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A Discussion of the Practical and Theological Impacts of COVID-19 on Religious Worship, Events and Pilgrimage, from a Christian Perspective

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This article explores the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 on the worship services and events of Christian communities. Focusing on the UK in terms of practice, the research includes early pandemic examples from a range of Christian traditions and denominations, as well as relevant cases from other countries. The Christian church organisations considered range from the extensive world-wide reaches of the Roman Catholic Church, to international Protestant denominations such as the Anglican Communion, and to independent non-denominational groupings and local churches. This paper considers the ways in which churches are coming to terms with the impacts of this pervasive virus on the global community, and on their own congregations.

At a time when all religious events were postponed or cancelled, many churches moved online for the delivery of daily and weekly worship services. Yet, some other events needfully persisted; this has especially been the case for funerals, as the number of people who have died from the virus continues to increase around the world. Governments have imposed new regulations that required immediate changes in religious practice, and the effects of these are discussed, giving examples. And it is not only religious practice that is changing – religious tourism has shut down, whilst pilgrimage seems to have morphed into a new creature, enabling pilgrims to continue in their journeying. These new pilgrimages may be physical or virtual, but they have been moderated by the limitations on travel, by social distancing and by self-isolation.

Meanwhile, theology is not exempt from alteration. The virus continues to impact on central religious practices, such as receiving the Eucharist (Holy Communion), sharing the Peace, and the use of religious buildings, transforming the ways that the Christian faith is practiced. The suggested introduction of ticketing for services moves beyond theology to the continued Eventization of Faith in this new world.

Key Words: Covid-19; Coronavirus, pandemic, Church events, Eventization of Faith, pilgrimage

Introduction

This paper considers the practical and theological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 on the worship services and events of Christian communities. Focusing on the UK in terms of practice, the research includes examples from a range of Christian traditions and denominations, as well as examples from countries other than the UK. Christian organisations considered, range from the extensive world-wide reaches of the Roman Catholic Church, to international Protestant denominations such as the Anglican Communion, and to the many independent local churches. This paper considers the ways churches are coming to terms with the impacts of this pervasive virus on the global community, and on their own congregations. The onset of the virus throughout the world has culminated in lockdown for much of the global population. By May 2020, some countries were beginning to emerge into a ‘new normal’, whilst others continued to struggle with the contagion.

At a time when all religious events and services were postponed or cancelled, many churches moved online for the delivery of daily and weekly worship services. Yet some other events have needfully persisted; this is especially the case for funerals, as the number of people who have died from the virus continues to increase around the world. Governments have imposed new regulations requiring immediate changes in the practice of worship, and the effect of these in the Christian context will be discussed, giving examples. And it is not only religious practice that is changing – religious tourism has shut down, whilst pilgrimage seems to have morphed into a new creature, enabling pilgrims to continue in their searches. These new pilgrimages may be physical or virtual, but they are moderated by the limitations on travel, by social distancing and by the need for self-isolation. Meanwhile, theology is not exempt from alteration, as the virus impacts on central religious practices such as participating in the Eucharist (Holy

Communion), sharing the Peace, and the use of religious buildings, transforming the ways that the Christian faith is practiced. Suggestions such as the introduction of ticketing for services as churches consider how to prepare to return to worship in their buildings, move beyond theology to the continued Eventization of Faith.

Research Approach and Methodological Perspective

This paper is written from the combined hermeneutical perspectives of the author, as an academic, as an events practitioner and as a priest in the Church of England. I have spent much of the past seven years researching the role that events play in the culture of church life, and developing the concept of the *Eventization of Faith* (Dowson, 2014; Dowson, 2016; Dowson & Lamond, 2017; Dowson, Yaqub & Raj, 2019). There are both practical and theological aspects of church activities, whether worship services or other events, that are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In writing this paper, I increasingly found myself reflecting on my own experiences and on my emotional and spiritual responses to the changes taking place. I note, but make no apology, that some of these elements are apparent from my writing here. This auto-ethnographic aspect of research is common in church studies, with the researcher as participant-observer, reflecting on subjective, personal experiences (Béres, 2012; Scharen, 2012). I share in common with the subject of the study, the characteristics of being an adherent of the Christian faith. My findings authentically ‘come from personal experience’ (Turner, 2013:223) as well as from academic research and current news sources. Till (2010) highlights that when writing about topics such as religion and belief it is difficult for an individual’s context to not affect that which is written and so an entirely objective academic opinion is a ‘questionable concept’ (Till, 2010). Such work involves an emic approach (Collins, 2005), putting prior theories aside and assuming an ‘insider’ perspective.

With this in mind, my paper poses several research questions:

- What do churches and their congregations do, when the church buildings are closed, and all religious events are cancelled or postponed?
- How have church organisations and leaders responded to the current circumstances and what are the implications for the future?
- What are the theological implications for church worship and Christian religious practices as a result of the virus?

I recognise that it may not be possible to determine the answers to all of these questions through this paper, but here I begin to assess the practical and theological implications of the pandemic for church activities and the Eventization of Faith. My aim is to identify and begin to shape the future research agenda for religious events and pilgrimage, in the light of the changes that are developing, as we explore the new world, during and post pandemic.

Background to the Coronavirus and the UK Context

This section outlines the history of the pandemic and identifies key activities and events that appear to have contributed to the spread of the virus in the UK. The official timeline of the Coronavirus began on 31 December, 2019, when the Chinese Government alerted the World Health Organisation to the existence of a new virus (WHO, 2020a). By 30 January 2020, the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) declared its first ever ‘Level 4 Critical Incident’ (Stevens, 2020). By 7 February 2020, a study was published that revealed that one-third of China’s patients required intensive care (Wang *et al.*, 2020). On 11 February, Leung, a Hong Kong public health epidemiologist, warned that the Coronavirus could infect up to 60% of the world’s population (equivalent to some 45 million people in the UK), if left unchecked (Boseley, 2020). Despite early increases in UK cases, several key sporting and music events still took place:

- On 7 March, almost 82,000 people attended the Six Nations rugby match between England and Ireland at Twickenham Stadium (www.sixnationsrugby.com; www.six-nations-guide.co.uk).
- Between 10-13 March, horse racing went ahead at the Cheltenham Racecourse, with almost a quarter of a million people attending (Wood & Carroll, 2020).
- On 11 March almost three thousand Atlético Madrid football fans flew from Spain to watch their team play Liverpool FC at Anfield (Lowe, 2020).
- On 13 March, the Football Association (FA, 2020) suspended England’s football Premier League, despite there being no requirement to do so from Government.
- On 14 March there were still no guidelines and the Welsh rock band Stereophonics played to an audience of 5,000 at the Motorpoint Arena in Cardiff (Murphy, 2020).

On 23 March 2020, the UK went into lockdown, and the nine million people aged 70 or over, along with those who are immuno-compromised or clinically vulnerable, were informed that they must go into self-isolation for 12 weeks, to 15 June (BBC, 2020a). These people were not supposed to leave their homes to buy food or other staples, or even to move their waste bins out for collection.

By 5 May, the UK death toll had become the highest in Europe (Campbell *et al.*, 2020), and at the time was the second highest in the world (with the USA in first place). Despite the considerable levels of infection and death, on 13 May, the UK Government announced the planning process for a roadmap to reopen schools, businesses and other organisations (www.gov.uk, 2020). These plans included a task force¹ set up within the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to address the issues facing places of worship (www.gov.uk, 2020). Places of worship were to remain closed apart from exceptions such as monasteries and religious communities, with the following guidance:

- Funerals may be held, but it is advised that they be conducted in line with guidance from Public Health England.
- Burial grounds and cemeteries can remain open. Grounds surrounding crematoria may also remain open, including gardens of remembrance.
- Providers of funeral services, such as funeral directors and funeral homes, may remain open.
- A minister of religion or worship leader may leave their home to travel to their place of worship. A place of worship may broadcast an act of worship, whether over the internet, or otherwise.
- A place of worship can remain open for the purpose of hosting essential voluntary activities and urgent public services, such as food banks, homeless services, and blood donation sessions. (www.gov.uk, 2020)

Any reopening of churches for worship required significant planning and consideration of a wide range of actions to maintain the health and safety of clergy, church staff, regular congregations and visitors. These areas will be discussed later in the paper.

Religious Events are Cancelled

The practice of most Christian churches is to develop and deliver a range of events for different purposes. These activities have been discussed in the unfolding exploration of the concept of the Eventization of Faith (Pfadenhauer, 2010; Dowson, 2014; Dowson, 2016; Dowson & Lamond, 2017; Dowson, Yaqub & Raj, 2019). However, during the pandemic of 2020, all events were cancelled – and this applied equally to any events organised by churches and to events held in church buildings. However, there are specific types of Christian events that are closely connected to churches. These include ‘pastoral’ events such as weddings and funerals; rites of initiation including baptism, confirmation and ordination; and regular services for the purposes of gathering in worship, whether formally or informally. This section focuses on three events in particular: weddings, baptisms and funerals. The consideration of the impact on worship services follows in a later section.

Weddings

Summer is wedding season in the UK and this includes churches, especially those with pretty buildings. As a priest it is part of my role, an honour and a deep joy, to join couples together in holy matrimony. On the last Saturday in May, 2020, I was due to take a wedding at my 500-year-old church in Bingley, West Yorkshire. The legal process for a wedding to be allowed to take place in church is that there must be an announcement (using strictly-worded legal language) both in the church/es in the parish/es where the couple reside, and, if they are to be married in a different parish, in that church also. This is known as reading the Banns, but it can only be undertaken in a public worship service. It must be repeated three times, and this is usually done on three consecutive Sundays. Therefore, only the couples who had their banns read prior to lockdown are legally allowed to get married, as there has been no public worship since lockdown. Sadly, this meant that there could be no weddings taking place in church buildings until further notice was given by Government on lifting restrictions. On 23 June 2020, government announced that churches were amongst the places that could reopen, but still with social distancing measures in place, from 4 July. Even where such important events could continue (for example, if the banns had been read prior to lockdown, or a special license were obtained), as with other church services, they would need to be scaled back

in order to meet the requirements for social distancing. For a wedding to take place, initial lockdown guidance required the numbers attending the ceremony to be limited to the legal minimum of five people: the priest, the bride and groom, and the two witnesses, who would all sign the marriage register. In addition, rituals, such as the priest blessing the wedding rings or holding the couple's hands as part of a prayer or blessing would be dispensed with. *In extremis* (such as the case of near death of one party), couples could apply for a marriage license through the local diocesan legal offices. The guidance also recommended live-streaming of weddings to include other guests in their own homes, but acknowledged that most couples postponed their weddings. It is not valid under English law for a wedding to take place using video conferencing technology without the couple, priest (or for civil weddings, the celebrant), and two witnesses being physically present. As a result, most weddings have been rearranged for 2021 or later (Church of England, 2020a).

Baptisms

Whilst churches were closed it was unlikely that any baptisms would take place, except *in extremis* (such as where the child's life is in danger). For a baptism to take place once churches are no longer closed, official guidance recommends that numbers be limited to the candidate (i.e. the child), their parents (or guardians or carers), the godparents and the minister. In this case, only the clergy and parents should join the child at the font, with godparents maintaining a social distance. Detailed guidance is provided on hygiene, including making it clear that the priest should not hold the child and that water should be administered with an appropriate implement such as a shell, rather than using the hand to sprinkle water on the child's head (Church of England, 2020a). A popular meme on social media portrays the future of baptism as the priest using a water pistol to maintain social distancing.

Funerals

Over recent years, there has been an emerging practice of requests for clergy to take funeral services in a funeral parlour rather than in a church or at the graveside or in the crematorium. Diocesan legal experts ruled in 2016 that this was not permissible for Church of England clergy, either by church (canon) law, or civil law. At that time, the legal ruling was that if a body (the deceased) was leaving from the funeral parlour, rather than from their home, it

would be possible for the celebrant to pray the 'prayers at home before a funeral' as found in the Pastoral Services approved liturgy. However, it is then imperative for the full funeral to proceed either in church, in the cemetery or graveyard, or at the crematorium. As shown in Figure 1 below, Paragraph 1 of Church of England Canon B38 (Church of England, 2019) contains a clear directive that every minister should 'observe the law', without any qualification or limitation as to the origins of that law, secular or otherwise. Paragraph 2 of Canon B38 requires that every minister is under a duty to bury according to the rites of the Church of England the corpse or ashes of a deceased person in the churchyard or burial ground or cemetery under his or her control provided that the person has a right of burial and the churchyard or burial ground is not full or closed.

However, church ministers are often invited to say prayers in the home of the bereaved, or in hospitals, care homes and hospices, or even in an undertaker's chapel where the body is being kept prior to the funeral, as part of the pastoral services offered by the church. There are examples of liturgy that may be followed, but it is also allowable to pray *extempore* prayers (using your own words), at the minister's discretion. Such prayers provide much needed support to the bereaved. Therefore, in 2016, the performance of a funeral service by an Anglican Minister in a funeral parlour was deemed illegal and improper, being in breach of both Secular and Canonical law (Jolley, 2016) (see Figure 1).

Once the pandemic was declared, changes were introduced to take account of the anticipated increase in the numbers of deaths, and therefore of funerals. In the UK, local government authorities have the responsibility for controlling local crematoria. Initially, some local authorities decided to impose direct cremations, allowing no ministers of religion to accompany the deceased or to pray and commend their bodies to be cremated; however, this decision was immediately reviewed following protests from faith communities (Bradford Council, 2020). Local diocesan representatives negotiated with the emergency planning teams to provide extra capacity for clergy to take shortened cremation services, developing duty rotas to cover each crematorium. However, this 'worst-case' scenario planning was mostly not required, so the usual practice of funeral directors contacting the appropriate local clergy to arrange services remained in place, with two to three weeks waiting time for a funeral at the crematorium. The time for these services was very

Figure 1 Church of England Canon B38 (Church of England, 2019)**B 38 Of the burial of the dead**

1. In all matters pertaining to the burial of the dead every minister shall observe the law from time to time in force in relation thereto, and, subject to this paragraph in general, the following paragraphs of this Canon shall be obeyed.
2. It shall be the duty of every minister to bury, according to the rites of the Church of England, the corpse or ashes of any person deceased within his cure or of any parishioners or persons whose names are entered on the church electoral roll of his parish whether deceased within his cure or elsewhere that is brought to a church or burial ground or cemetery under his control in which the burial or interment of such corpse or ashes may lawfully be effected, due notice being given; except the person deceased have died unbaptized, or being of sound mind have laid violent hands upon himself, or have been declared excommunicate for some grievous and notorious crime and no man to testify to his repentance; in which case and in any other case at the request of the relative, friend, or legal representative having charge of or being responsible for the burial he shall use at the burial such service as may be prescribed or approved by the Ordinary, being a service neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter: Provided that, if a form of service available for the burial of suicides is approved by the General Synod under Canon B 2, that service shall be used where applicable instead of the aforesaid service prescribed or approved by the Ordinary, unless the person having charge or being responsible for the burial otherwise requests.
3. Cremation of a dead body is lawful in connection with Christian burial.
4. (a) When a body is to be cremated, the burial service may precede, accompany, or follow the cremation; and may be held either in the church or at the crematorium.
(b) The ashes of a cremated body should be reverently disposed of by a minister in a churchyard or other burial ground in accordance with section 3 of the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1992 or on an area of land designated by the bishop for the purpose of this sub-paragraph or at sea.
5. When a body is to be buried according to the rites of the Church of England in any un-consecrated ground, the officiating minister, on coming to the grave, shall first bless the same.
6. If any doubts shall arise whether any person deceased may be buried according to the rites of the Church of England, the minister shall refer the matter to the bishop and obey his order and direction.
7. A funeral service at a crematorium or cemetery shall be performed only in accordance with directions given by the bishop.

limited and the Church of England developed a shortened approved liturgy for a 15-minute service. The number of mourners was limited to ten people. However, as there were concurrent restrictions to movement for anyone over 70, as well as on those with medical conditions, this limitation on numbers did not seem to be problematic. Most crematoria offered a live-streaming service, usually subject to an additional fee. This enabled mourners – family and friends – to watch the funeral service online, synchronously, from anywhere with online access. It has also been possible to record funeral services to watch at a later date. Burials were limited to close family at the graveside. In both cases, standard Church of England funeral fees continued to apply (Jolley, 2020).

The number of funerals with few or no mourners, for example, where the family lived some distance away, combined with the restriction on visiting patients with coronavirus, are expected to put an immense focus on post-pandemic memorial services as well as adversely impacting on the mental wellbeing of survivors.

Online Worship Trends

Once the government had decreed that all churches were closed, the logical place to move worship services was online. For Christians at least this proved not to be a stumbling block, and some churches were already adept at live-streaming their services. This section discusses the practical and experiential differences that worshipping from home made during the vital holy seasons of Lent through to Pentecost; the theological and pastoral implications of not being able to celebrate or receive the Eucharist (Holy Communion, bread and wine); and the variable use of social media and online communication platforms for delivering daily, weekly and special services of worship and liturgy, including the day the church ‘broke’ Zoom.

Worshipping through the Seasons

The lockdown began in the UK during the Christian season of Lent. This is one of the most important times of the church year, as believers prepare themselves spiritually

for Easter, with Passiontide (Palm Sunday) leading into Holy Week (with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday), and culminating in the celebrations of Easter Sunday. The Easter season then continues for fifty days, including Ascension Day up to Pentecost. The differences between

what would normally happen, and what took place in 2020 are vast. The table in Figure 2 below describes what would be normal practice, and outlines some of the key changes experienced under lockdown.

Figure 2 Times and Seasons BC and AC	
Lent	
<p>Before Corona Lent is firmly attached to and precedes Easter. Characteristic elements of Lent include: individual and corporate self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter. Lent became the period of preparation for entering into the Church’s fellowship through baptism at Easter. As candidates for baptism are instructed in the Christian faith, and as penitent worshippers prepare themselves through fasting and penance, to be readmitted to holy communion, the whole Christian community is invited to join them in a process of study and repentance. Lent lasts for forty days and this reminds Christians of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tested by Satan.</p>	<p>After Corona As lockdown in the UK began several weeks into Lent, the added pressures of self-denial took their toll, as some believers rescinded their fasts, to cope with the mental challenges. On one of the last Sundays before lockdown was announced on 15 March, congregants were offered a choice of consuming the Eucharistic elements ‘in one kind’ (i.e. only the bread / wafer) and not taking the wine, which is offered in a shared cup in Anglican churches. It is common practice for the presiding priest and / or deacon to consume any remaining bread and wine. Bible study groups were cancelled at this point, and only later went online. From 22 March, services were delivered, and some small groups started to meet, online.</p>
<p>Ash Wednesday marks the start of Lent; in 2020, this took place on 26 February, prior to lockdown. Ashing services are held, in which individuals are marked with ashes made from palm crosses from the previous year, burnt and mixed with olive oil. This is an ancient sign of penitence, as the priest marks the sign of the Cross on each parishioner’s forehead.</p>	
<p>Liturgical dress is kept as simple as possible. Churches are bare of flowers and decoration. The anthem ‘Gloria in excelsis’ is not used during Lent. Many churches undertake weekly small group Bible studies, to enable participants to explore their faith. It is common practice to give something up for Lent; for many nominal or non-Christians this might include chocolate or alcohol or meat. Some Christians may fast on a regular basis during Lent, spending their time in prayer instead of eating.</p>	
Mothering Sunday	
<p>Before Corona The meaning and practice of Mothering Sunday have evolved over the years. The day originated from the time when people would return to their “Mother Church” during Lent, and when those in service and apprenticeships went home to their mothers with gifts such as hand-picked flowers. By the early 20th century celebrating Mothering Sunday had waned in many places, but the institution of Mother's Day in the United States brought about renewed interest. By 1938 it was claimed that Mothering Sunday was celebrated in every parish in Britain. Mothering Sunday is a staple in the church calendar and is celebrated on the fourth Sunday in Lent. The meaning of Mothering Sunday has changed so that it has become more of a time for all to recognise the importance of those who have cared for and mothered others throughout their lives. Small posies of flowers (generally daffodils) are given out to everyone (not only to mothers) in church services, in an act of inclusion.</p>	<p>After Corona In lockdown, families were unable to gather together to celebrate with their mothers on 22 March, and as all services were firmly online by this time, no flowers were given.</p>
Passiontide	
<p>Before Corona As Holy Week approaches, the atmosphere of the Lenten season darkens; the readings begin to anticipate the story of Christ’s suffering and death, and the reading of the Passion Narrative gave to the Fifth Sunday its name of Passion Sunday. Over time, Passiontide developed into the structure of Holy Week and Easter.</p>	<p>After Corona The Lenten fast took on new meaning in 2020, as congregations were unable to participate in services together, and especially as they were unable to share physically in the Eucharist.</p>

Palm Sunday	
<p>Before Corona Through participation in the whole sequence of services, the Christian shares in Christ's own journey, from Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, on Palm Sunday to the empty tomb on Easter morning. The procession with palms is accompanied by the reading or singing of the Passion Narrative, in which the whole story of the week is read. Choral music is especially important at this time of the Christian calendar.</p>	<p>After Corona No donkeys or processions in 2020, no dressing up or waving palm branches, no streams of worshippers singing joyfully, no handing out palm crosses to passers-by in the streets. No special services or events that include beautiful choral pieces composed especially for this season.</p>
Holy Week	
<p>Before Corona The Stations of the Cross, made popular in the West by the Franciscans after they were granted custody of the Christian sites in the Holy Land, form part of the regular activities of Holy Week. This solemn season preserves some of the oldest texts still in current use, and rehearses the deepest and most fundamental Christian memories. Many churches have special services each day during Holy Week, with reflections on art and music, as they follow Jesus' journey from a jubilant Palm Sunday to the Cross.</p>	<p>After Corona No small group meetings physically, but by now the transfer to online meetings and services is accomplished. Clergy and congregations begin to use Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, Facebook Live and other social media to spend time together online.</p>
Maundy Thursday	
<p>Before Corona Maundy Thursday (from <i>mandatum</i>, 'commandment') contains a rich variety of themes: humble Christian service expressed through Christ's washing of his disciples' feet, the institution of the Eucharist, the perfection of Christ's loving obedience through the agony of Gethsemane. In this garden, Jesus asks his disciples 'Could you not watch with me one hour?' as they fall asleep whilst he prays. Churches keep vigil as Thursday passes into Good Friday. The sacred Chrism Mass takes place on Maundy Thursday as the people of God, bishops, priests, deacons and the lay faithful, assemble together. By long-standing tradition this holy service takes place on the morning of Maundy Thursday in Cathedrals, where the bishop is surrounded by the priests of the diocese, demonstrating unity by their presence. In the Roman Catholic Church, Maundy Thursday is the day on which the institution of the Mass and the priesthood are celebrated. This re-dedication is followed by the blessing of holy oils for healing and baptism, and the consecration of Chrism Oil.</p>	<p>After Corona This year priests did not kneel to wash the feet of their congregations, and there were no Maundy Thursday meals to recreate the Last Supper. Clergy were unable to meet together with their diocesan bishops in renewing their ordination vows and for the blessing of oils in the Chrism Service. The brief online alternative did not recreate the joy of standing alongside your ordained brothers and sisters to pray together and receive a blessing.</p>
Good Friday	
<p>Before Corona Good Friday contains two characteristic episodes. The veneration of the Cross has a long history. The sequence of meditations and music known as the Three Hours' Devotion was introduced into the Church of England in the nineteenth century. The veneration of the Cross is now sometimes incorporated into the structure of the Three Hours' Devotion. It is a widespread custom for there not to be a celebration of the Eucharist on Good Friday, but for the consecrated bread and wine remaining from the Maundy Thursday Eucharist to be given in communion. The church remains stripped of all decoration. The gathering together in silence in the quiet cool of the church contrasts with the procession of congregations from different churches as they congregate in the local town centre to worship and pray.</p>	<p>After Corona In 2020, there are no processions, no meeting together physically, but there are online services.</p>

Holy Saturday

Before Corona The church remains bare and empty through Holy Saturday, which is a day without a liturgy: there can be no adequate way of recalling the Son of God being dead, other than silence and desolation. But within the silence there grows a sense of peace and completion, and then rising excitement as the Easter Vigil draws near. This is the first service of Easter and either begins sometime on the evening of Holy Saturday (the day before Easter Day) or early on Easter Sunday, usually before daybreak. This service offers a renewal of baptismal vows, and usually takes place in darkness, as the church is lit only by the light of the large Easter candle. Congregants enter and leave in darkness and in silence. The Easter Vigil begins with a symbolic expectant waiting (usually outdoors, around a fire) for the resurrection of Jesus early on Easter morning, and this is represented visually by the large Easter candle, which is lit from the fire and brought into a darkened church. This depiction of new life and light represents Jesus' resurrection on the first Easter morning. The congregation then light their own candles from the Easter candle, representing their own new life as followers of Jesus. The service contains readings from the Bible, and also an opportunity for all the participants to renew the promises made at their baptism. The Easter Vigil is generally a quiet and thoughtful service, but one full of joy. The Vigil is probably the oldest feature of the Easter celebrations. From its earliest times the Church would keep watch through the night and meditate on the mighty works of God. Christians would pray until the earliest hours of the morning, when Christ's resurrection was acclaimed. The Vigil is properly a service for the night and should never begin before sunset on Holy Saturday.

After Corona Easter Saturday feels more like it should, bare and empty, as Christians recall the death of Jesus and anticipate his rising from death. The only events that take place are late in the evening. Some priests recreate the Easter vigil by lighting fires outside their Vicarages and live-streaming to their congregations.

Easter Sunday

Before Corona On Easter Sunday morning, the Service of Light proclaims the resurrection of Christ from the dead, using word and action, in silence and sound. The Easter Candle, symbolising Christ, the light of the world, is lit and the light is carried through the church and progressively passed to the whole congregation. The *Exsultet*, an ancient Easter song of praise, is sung as the climax of this part of the liturgy. The Easter Liturgy is a major baptismal event, because baptism and Easter have been closely linked from at least the end of the second century. Baptismal candidates enter into the life of Christ's death and resurrection in the midst of the Church's celebration of them at Easter. It is appropriate that there should be a celebration of Baptism (of those able to answer for themselves) and/or Confirmation during the Easter Liturgy, or at least a Re-affirmation of Baptismal Vows by the Christian community as a public declaration of their union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The celebration of the Eucharist is the climax to the Easter Liturgy when Christians are sacramentally reunited with Jesus, the risen Lord. The most appropriate time for a celebration of Holy Communion is in the early hours of Easter morning. There must be at least one celebration of the Holy Communion in every parish church on Easter Day.

After Corona Somehow even when you're preaching, an online service is not the same as standing together and worshipping on holy ground. All preparation is done several days before, which adds to the disconnection between reality ('IRL') and online worship. This most holy celebration lacks the vitality and excitement of meeting together to share the story of Jesus rising from the dead, the empty tomb discovered by women followers.

Easter Season

Before Corona The Great Fifty Days of Eastertide form a single festival period in which the tone of joy created at the Easter Vigil is sustained through the following seven weeks, and the Church celebrates the gloriously risen Christ. In those places where the custom of lighting the Easter Candle at the beginning of Easter is followed, the lit Candle stands prominently in church for all the Eastertide services. The Alleluia appears frequently in liturgical speech and song; Morning Prayer begins with the traditional collection of Pauline texts known as the Easter Anthems, and white or gold vestments and decorations emphasize the joy and brightness of the season.

After Corona Easter is not as joyful as usual, it feels more like Lent, continued. Priests and their congregations discover new ways of meeting online, but watching a service on a screen can feel like an impartial observer, dipping in and out of concentration. Reality has set in by now, and some worshippers find the need to discover new ways of worshipping that enable them to connect with the divine.

Ascension Day	
<p>Before Corona On the fortieth day after Easter Sunday there has from the late fourth century been a particular celebration of Christ's ascension. Jesus, the Risen Christ, commissions his disciples to continue his work. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then he is no longer among them in the flesh. The Ascension is closely connected with the theme of mission.</p>	<p>After Corona This day almost slides into invisibility, in contrast to the usual special services that bring people together mid-week. Mainstream church denominations in the UK combine together to launch their annual online programme, 'Thy Kingdom Come', in which believers are encouraged to pray for five friends or family members to come to faith. The Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, preaches with his usual passion.</p>
Pentecost	
<p>Before Corona Early Christians gave the name Pentecost to the whole fifty-day span of rejoicing, which Tertullian calls 'this most joyful period' (<i>laetissimum spatium</i>). It is sometimes also called 'Great Sunday'. The arrival of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost completes and crowns the Easter Festival.</p>	<p>After Corona Writing this in advance of the festival that celebrates the coming of God's Holy Spirit in power means that this cannot be reviewed with hindsight. The usual sense of high expectation, wondering excitedly 'what will happen this year?' is replaced by a dulled hope that it won't be too disappointing.</p>
(adapted from Church of England, n.d.; The Mothers Union, n.d.)	

The Eucharist BC and AC

In these times, people are already referring to BC and AC – life 'Before Corona' and 'After Corona'. As people reflect on the stories of this time, the stories that will be told to those who come after the Virus, one wonders what will they share of these new experiences of faith? For some, the sharing of funny videos between friends each day, that bring a smile to our faces, is part of the new expression of our faith. For others, it will be the stories of the cakes that have been baked, and shared with neighbours, as new friendships emerge within small local communities, faith come alive and translated into small things. But for many Christians, and especially those for whom the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is a primary part of their Sunday and weekday worship, the challenges of living in lockdown mean not only that congregations are unable to meet together to pray, but they are also unable to share the bread and the wine in the Eucharist. For many, this has been a spiritual struggle.

Watching church services from the comfort – or discomfort – of home, congregations are not able to join their presiding priests in receiving the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Jesus. (For Catholics and Orthodox Christians, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus, whilst for most Protestants and non-denominational churches, this is a symbolic representation.) But, theological meaning aside, instead of physically receiving the bread and the wine, this act is undertaken by the presiding priest alone, on behalf of their congregation. For many individual Christians, the time of Coronavirus will be remembered as the time

of a spiritual fast, as though Lent were extended, even though Easter was celebrated in early April. Christians began to discuss and re-imagine the experience, as a new spirituality, without the Eucharist. Throughout lockdown in Italy, during Lent and much of the Easter season, Roman Catholics were able to watch Pope Francis preside at the Eucharist each morning in the Santa Marta Chapel. This chapel is situated within the Vatican precinct, in the complex that houses the current Pope's chosen residence. (Pope Francis does not live in the official Papal palace). Each morning, as Pope Francis presided at this service, viewers were invited to join together in a spiritual communion. The words of a prayer were spoken each day by Sister Bernadette, the official English language translator:

O Jesus, we love you above all things and we desire your presence within us. Since we cannot receive this sacrament physically, we invite you into our hearts. We embrace you as though you are already there, and we unite ourselves wholly with you. Let us not ever be separated from you. Amen.

Debates have abounded, often on social media (especially on Twitter). On the one hand there are those of the more catholic persuasion, who painfully missed their Eucharist and were very upset at not being allowed in their church buildings. On the other hand, there are those for whom 'the church is not a building' and holy communion is a symbolic act of remembrance. Theological differences became more evident on this aspect of lived faith. A major issue will continue, as the bread (or wafer) is either placed in the communicant's hand or mouth, by the priest,

as the presiding clergy move from one person to another. In Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, the wine is offered to communicants from a 'shared cup'. The vessel is usually made of silver, which has anti-microbial properties, as does alcohol. Since the advent of HIV and AIDS, churches have assured their congregations that the risk of infection from drinking consecrated wine is low. In the UK, during foot and mouth epidemics of the past (www.gov.uk, 2008), the practice of receiving 'in one kind' only (i.e. just the bread / wafer) was imposed to reduce contamination. Most churches do not allow people to dip the wafer into the wine (this is called 'intinction'). This is because hands are more germ-infested than lips and mouths. When a communicant dips the bread / wafer into the wine, they may touch the rim of the cup with their hands, transferring germs that were on their hands onto the rim. Alternatively, they may accidentally dip their hand or fingers into the wine, along with the wafer. As this is an excellent method for spreading disease, intinction is very strongly discouraged (King, 2017).

Church of England clergy have been advised that the current circumstances are likely to continue for quite some time, until the development of a vaccine, or the eradication of the virus (which may apply in some countries sooner rather than later). This leaves a quandary regarding the future of the sacred rite of Eucharist (Holy Communion). We do not know what the Eucharist will look like AC (After Coronavirus), or how long clergy can expect the rest of the church to be satisfied with a 'spiritual communion' to replace the physical act (which is highly spiritual in its enactment). These theological concerns continue to inspire much debate and discussion as we continue through and begin to emerge from lockdown.

Christian Worship Moves Online

Most churches turned to social media and online resources to share their worship services, whether they take place on Sunday or on a weekday, whether they are live-streamed or pre-recorded. It is important to acknowledge that for many disabled or housebound worshippers, their usual and sometimes only way of worshipping is through 'online church'. Any suggestions that this mode of church is 'second best' or 'good enough for now' have been met with robust feedback and criticism by community members, especially on Twitter. The demographics of many churches include elderly congregation members who may not have access to computers or smart-phones, or who may not be able to work the technology they do have. This has resulted in the widespread use of other

methods, including phone calls, and paper invitations to ask for help, being delivered by church members to their neighbours.

Clergy also share ideas for what to do when technology fails, whether through WiFi cutting out (and having to learn about speed-testing data transfer, or how to use a WiFi booster) or when video telephony services crash. On the morning of Sunday 17 May 2020, many churches in the UK were live-streaming their services on Zoom, when they experienced a failure as the app crashed. Apparently in California, where Zoom is based, it did not occur to anyone that very early on Sunday morning would not be a good time to update the app. Unfortunately, this happened to coincide with the time that church services were being held in the UK, and so this resulted in widespread outages. This became known as 'the day the church broke Zoom'. Professional companies who provide live-streaming for commercial or public sector organisations know all too well the challenges of ensuring a smooth flow, with checks and double-checks prior to a live event. Clergy have been live-streaming services from their homes, not from their churches and have no access to now much-appreciated technical support, whether they may have had this previously in church, or not. Advice from a range of church communications support teams includes:

- Don't panic (written in large, friendly letters), as there are options available.
- Be prepared, keep things simple, and have a back-up, or three.
- Whatever your preferred channel is, have another option ready for a last-minute switch, e.g. Zoom, Facebook Live, Skype, YouTube, Instagram Live.
- Pre-record a message. It may not be the message you intended, but have a couple of short messages ready to push out on Facebook or YouTube should your live service be interrupted.
- Have a way of telling your church community if something has changed, via a Facebook group, an email or a telephone tree, as well as putting a notice on your church website.
- Think about creating ways for people to interact with each other, such as hosting a Zoom coffee later in the week, or sharing prayer requests.
- Follow up. Make sure people know they haven't been left on their own. Send messages to everyone after a technology failure and remind them of all the ways they can stay connected.

- Help older people to log on in advance and remind them to have the iPad camera on their faces, not on the chair leg.

However, such advice has not always been well-received by hard-pressed clergy lacking in time, technical resources and / or training, whilst balancing work with home-schooling and surviving general pandemic anxiety.

It became increasingly important to control the sharing of Zoom codes as there have been distressing examples of ‘Zoombombing’ across all faiths, in which the open online doors of houses of worship have been infiltrated by trolls, hackers and objectors, generally disrupting services and events, and even displaying porn (Khan, 2020).

A Church of England ‘Digital Labs’ conference on livestreaming services in 2018 considered social media strategies and web developments to encourage the use of digital space to enhance the church’s mission and build discipleship. In 2018 there were examples of churches live-streaming their services, but to do this well the buildings require reliable WiFi or hardwired internet access, and the ability to ensure good music and voice audio for quality transmission is acknowledged to be vital.

Church Buildings are Closed

As church buildings were closed during the lockdown, even to clergy (apart from a weekly check, for insurance

Figure 3: Recommendations for handling, cleaning and disinfecting cultural heritage (Vatican, 2020)

BUILDINGS		FLOORS AND PAVEMENTS		MOVABLE PROPERTY			MISCELLANEOUS MATERIALS OF NO HISTORICAL INTEREST	
Historical value	No historical value	Antique or wooden	Tiles or marble	Sacred vessels	Vestments	Documents and archives	Metals, ceramics and crystals	Furniture, doors and wooden fixings
No bleach and No alcohol	Soap and water or Water and alcohol and No bleach	Soap and water No bleach	Water and soap or Water and bleach (0.5 %)	Keep aside those of greatest interest		Reserved access	Soap and water	Soap and water
				Water and soap	Never spray			
				Dry thoroughly after cleaning	Special dry cleaning	Gloves and masks		
				Do not share		Special record for enquiries		
Ventilate after cleaning		Avoid forming puddles		Individual process by type			Process: a. Apply b. Allow to act (1 min) c. Remove d. Discard	
Do not spray			Do not disinfect, do not restore			Use personal protection		
Use personal protection			Avoid contact with the faithful					
Do not fumigate			Signs: ‘Do not touch’			Careful cleaning		
Clean and disinfect areas after each celebration			Avoid handling by more than one person			Clean and disinfect areas after each celebration		
Use gloves and masks								
Avoid mixing products								
Know the nature and composition of the cleaning products and the cultural asset on which they are to be applied								

(Vatican, 2020)

and security purposes), most churches were locked at all times. This is in stark contrast to 'normal' pre-Coronavirus times, when some churches were opened each day for public services and private prayer. However, many churches offer additional provision to their local community, such as foodbanks, meals and resources for the homeless. Some other churches incorporate spaces hired by or leased to charities and businesses within their premises, including post offices, nurseries, toddler groups and even GP (doctors) surgeries. Even more churches offer space for hire, both religious spaces in church and non-religious spaces such as parish halls, to local community groups, charities, businesses and individuals for events. The issues of adequate cleaning and the requirements of continued social distancing remain paramount after lockdown ends.

Cleaning in Churches

The issue of ensuring that churches were cleaned to an adequate standard once access was available again, however limited, was complex. The table in Figure 3 below shows the recommendations prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church in guidance released in May 2020. The Church of England issued similar guidance in May 2020, including requirements for the opening of churches to clergy, church members and the public. It was anticipated that this would be a slow process (Church of England, 2020b). Government announcements in June 2020 allowing the reopening of churches for private prayer were met with a cautious response, as some churches remained closed, whilst others, previously open (B.C.) for eight hours a day, decided to open initially for only three hours a week.

It is clear that strict processes for monitoring access and specialist staffing resources with specialist training were required, with provision for thorough cleansing between services once church buildings were reopened. The limitations on numbers allowed in churches for services, due to social distancing, means that multiple services may be held to ensure that congregation members are able to attend, however, the churches require cleaning between each service.

Social Distancing

This section is inspired by an online discussion with academic and practitioner colleagues and former colleagues at the UK Centre for Events Management (Nightingale, Bowdin, Lomax & Dowson, personal

communication, 2020). The conversation was sparked by watching theatre managers on a television programme trying to demonstrate how a theatre could be run with two-metre distances between guests. Two metres gap between people requires roughly four square metres per person (putting each one in the middle of a two metre square). If that distance is reduced to 1.4 metres between people, two square metres per person is required, and it would then be possible to accommodate twice as many people into the event space. A social distance of one metre per person gives double the number again (and is close to the separation found in the wider seats in newer cinemas).

The basis for two metres is understood to have originated in the 1930s (Gilbert, 2020; Technology.Org, 2020). Whilst today, evidence suggests that droplets from a sneeze/cough can travel 8 metres, the original recommendation from the WHO was to keep a safe distance of one metre. However, advisors at the time thought that one metre would be difficult to keep, and so the distance was doubled to be safer. It is useful to be aware that two metres is slightly more than two arms lengths, so if two people were to stand next to each other with their arms stretched out, that would be about two metres' distancing. This is easier for people to be aware of than four metres, which is difficult to estimate. This rationale indicates that two metres was probably a proxy for 'keep your distance' rather than an actual number.

In May 2020, some British MPs were pressing for the two metre rule to be discarded or reduced, but as many businesses had gone to the trouble of measuring and marking the distances to get businesses running and people are working with it, the change seemed unlikely. In addition, the UK Government's chief scientific adviser warned that coronavirus transmission is significantly higher at one metre apart. Addressing the Parliamentary Health Select Committee, Sir Patrick Vallance explained that the risk of spending only six seconds standing one metre away from a person is equivalent to spending one minute standing two metres apart (Langford & Tolhurst, 2020). However, on 18 June 2020, after the UK Prime Minister announced in a national newspaper that there would be a reduction in the space required for social distancing, the UK's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Independent SAGE) issued a review of the scientific evidence comparing the dangers of reducing social distancing from two metres to one metre (SAGE, 2020). The change was estimated to reduce the safety

of BAME and older age groups especially, effectively cancelling social distancing, and sending ‘a ‘back to normal’ signal when we are still in the middle of a deadly pandemic’ (SAGE, 2020).

From the perspective of the wider events industry, a key industry body, Business Visits and Events Partnership (BVEP, 2020) along with other events industry associations campaigned for business events to be recognised as ‘organised events’ rather than ‘mass gatherings’. The rationale for this move is that it is possible to identify exactly who is attending certain events, which would enhance the effectiveness of ‘track and trace’ through a minor adjustment to the information that is gathered at event registration. Other social distancing and safety measures would be needed along with increased staffing to facilitate or enforce their application. This argument could be applied to many churches in that there are mostly ‘regular’ attendees, even if most do not attend every week.

Based on their events management experience, Nightingale *et al.* (2020) suggest that if there was a COVID-positive person sitting in a church service for one or two hours, along with a hundred other people, they might pass it on anyway, regardless of seating patterns. The complexity of undertaking Risk Assessments under the circumstances of having no agreed figures on the probability of transmission, is clear. However, if the church was able to have confidence that no one in the church or venue has COVID-19, this would be helpful evidence. Churches have similar considerations to theatres and other event spaces. However, it is notable that family groups are common in churches and they can sit together during church services, as they will not infect each other. They are together in church for one to two hours a week, whereas at home they will be together for 100 hours. Options could include holding church services outdoors, but this is only suitable in fine weather; however, this option has been considered by some, until buildings are fully re-open. To use a church building that has fixed pews, these events management experts suggest leaving alternate pews (rows) empty, with two metres apart between groups on a pew. Inside the church, most people would be facing forwards. However, the choir could be facing each other in the Nave and clergy do not face forwards, as they usually face the congregation. Additional safety requirements would be to undertake temperature checks on the way in, and the stipulation of wearing masks or visors. Any actions to spread people out

in the space available should prove useful in maintaining social distancing. Curtailing the activity to only include a service, in contrast to past practice that usually included refreshments and informal conversation after a service would be highly recommended from a health and safety perspective, but not good for social and mental wellbeing of the congregation. Tools such as the Zoe COVID-19 tracker app (<https://COVID.joinzoe.com/about>), which had over 3.9 million users by June 2020, could enable a good estimate of disease prevalence in the area even before the government provides widescale testing. Guidance announced in June 2020 for implementation by 4 July when buildings such as churches were allowed to reopen included a requirement for taking names and contact details of each person attending a service.

The design of most church buildings tends to include high ceilings, with vaulted roofs, which allows for air circulation. However, there is a problem with all confined spaces, and churches are no different from any other event space in that regard. People breathing in other people’s exhaled air has caused transmission in the past, including some notable church examples. In the early days of the virus spreading in South East Asia, a Christian sect in Seoul, South Korea was at the forefront: the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony claims to have over 245,000 followers (Rashid, 2020). In South Korea this is not an unusual size, as the country has many mega-churches. By late February 2020, some 60% of the country’s 4,000 confirmed cases were linked to this secretive church, having attended services and prayer meetings (BBC, 2020b).

In Europe, a Baptist church in Germany that met on 10 May 2020 after restrictions were relaxed on 1 May was found to have resulted in 40 new cases of the virus (BBC, 2020c). Clarification is required regarding the need to socially distance once a person has recovered from the virus. This will necessitate reliable testing both for the virus and for the presence of antibodies, with assurance that re-infection cannot occur, before social distancing can be relaxed for such individuals.

Pilgrimage

The Christian season that flows from Lent into Easter is a time when pilgrimage might be considered. However, in the ‘new normal’ of lockdown, travel was not possible. Even when lockdown was being eased, there

was a problem with lack of toilets for public use that inhibited travel (for some). But in this season, people of faith developed creative ways of using the time and the space they are allowed to inhabit, to create new ways of pilgrimage. Many pilgrimage sites created or promoted virtual tours, whilst monasteries such as Taizé live streamed services and guided meditations. In the UK there were virtual pilgrimages by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and the Chief Rabbi. These pilgrimages took place during allowable exercise time, as religious leaders made their way to key worker sites, including schools, hospitals, care homes, bus stops, supermarkets and food banks, to offer prayers and support. The initiator of this programme was Jonathan Wittenberg, a senior Masorti rabbi, who wanted to develop and promote a

way of life in which we notice and care for each other with greater attentiveness and kindness. These are our most basic and most universal religious and human values (Sherwood, 2020).

Church Leadership

During the early days of the pandemic the role and visibility leaders of denominations and individual churches varied immensely. Although Pope Francis physically retreated within the bubble of the Vatican precinct, each morning he presided at Mass in the private Santa Marta Chapel. This daily service was live-streamed via various networks and media channels, with simultaneous translation into English and other languages, providing a visible reassurance for Roman Catholics and other observers. His Holiness announced an ‘Intention’ (or special purpose) for each service and preached a short homily that was relevant and comforting to viewers. This daily visible sign provided encouragement of some sense of continuity, despite the traumas exploding around the globe. Unfortunately these daily screenings concluded at the end of the Easter season.

The Anglican Church also retreated, led by the ‘*primus inter pares*’ (‘first among equals’), Archbishop Justin Welby, who remained in his official apartment in Lambeth Palace, London. Despite the fact that Lambeth Palace has its own chapel, the Archbishop of Canterbury chose to live-stream the Church of England’s national Easter Sunday service from his kitchen. This was portrayed as an act of solidarity with the many Anglican clergy who were also live-streaming from their kitchens, spare bedrooms or gardens. This absence from church buildings

was caused in part by decisions made (and which have continued to be made) at UK national government level, along with similar decisions at local government levels, often without consultation with national or local church leaders. In the UK, as in other places, all churches were closed. Despite the fact that some clergy live in accommodation that directly connects into the church building, no access was allowed into churches for any activities other than Health and Safety checks. Religious communities such as the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield were able to continue to hold their various services every day, from Morning Prayer to Compline, and these all continue to be live-streamed to Facebook.

At local and regional levels, bishops and their diocesan organisations have offered regular advice and support to clergy, with detailed policy and procedural updates almost on a daily basis. Some have been more prescriptive, whilst others have offered choice – leaving decisions up to the local incumbent (Vicar) to make decisions on re-opening church buildings and offering worship opportunities based on their local context and resources.

On a global level, all religious leaders have been encouraged to influence their followers, working together for peace during the pandemic. On 12 May 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres addressed a high-level video conference at which he thanked religious leaders for their support in ‘joining forces to promote social cohesion, mutual respect and understanding, unity and solidarity’ (UN, 2020a). The UN also garnered some fifty examples of faith organisations and leaders around the world in supporting and guiding their communities during the early stages of the pandemic (UN, 2020b). In April 2020, the World Health Organization produced interim guidance with practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities, in clear recognition of the vital role that religious leaders play within their faith contexts. The WHO noted faith leaders’ importance as ‘a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve’ (WHO, 2020b), The US-based thinktank, the Council on Foreign Relations, also recognised the role of religious leaders in offering prayers and support within the communities they serve (Robinson, 2020).

Meanwhile, academics and faith based organisations have begun studying the impact of the virus on the faith practices of Christians in the UK (Gledhill, 2020; Savanta

ComRes, 2020). In Ireland, the Irish Council of Churches commissioned research that found seven out of ten faith communities were providing social services to their local communities. The proportion of faith communities in Ireland providing online worship rose from 66% to 87%, and clergy and other religious staff were designated key workers in the UK and Ireland. This is said to be in recognition of their vital role in ‘burying the dead, comforting the grieving, and providing focal points for communities’ (Gledhill, 2020).

Commercial research organisation, Savanta ComRes undertook four public omnibus opinion polls in April-May 2020, on behalf of clients Tearfund and Christian Aid, which included research questions about the public perception of the role of faith leaders in the crisis. This was followed by a webinar for invited faith leaders and researchers (attended by the author), to discuss the results. The research found that some 61% of the public agreed that faith leaders have a role to play in providing guidance during the pandemic. In particular, younger people were most likely to seek guidance from a religious leader, which is surprising as this generation has less direct experience of religious practice in their home family context (Savanta ComRes, 2020). The research also noted that unprecedented numbers of people, often without church connections, were engaging with online worship services.

Eventization of Faith

Whilst reviewing the impact of the pandemic on Christian communities, this paper also aims to contribute to the ongoing development of the concept of Eventization of Faith. Previous research (Dowson, 2014; Dowson, 2016; Dowson & Lamond, 2017; Dowson, Yaqub & Raj, 2019) has focused on several aspects that are relevant here. Firstly, the extended use of church buildings beyond the Sunday services, including commercial and private hire of facilities has been hugely impacted by the pandemic, as churches have been closed, especially during lockdown. The only activities that have continued are local community social provision such as foodbanks that operate out of church premises, and the continuation of vital community resources such as post offices and GP (doctors’) surgeries, where they exist within church premises. Secondly, all church events programmes have been curtailed completely, or moved online, as interaction between people is restricted by the requirement for social distancing. Along with other events, the challenge will be

to develop programmes that allow face to face interaction in the future. A popular meme pictures the Vicar on the phone, sitting at their desk, and consulting a wall-planner of seating arrangements, as the caller asks for seats at the carol service. The reality that the pandemic will impact Christmas services some nine months after initial lockdown in the UK, is sinking in. As a result, some churches are already turning to standard event management tools such as Eventbrite or Ticketmaster to allocate seats at services, as social distancing limits capacity. In addition, services will be repeated multiple times, with strict cleaning processes in place in between iterations. The introduction of live-streaming continues as churches re-open for services, weddings and funerals, is becoming part of the ‘new normal’.

Future thinking – shaping research

The future of the church and the ways in which worship is practised as a result of the pandemic, and its ongoing impact covers a range of vital issues:

- *Theological implications of the future of the Eucharist, especially in more catholic churches.* Whilst buildings were closed to the public, and even to clergy, it was not possible to celebrate this holy ritual face to face except within a closed household. Theological differences between and even within denominations mean that those for whom the Eucharist is more important and a more regular practice would not consider or allow the virtual blessing and consecration of the elements of bread and wine. Some fear that this could mean the end of the Eucharist, whilst others suggest that it may no longer be possible for the Eucharist to be the focus of every service, the ‘centre of All That We Do’ (Holdsworth, 2020). Once congregations return to their churches, the Eucharist is likely to be taken ‘in one kind’ only. During this time, it is not only the Eucharist that has been affected. There are other sacraments and sacred acts that have not been possible in person: Last Rites, Confirmation, Confession, Marriages, Ordinations, Baptisms. And what is the Eucharist without the gathered community? Theologians and congregations will have plenty of deep questions to discuss in the coming months and possibly years, as we await a vaccine or some other positive outcome (Barrett, 2020).
- *Training and skills development, technical resources:* Webinars and online courses for upskilling and development, as well as providing spaces for discussion and debate, are already and will become

increasingly important, for clergy and those lay people with volunteering roles in churches. Practical issues such as the lack of reliable WiFi or technical hardware in church buildings will dominate as churches seek funding and permissions to make these vital changes.

- Ensuring social distancing once churches reopen may be done through a range of events-related processes, including ticketing (Sherwood, 2020b), as the Eventization of Faith (Dowson *et al.*, 2019) continues to make inroads in religious practice. The UK Government Task Force is taking account of the health and safety requirements for all faith groups as it meets throughout 2020.
- ***The role of the Church of England in the public square:*** A debate has raged within and beyond the Church of England as to the impact of the pandemic on the special role that the Church of England occupies within the state. Accusations of invisibility of the church due to its withdrawal of public worship from sacred buildings are met with examples of practical support within communities (Cottrell, 2020). Has the Church left the building, or has the Church discovered new ways of ‘being church’ within the local communities it inhabits?

Summary

This paper posed three research questions, which have been considered in discussing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that this practical assessment of the activities of churches during the pandemic will help to shape the future research agenda, post-pandemic, as outlined in the previous section. The study asked what churches and their congregations do, when the church buildings are closed, and all religious events are cancelled or postponed. The answer has been, simply, to move online. However, there has been much creative thinking about the future and planning for new ways to engage. These considerations are not only for existing congregations, but also for new people who may not consider themselves to be ‘believers’ or ‘faith adherents’, but who have begun to observe or consume the wide range of virtual spiritual food that continues to be produced.

The question of the role and impact of church leaders and organisations has found that international and global organisations value the input provided in leading and influencing their own faith communities. Denominational church leaders have responded to the current circumstances in different ways, and some approaches have been met with criticism from within the church structures, but it appears that the influence of the church is not diminished by the withdrawal from church buildings, as many more people access online services.

The full theological implications for church worship and Christian religious practices as a result of the virus are being considered, as the church wrestles with implementing changes that will be required, from the complications of social distancing, to the possibility of church without a Eucharistic focus.

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