with their parents and grandparents or to show them how to participate online. A Catholic interviewee told us about setting her grandma up with the online Mass access: “It made me realise how important Mass was for my grandma. I knew she did daily Mass but this is the first time I saw her do it. (...) I guess I got to appreciate it and I also made time to join her sometimes.” Similarly, a Muslim interviewee said that: “We used WhatsApp to tell the youngsters about what was available and we asked them to pass it on to

their parents, grandparents and so on. They helped us provide the others with a spiritual booster they could no longer get at the mosque. (...) For many, mosque is their social life too and that also gives them spiritual strength, so we had to make sure we can provide some access." This reflection also highlights the interconnection between ritual and social life, both of which have been shown to be deeply necessary sources of spiritual nourishment during the pandemic.

Embodiment and Relationship

A major theme in our research was the pain at the loss of the affect of embodied collectivity —that is, how hard it was to lose the feeling of being together in person for worship. The terms 'communal' and 'participatory' were those that fell the most in our survey results, and in interviews, it was the impossibility of physical co-presence of people together that was consistently raised as the challenge that needs to be overcome.

This lack of embodied collectivity was the central fact that framed the experience of ritual under the pandemic. It was this experience that, despite the considerable innovations we have seen which are likely to prove useful in the long term, led to the deep-seeded dissatisfaction with online ritual that we saw in the data. In fact, one way of interpreting the relatively more optimistic and positive outlooks of ritual leaders with regard to online adaptations, in comparison to ritual participants, is that for the former these remained embodied, performed in the same spaces, albeit in a new format. A great many people want to engage in online rituals, but their disembodied nature is, for many of them, a barrier to effective engagement.

We would speculate that the pattern that conference call software creates a more effective ritual experience than the streaming of video may relate to this; while neither are perfect, conference call software gives a closer approximation of embodied co-presence than streaming video is able to. Others who have created new rituals and liturgy in response to the pandemic have particularly emphasised meditation, breathing exercises, the relationship with nature, and other aspects that drew worshippers' attention to the physical and embodied nature of the act of worship, something that may not have been as necessary before the pandemic.

A more disembodied, digital form of worship does have some advantages. Attendance numbers have gone up, as online worship is more accessible to those who could not or would not have wished to attend in person. Virtual worship also enables those who would like to explore different forms of worship to experiment, visiting communities that are geographically and religiously far more diverse than they had been before.

Many ritual forms are very tied to a specific building or geographical location. These rituals were particularly difficult to reconstruct in a way that did not feel distant, inauthentic, or ineffective, absent significant creative thinking on the parts of those conducting them. These included the work we observed regarding death care and chaplaincy, where we saw both the pain of the loss of established patterns of grief and support as well as the emergence of new ones which, in time, may prove important and effective. Other spatial practices, such as pilgrimage, have found more success online. These rituals seem to be able to engage the spatial imagination of their participants and build a sense of online community. That these rituals are generally an act of affirmative choice, rather than direct responses to external crises, may explain some of the difference.

The physical houses of worship in which most rituals are held are, of course, central to the felt sense of embodied community that is traditionally associated with worship. The lack of this sacred space presented a challenge for worshippers. Some attempted to create a sort of 'home shrine' as a domestic analogue to a house of worship. Some were decorated, even temporarily, in order to mark out the distinction of a separate space for ritual, even if, at their centre, was the same computer monitor used for work, socialising, and nearly every other necessary task. Such home shrines were relatively rare, but they do seem to respond to the longing for a set-aside place marked as sacred to conduct ritual acts. We would speculate further that part of the reason that Church of England clergy, in particular, seemed so much more content with their worship experience than their congregants did was that these clergy were able to conduct worship in the church buildings that they were used to. Whatever else might be the case about mutual understanding between clergy and congregants, it seems quite likely that being able to conduct worship from those sacred and (in many cases) historical and much-loved spaces enhanced clergy members' experience of worship and made it feel more normal.

The ubiquity of online worship has led to some rich and detailed theological thinking about what embodiment is and how ritual engages with it. These theological concerns are, of course, tradition-specific. For some communities—such as most Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities—physical co-presence is a non-negotiable requirement of most key rituals. For others, such as Catholics, there are key elements of rituals that require physical co-presence, and there is a hollowness to rituals conducted without them. For Quakers, online meetings have revitalised conversations about the

importance (or not) of embodiment, in response to the many positive experiences of online worship within the community. In most cases, though, these reflections on embodiment extended beyond systematic theological thinking about doctrines and rules to embrace the practical (but still theological) question of the role of embodiment in worship and ritual life.

What we tended to see with the more effective online ritual is not an attempt by online rituals to replicate the forms of embodied collectivity of in-person rituals, but to to create a different but still effective model of embodiment appropriate for the medium being used. The ways in which chat functions are integrated into ritual events, the use of more tangible forms of networking such as postal mail and telephone calls, and an increased interest in the physical landscape, however engaged, are, we would suggest, the starting points of these expanded understandings of communal embodiment and how rituals can relate to our bodies, our mind, and our (social, spiritual and digital) selves. For those who have negative associations with the formal infrastructure of religious building, this move may be particularly freeing, allowing the creation of a different model of embodiment without the same institutional baggage.

Authority

Many of our participants reported shifts in the structures of authority within their communities over the course of the pandemic. In the early stages, this tended to occur as decision-making power came to rest with the people who had the time and, importantly, the technical skills to facilitate alternative modes of ritual engagement, as described by O'Keeffe in her Tech Teams case study. This early shift in authority contributed, in some instances, to a more empowered laity, as exemplified by Stuerzenhofecker's work on Orthodox women's prayer practices.

But if, in some ways, online formats challenged or undermined established structures of authority, they could also reinforce them. Zoom created new opportunities for engagement and ritual making, but it also created new social zones of authority in sometimes unexpected ways. The Quaker institution, in the Tech Teams case study, is a good example of how conducting worship over conference call software required a number of new administrative roles ('facilitators') to deal with the new social challenges of worshiping at home and online. However, the need to control the Zoom room to a greater or lesser degree, and the question of how to do that, applied to all communities using video conferencing software. This free text comment entered in our survey is revealing how sometimes not enough authority was deemed to be exerted:

> *"It was charmingly muddy to start with, but eight months later it's just maddening that the worship leaders haven't yet worked out that as Zoom hosts they can/should mute the heavy breathers on the phone during the sermon."*

Yet, leaders often found their power to control the zoom room was an uncomfortable aspect of their work, which could bring them into conflict with congregants. One pastor of a Pentecostal community in South East England, for instance, described how, after some consideration and discussion with her team, she had found a solution to congregational singing via Zoom. This demanded that participants mute themselves, and listen to two singers only, which she explained to her congregation. During the service, however, another congregant switched on her microphone, and sang loudly and out of sync with the others, which ruined the streamlined effect of two voices. During the mute button battle that ensued, the congregant refused to leave it off, either through ignorance or by intent. The pastor had to consider ejecting her from the room to preserve the service for others. Reflecting on this episode, the pastor clearly found it humorous, but, at the same time, did not appreciate having to make these decisions.

The burdens on leadership also increased as authority to manage COVID-19 governance was passed to those who managed congregations, who had to make decisions of whether to open or not, and how to implement social distancing guidelines amongst their congregations. This extended authority into new domains, but also generated feelings of culpability. Many ritual leaders we spoke to, to a greater or lesser degree, felt that administering COVID-19 restrictions disturbed their established structure of social relations. In some ways, it reactivated issues of authority, and age or gender, in ritual work. Ritual leaders reflected that they felt uncomfortable enforcing guidelines amongst older generations, who were sometimes the worst adherents amongst congregations. Gendered languages of authority, too, came into play, with female ritual leaders sometimes caught between concern for community lives, a heightened sense of personal culpability for their well being, and fears of coming across as too "bossy".

Most conversations with ritual leaders for BRIC-19 research and case studies reflected on this aspect of the "new normal" and sometimes how frustrating it was to manage those who did not want to be managed, and the ruptures it could create in communities and between ritual leaders and governing systems. But for some communities, the political undercurrents of that work

created tensions and difficulties that were impossible to resolve for individuals. One member of a Black-majority church clergy team, based in South East London, talked of how awkward she felt administering the COVID-19 system, and trying to interpret these new procedures (on behalf of the government) to her community, who were distrustful of these restrictions and the motivations behind them.

Continuity and Change

We would like to conclude these findings with a broader reflection on the ways in which we have seen ritual makers engage with tension between continuity and change. As we indicated in the introduction, the very word 'innovation' in the title of this project was seen as inappropriate and even offensive by some of our partners. It was exceptionally important to many of our partners to demonstrate the clear continuity of their ritual practices from before the pandemic to the period of it. For many, many people who engage with ritual, the continuity of ritual practices over time is central to its affective and spiritual power. The notion of ritual change in our times is thus deeply upsetting and, in cases, a form of sacrilege.

The value of tradition in ritual is widely recognized, both internally by religious people and externally by wider social forces and the media. It is a near consensus. As observers, then, we find ourselves in a difficult situation. We understand and appreciate the value of tradition, but from the outside, we can observe things that certainly look like change happening, and at a fairly rapid pace. As observers and analysts, working in partnership with those inside the field, how can we make sense of the tension between our observations of change and the clear articulation that to focus on such changes misses the most essential point?

In the survey, we asked ritual ritual leaders if the regular (i.e., weekly) rituals that they conducted were "the same rituals" as those they conducted before lockdown. A full 44.5% said that they were "almost entirely the same" and 39.6% said they were 'slightly different.' But when we asked if these rituals were conducted in the same manner as before, over half (52.2%) said that they were conducted 'very differently,' and 13.4% said that they were conducted 'almost entirely differently.' Responses from participants were similar; over half (56.2%) said they were the same rituals, with another 38.6% saying they were the same 'to some extent,' while 41.8% they were conducted in a 'very different' manner than beforehand, and 41.2% said they were conducted in a 'slightly different' manner. While, to some extent, this result may have been prompted by the presence of these two questions together, it seems that very many congregants and leaders agreed that there was both a change in ritual methods but a fundamental continuity at the ritual's core.

This perspective does not resolve this tension, of course, but it does help us navigate it. We have not found many examples of ritual revolutions in this project. The largest changes have come not from religious communities, but other organisations (often commercial ones) who have offered something new in the hopes that it will prove popular. Religious communities and leaders, those who have a tradition that they value and protect, have very rarely rebelled against those traditions during the pandemic. There is no desire to make COVID-19 a second Reformation.

What there has been, however, is a great deal of negotiation, with the virus, with society, and with religious traditions themselves. Religious traditions are rich and complex things, and faced with the challenges of the pandemic, many religious leaders have looked more deeply into their own tradition's scriptures, history, and practices to find ways of adapting ritual practices to address the COVID-19 pandemic. While we have observed changes, then, there is an important sense in which these changes are not, in fact, novel: for the most part, they are one more step in a centuries-long, ongoing dialogue within these traditions. Technological and social developments do mean that some formal adaptation is necessary to keep the tradition going on, but to see what is happening during the pandemic as either a break with all aspects of a tradition or a straightforward continuation of the single option that a tradition contains, is to do a disservice to these faiths and to fail to see the dynamics of the moment. The adaptations we have seen under COVID-19 are not unprecedented or inventions; even when they feel new, they are negotiations and continuations, not breaks.

Conclusions and Questions Arising

Conclusions

Our research has revealed both considerable innovation in, and deep-seated dissatisfaction with, digital worship during the pandemic. There have been important positive developments and adaptations which will strengthen British religious life in the long term, but for most people, the move to online ritual has been one of loss, not gain. Rituals—regular weekly worship, funerals, baptisms, festival celebrations, and the like—have been exceptionally difficult for most participants and leaders during the pandemic. By almost every metric, the experience of pandemic rituals have been worse than those that came before them. They are perceived as less meaningful, less communal, less spiritual, less effective, and so on.

The ways in which community structures have been impacted by alterations to ritual practices during the pandemic are diverse and complex, with new understandings of and approaches to community arising while previously existing configurations are found to be unsustainable. Nevertheless, an overall sense of community has been markedly lacking and deeply missed. This loss of the sense of connection correlates to a decrease in the perceived effectiveness of rituals. In fact, worshippers seem 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 (such as streaming video). Human connection seems more important to congregants than technical quality or spectacle.

In spite of these dissatisfactions, there is a tremendous appetite for religious ritual online. Many communities report online attendance numbers that are vastly higher than their in-person, pre-pandemic counterparts. Attendees are also much more likely to experiment, visiting communities that are geographically and religiously far more diverse than they had been before. Older generations, particularly, are beginning to make their mark on digital religion. This has effects on the nature of religious communities in the long term.

Reflecting on our work over the past year, it is not surprising that so much of our research has centred on experiences of grief and loss. Rituals—including, but not limited, to those of grief and mourning—are enormously important for people's sense of self, place in society, and mental health. They are essential for combating loneliness, especially in times of isolation. Having access to (appropriate) rituals can, at times, be a matter of life or death. Rituals are also often politically and emotionally potent sites for conveying social information. This is relevant for the ways in which religious leaders can convey or demonstrate public health advice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, different communities engaged with this potency in quite different ways. Similarly, rituals of remembrance are key in shaping people's sense of their relationship to a community and its history. When those rituals are played out online, they make use of different skill sets and cultural contexts. When ritual work is done online, it necessarily participates in the practical and discursive patterns of online culture, which requires particular sensitivities and expertise that in-person ritual makers may not have.

Conducting any ritual work online, however, requires a different set of skills and tools, which clergy have necessarily developed at considerable speed. In doing so, they have had to reflect on their own work in shaping ritual conditions. This added attention to craft and context, alongside the possibilities of online gathering, has led to important developments in the ways religious

communities gather. Both new technologies (such as social media and messaging apps) and older ones (such as phone calls and the post) have been used to build a sense of togetherness and community during times of isolation. While online rituals vary enormously, some patterns are evident. Effective online rituals tend to be shorter and more casual than their in-person components, have acceptable levels of sound quality, and place their focus on the people presenting them, often including congregants who take opportunities to participate from where they are. Many communities have started regular (even daily) online rituals that were not feasible or demanded before but have proved quite popular.

In many ways, the digitisation of religious life has shifted patterns of religious authority and power. Out of necessity, rituals were organised and made during the pandemic by anyone with the tools and ability to do so, not only by authorised clergy. Individuals were also more able to join whatever religious activities they wished, even if they were far from their 'home' community. This has, at times, led to a shifting of religious control towards the laity, and to those sections of communities which have historically been marginalised (such as women, the differently abled, and other minority groups). This often happens in specific and local ways that do not directly challenge existing structures of religious authority. The patterns of collaboration between leaders and community are being renegotiated, not revolutionised.

However, existing networks of power and resources still matter greatly. Individuals and institutions with greater economic, social, and political potency—such as major cathedrals, pre-existing social networks, or successful commercial enterprises—have been more able to establish new practices than others. Digital religious practice has revealed the inequalities present in religious life; it has not cured them. Our survey found a particularly large gap between the experience of clergy and congregants in the Church of England. C of E clergy said that the experience of ritual during the pandemic was only marginally worse than that of ritual before the pandemic. For congregants, however, it was much worse. This suggests a problematic experiential disconnect that is likely to affect the relationship between C of E clergy and laity going forward. This gap did not appear for other religious groups.

Not all pandemic adaptations are digital. Many of the ritual adaptations we saw were social modifications, sometimes in combination with digital tools, that often aimed to maintain human connection when the ability to do so had become strained. Some rituals which, by their nature, cannot or should not be moved online (e.g., many Muslim rituals). In many of these cases, there has been a pronounced effort to create an alternative sacred space—whether physically within the home or virtually via digital interactivity—to ameliorate that loss of community. While this place-making work could be emotionally effective, it was not a replacement for the rituals themselves. Some religious practices which are especially tied to a physical location—such as a cemetery or a workplace—were exceptionally difficult to bring online. This was evident in our case studies regarding death care and chaplaincy, where we saw both the pain of losing established patterns of grief and support as well as the emergence of new ones which, in time, may prove important and effective. Other spatial practices, such as pilgrimage, have found more success online. These rituals seem to be able to engage the spatial imagination of their participants and build a sense of online community. That these rituals are generally an act of affirmative choice, rather than direct responses to external crises, may explain some of the difference.

In the context of shrinking budgets and attendance numbers, it appears that the pandemic has accelerated a move towards digitisation which was likely to have been inevitable under any circumstances. Lessons taken from the pandemic point to a need to attend to multiple modalities of interpersonal connection. Religious communities do not naturally separate ritual life from pastoral care; technological innovations that prove effective in one area are likely to spread to the other.

Online ritual has been particularly inviting for those who are seeking out new communities, experiences, and modes of worship. For those with a strong ties to a particular community, place or building, however, the disembodied nature of online practice could make some rituals feel distant, inauthentic, or ineffective. While the ability of worshippers to join communities far from their homes is a significant positive development that is likely to continue, especially for those who do not have a local congregation that serves their religious needs or for faiths whose numbers in the UK are relatively small, the effectiveness of in-person rituals suggests a limit to the potential of online-only communities. Some form of online-offline hybrid seems likely to be the way forward. Creating such hybrids, however, is an expensive prospect, and religious leaders are quite worried about how these costs will be handled in a context of scarcity. There is concern that smaller communities will be unable to afford these costs, and they will be forced to close or merge with others.

Our survey did, however, suggest that participants in larger communities found their experience of rituals during the pandemic to be significantly less positive than was the case for participants in smaller communities, especially in the categories of communality, participation,

identity-building, and effectiveness. This suggests that smaller communities were better able to maintain a sense of togetherness and mutual support through their rituals during this crisis, and that their convivial, small nature was a source of resilience rather than a weakness. We would urge those making decisions about the mergers and closures of communities to take this into account.

Questions Arising

Rather than conclude with a specific set of policy recommendations, we end with a set of questions that, we hope and expect, will occupy the interests of ritual makers, religious people, scholars of ritual, and those who have financial or organisational oversight of British religious life for the next years, as the long-term impact of the pandemic becomes clear.

- How can we meet people where they are?

  One of the great gifts of ritual during the pandemic has been its accessibility. Far more people have engaged with online worship than engaged with it offline. Part of the reason for this is because, through all its challenges, it was able to reach out to people where they were—physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually—and speak to their condition. For those who were self-isolating or otherwise were unable to travel, worship could come to them via tables, screens or phones. For those who did not find their local house of worship appropriate for their needs, they were able to explore online to find another that was better for them. Now that religious communities know that this need exists and that it *can* be served, it seems clear that it *ought* to be served. People cannot be left behind as they were before the pandemic. Religious leaders will need to think about this extended, and perhaps invisible, community that their rituals engage, and think about what tools and techniques are necessary to speak to their particular needs and to include them fully into their communities.

- How can we build and sustain communities?

  Our research has shown how essential a sense of community is to the success of ritual life. It has also shown how difficult it is to sustain a sense of community without physical co-presence. Organisational and financial pressures that existed before the pandemic have, to a degree, been exacerbated by the pandemic, and many communities fear technology as a threat to their futures. This research has shown that, when well used, technology can be a means of enhancing, expanding and strengthening communities, rather than a threat to it. Communities should take charge of their technological tools and not let themselves be dictated to by them. And yet, we have seen how digital life and the ease of communication challenges the *shape and nature* of communities, weakening the power of geographic boundaries and the parish system. The urgent task is to ensure that a digitally expanded community remains a supportive and strong one, and does not decay into the weaker and less meaningful social relationships that make up so much of our digital lives.

- How can we tap into the energy of the laity?

  The profusion of ritual activity and creativity we have seen has not come entirely from the clergy. Members of the laity have used their technical skills, their personal networks, and their commitment to their faith to take responsibility for and ownership of their own ritual lives and for that of their communities. There are, in most traditions, structural and/or theological limits on what the laity can do on their own, but we have seen a shift in religious authority over the pandemic away from those who are explicitly authorised to lead towards those who have the energy and ability to do so. While this may pose theological and practical challenges, this upsurge in lay activity should be seen as a source of strength and vitality for religious life. Communities will need to find appropriate and effective ways of harnessing that energy without dampening it out through too much imposed control.

- How can we mourn the dead?

  The pandemic has been marked by an overwhelming amount of loss, and both the need to persevere and the difficulty in conducting traditional mourning rituals have meant that much of this loss has not been adequately addressed or mourned. For a considerable length of time, addressing this built-up grief will need to be a priority for religious communities across Britain and the world. The techniques, tools, compassion, and resources of communities will need to be put to serve this end.

- How can we remember what we have been through?

  Even those of us who have not lost a loved one to the pandemic have lived through an extraordinarily difficult time in the life of the UK and the world. The way the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic are remembered, and the way they are narrated for the future, are hugely important questions for the future social, political and medical health of the country. The experience of past national crises shows how

central a role religious institutions and practices can play in building these frames of remembrance. Patterns established in the next few years are likely to endure for decades, and so religious communities should think seriously about what it is they ought to remember about pandemic and how that remembrance can be best constructed.

- How can we build resilience for the future?

  Amongst much else, the pandemic has shown how important religious practices, communities, institutions and rituals are for the social, psychological, and cultural health of individuals and the country. Religious communities need strong and resilient practices in order to continue to serve those needs. The next crisis may not look like this one, but inevitably, there will be other challenges to the continuity and strength of religious practice in Britain in the years to come. Most religious traditions have long and proud histories of adaptation and perseverance in the face of adversity. Religious leaders ought to make use of both the wealth of their tradition and the common experiences of the pandemic—which we have collected here—to ensure their practices remain resilient for whatever is to come next.

In this spirit of reaching into the past to serve the future, we commend this report to its readers, hoping that, in time, the observation and analysis here can be used to better understand the workings of religious ritual and to ensure that it can serve the needs of as broad a community as possible for generations to come.

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Acknowledgements

This project has been funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Arts and Humanities Research Council, grant number AH/V008730/1. It is a joint project between the Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Chester. We are grateful for this institutional support.

This project is a properly communal one, and thus there are more people who deserve our thanks than we can list here. Our thanks go out to all of our survey respondents, interviewees, case study research participants, and action research group members who so generously contributed to this project. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the specific strategic contributions of the following:

Josh Cass, Anne David, Gladys Ganiel, Mark Godin, Hannah Guy, Nontando Hadebe, Rebecca Hewlett, Tim Hutchings, Magdalen Lambkin, Rev Tim Meadows, Lea Mühlstein, Felicity Roberts, Lucia Scazzocchio, Maureen Sier, Jasjit Singh, Dominic Smith, Caroline Starkey, Farida Vis, The Muslims in Britain Research Network, The Visual Social Media Lab at Manchester Metropolitan University, Our partners at the Faith and Belief Forum, Our partners at Interfaith Scotland, Our partners at the Council of Christians and Jews, Our colleagues at the Manchester School of Theatre, Manchester Metropolitan University, Our colleagues at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester.

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