

**‘Something Other than a Building’:
Churches as Sources of Hope in a Society Emerging from Covid-19
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I am joining you by video today. Thankfully that’s not due to COVID-19, but rather a scheduling clash. Prior to the pandemic, it would not have occurred to me to suggest that I record a contribution instead. That’s just one way the pandemic has changed the way we interact with each other.

As clergy, you have been on the front lines of those changes. You don’t need me to remind you that you were designated as key workers during those first, daunting days of lockdown. Burying the dead and comforting the grieving, in such strange circumstances, was not easy. Nor was rushing to get services online, at times learning new technologies as you went along. Then you had to deal with the stresses of re-opening church buildings, as you balanced public health concerns with spiritual needs.

Now that we have been back in church buildings for some time, you may feel disheartened. You look out and people are missing. You may not be entirely sure why they have not come back. As a university lecturer, I have had a similar experience. Students are not attending class the way they used to – they know they can get the lectures online. There are a few bright sparks and stalwarts who are there every week – and have done all the readings. The rest are like ghosts, haunting our online teaching platform. I can see they have logged on and they hand in their assignments, yet I am still left wondering if what I have to say is getting through.

But there are reasons for hope in these circumstances, based on real-life examples of what churches did during lockdown, and continue to do as we emerge into what I definitely do not want to call the ‘new normal’.

In the first months of lockdown in 2020, I worked in partnership with the Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter Church Meeting, researching the role of religion during the pandemic. Today, I am going to reflect on findings and insights from that research, giving you reasons why churches can be hopeful about the future; and why the churches can be sources of hope.

My research had two main parts: a survey of faith leaders on the island of Ireland, and follow-up interviews with 32 clergy, all conducted between May and December 2020. Results were published in two reports, titled *People Still Need Us* and *Something other than a Building*. For me, the titles of those reports convey hope.¹

The phrase ‘People still need us’ was a response from a Catholic priest on the survey, expressing the feeling that in a time of crisis, some people still hungered for something spiritual and turned to churches for hope. ‘Something other than a building’ was a quote from an interview with a Presbyterian minister, who believed that the pandemic had forced Christians to really look beyond the walls of their church buildings to serving others – including in cyberspace.

On a secularising island, where people just don’t engage with religion in the ways they did in the past, it is worth dwelling for a moment on that phrase ‘people still need us’. In the survey, clergy reported that people were praying more; and they were frankly shocked by how many were

¹ Gladys Ganiel (2020), ‘People Still Need Us: A Report on a Survey of Faith Leaders on the Island of Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic,’ Belfast: Irish Council of Churches, [People-Still-Need-Us-May-2020.pdf](https://www.irishchurches.org/People-Still-Need-Us-May-2020.pdf) ([irishchurches.org](https://www.irishchurches.org)); Gladys Ganiel (2021), ‘Something Other than a Building: A Report on Churches on the Island of Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic,’ Belfast: Irish Council of Churches, [Final-Something-other-than-a-Building.pdf](https://www.irishchurches.org/Final-Something-other-than-a-Building.pdf) ([irishchurches.org](https://www.irishchurches.org)).

accessing online services. You may remember that during the first lockdown, church buildings were open for private prayer in the Republic. Describing this situation, one priest wrote on the survey:

I could keep the church heated from the shrine candles alone! If this increased devotional activity points to people seeking comfort in faith, then clearly at least some people are finding strength in their faith.

In addition, my research, and that of social scientists in other countries, found some evidence of an intensification of faith – at least among those who were churchgoers *before* the pandemic. And the 2021 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey found that nine percent of people who identified as Catholic or Protestant – but who were not regular church attenders before the pandemic – were accessing virtual services two to three times per month during it.²

It is also worth reminding yourselves of the scale of the achievement in providing people with online opportunities to engage with their faith. My survey found that the percentage of faith communities providing online worship opportunities increased from 56% to 87%, and that 70% of faith leaders intended to retain at least some aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings were lifted. Now, it is open for debate whether the continued provision of online services is a disincentive for people to come back to church buildings. That question is similar to the one I ask myself as I record lectures for the students who have not come back to my classes!

At the same time, the solution is not to remove online opportunities for engagement. The pandemic has reminded us that these opportunities are life-giving for people who are unable (for various reasons) to attend church in-person; and helped us discover that as more and more people live huge portions of their lives online, it is vital that they are able to engage with faith digitally as well.

That takes me to the second phrase: church is ‘something other than a building’. We all know that it’s people who make the church, not bricks and mortar. While this idea is not new, the pandemic has accelerated a shift in emphasis towards the idea that church is ‘something other than a building’. This shift seems to be related to the increased availability of online services, churches’ responses to the pandemic through practical action in their communities, and increases in lay activism during lockdown.

To give examples of practical action, the survey found that among the four largest denominations, 74% of churches were providing social services to the wider community during the pandemic. Among those providing services, 42% said their services had increased, 33 percent had stayed the same, and just 25% had decreased their services. In the follow up interviews, I discovered that among those who decreased their services, this was often due to being unable to use church halls for community activities, rather than a lack of will. So overall, the practical work of the churches was commendable in difficult circumstances.

To give examples of volunteerism, the survey found that volunteers have been vital for moving religion online across all denominations, although there are some variations. Methodist clergy were the most likely to have received assistance from some combination of volunteers and paid staff (66%), followed by Presbyterians (59%), Church of Ireland (43%) and Catholic Diocesan (38%). While lay volunteerism remains lowest in the Catholic tradition, interviews revealed that lay Catholics were more likely to volunteer for technical or practical tasks such as assisting with online technology or serving as stewards for social distancing when churches re-opened. Protestant laity were more likely to assist clergy in providing pastoral care.

² Gladys Ganiel and Chris Morris (2021), ‘COVID-19 and Religious Practice in Northern Ireland’, ARK Report 144, <https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/257813783/update144.pdf>

This could indicate that the pandemic has helped create a chance for the Irish churches to develop more collaborative relationships between clergy and laity. Especially among Catholic priests, but also in some Protestant traditions, there was an emphasis on seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to move away from overly-clerical models of church, encouraging greater participation among lay people.

Some clergy had been trying to communicate these or similar understandings of what 'church' is and should be prior to the pandemic. But it seems that the pandemic created a context where, by and large, Christians *were forced to* live out their faith outside church buildings – if they were to live it at all. Many clergy were hopeful about the implications of this, interpreting it as an opportunity to create a more vibrant, living church for the future.

I think it is worth giving you the opportunity to listen to the clergy who spoke in the interviews about church as 'something other than a building'. Though they struggled with the stresses and challenges created by the pandemic, they were hopeful about how the churches could change, and what they could become.

For example, the Presbyterian who commented that church is '*something other than a building*' has been trying to communicate this understanding of church for some time, saying:

I don't know if this is a trend in other congregations, but I've been doing a lot the past few years trying to teach about how the church isn't the building, it's the people. I think the pandemic has been a real wake up call to the reality of that. I would have said our faith isn't confined within these four walls for one hour and one day, but it actually needs to be out there if it's going to be real. ... And lockdown has made people realize, ok, the church isn't the building. So I would hope something comes out of that for churches.

Similarly, a Church of Ireland minister in the Republic said he had been trying to shift the focus from church buildings for years:

If there are any good things coming out of this, it's moved us beyond our buildings and beyond our walls. We've gotten used to not locking ourselves in our buildings, we had to be outside. One of the things I'd love to do going forward is get input from community groups first for prayer points, and then for practical points that we can respond to. A) it would engage younger people, but B) primarily it's actively living real faith, rather than just going to a church building and going through the prayers. ... It's not ever going to be easy or comfortable. But we would have never closed or changed our churches were it not for Covid. So, there's a lot of stuff in the church that isn't great, and some can be changed, and some can't; but in the midst of this, what can we learn and do better or differently?

Among Catholic priests, the emphasis on moving towards a less clerical church was prominent. A priest in the Republic said:

I don't want to create opportunities out of a crisis, but our way of acting now has to be different. Our way of being priests, our way of living faith, our way of sharing faith, our way of reaching out, has to change. Our way of liturgy has to change, our way of worship has to change. In many ways it's been dragged away from us as ministers; the responsibilities have been thrown onto everyone in living their own lives. And what's this God is about? They have to find away, and I think that's good. I mean the nanny state that the church was, and is maybe, and the clerical caste ... [with a] passive mob ... is a nonsense. So, the sooner the collapse the better!

A few clergy I spoke with mentioned in the importance of including young Christians in shaping what the church should look like in the present and in the future, ensuring that they have opportunities to really drive change rather than to simply be 'consulted' and then ignored. I don't think that we have, as of yet, effective mechanisms for enabling young people to help build the church. But I have a hunch that most young 'Generation Z' and millennial Christians wouldn't start with the pre-pandemic worship and discipleship formats that so many of them are walking away from.

Another hopeful finding for the churches from my research was that national level inter-church relationships are at a historic high, with cooperation among the four largest Christian denominations, especially via the Church Leaders Group, more frequent, harmonious, and united than any other period of Irish church history. The frequency of contact has been driven by the pandemic, as church leaders worked together to respond to government restrictions on public gatherings (amongst other issues), aided by technologies that made meeting online more efficient than meeting in person. In that light, it could be argued that the pandemic is presenting an opportunity for Irish churches to transcend their divided and often sectarian pasts. On a secularizing island where religious identities are losing their salience, churches may be more likely to contribute to societal debates if they do so from a position of unity.

But while national level inter-church relationships seem to be thriving, there is evidence from my research that they have stalled at the grassroots. This is understandable, as opportunities for in-person meetings and events were greatly reduced; and clergy were so focused on serving the immediate needs presented by their own parishes, congregations and local communities. So inter-church relationships may need to be intentionally rebuilt (or created anew) in the days and years ahead. While this may seem daunting, in the long run local level inter-church relationships can be another source of support and hope for clergy and laity alike.

In the early days of the pandemic, there was a lot of excited chatter about how it was the chance to hit a 'reset' button, to make the world a better place. Now, more than two years later, it seems that the inequalities and injustices in our world have multiplied: we are not all really in this together. In this context, how can churches be sources of hope for society?

It won't be easy. I am aware that many of the clergy who responded to the survey or participated in an interview might have very different views now, nearly two years on from when most of the data was gathered. Even if they were hopeful about the future then, would that hope still hold true today? Perhaps your own thoughts and feelings have changed over the past two years as well. Lockdowns and re-openings, illnesses, deaths of loved ones, socially-distanced events and Zoom fatigue have left us at best weary, and at worst burnt out. Many parishes and congregations are struggling to make ends meet financially, and some clergy, especially those serving several congregations in rural areas, are concerned that the pandemic could accelerate the permanent closing of their church buildings in the years ahead.

I understand that it can be discouraging to look out at empty pews, making it difficult to believe that Christians should be hopeful about the future, and that the pandemic could be an opportunity for renewal, for the churches and for wider society. It could be easy to disregard the hopeful voices that I have shared with you today; or to be overwhelmed by the work that needs to be done to truly transform our churches into 'something other than a building'.

As clergy you have a leadership role, of course, but it's not all up to you. Take a deep breath and accept the gifts and assistance of those around you (some of those folks might not even 'go' to church). Don't worry about getting people back in pews. Think about how people might contribute

to being the church in different ways, including serving outside churches' four walls. Consider the diverse ways that people might engage in worship and contemplation. Be hopeful about the opportunities to transform the churches' old ways of thinking and doing. Witness alongside those who are suffering the most, challenging those who have the power to rectify injustices. If (and when) you do those things, you will show love. And there is no better way to inspire hope than to show love.