

#lockdowndisciples

An exploratory study of discipleship journeys
through the Covid-19 pandemic



#lockdowndisciples, written by Ian Jones

Research team: Ian Jones and (for focus groups and input into concept) Nick Shepherd

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Introduction

Why the Research?

***#lockdowndisciples* is a snap research project undertaken in 2020 focusing on the experiences of UK Christians during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, focusing both on their inner journey with God and their outward expression of their Christian commitment.**

Times of sudden change may be key formative or transitional change in Christian discipleship. Oral history and sociological research has highlighted how times of collective trauma or profound shared experience can be critical in forming the worldviews of the generations living through it.¹ There are many examples of this in the Bible (for example, the Exodus and Exile). **Will Covid-19 prove to be another key time of transition for the Church?**

In the West, most Christians are little used to living the life of discipleship amidst dangerous circumstances. In a time of climate and nature crisis and global political and economic instability, Covid-19 is sadly unlikely to be the last major global crisis of the 21st Century. **The pandemic provides a first, early opportunity to explore the experiences of UK Christians in challenging times.**

Why 'discipleship'?

The word 'discipleship' is used in many different ways in different churches. Here it is used in a fairly broad sense – to mean **the whole 'being and doing' of life with God – of following Christ with 'head, heart and hands'** (this tripartite framework informed question design – see **Appendix 2**).

'Discipleship' in this sense encompasses: personal spiritual formation/development, living all of life with God, the discernment of calling and the exercise of a person's ministry (wherever exercised), participation in a worshipping community and the practical expression of the Christian life in acts of love, witness and service. In this sense it goes beyond some narrower definitions of discipleship, which tend to focus primarily on inner holiness and/or the practice of particular spiritual disciplines.

This research project focuses on the 'being and doing of the Christian life' because **this is one aspect of the Christian experience which has not been much studied during the pandemic so far.** There have been several studies of churchgoers' experiences of online worship and pastoral care during lockdown;² some research on general patterns of belief and practice in the population as a whole;³ research on how faith communities have worked with local authorities during the pandemic;⁴ on churches providing for community needs,⁵ and on the use of church buildings during lockdown.⁶ However, with some notable exceptions, very little research has focused on how Christians are living and being shaped as followers of Jesus during Covid-19. What has been done so far largely focuses on a relatively small number of Christian practices and habits (e.g., personal prayer and Bible reading) or levels of well-being.⁷ This snap research project therefore seeks to fill a gap.

The Research

The focus of the research has been upon individuals' development as Christian disciples during lockdown:

- the ways in which they believe they have **developed or been strengthened**;
- the **struggles** in discipleship they are encountering as a result of the coronavirus crisis and resulting lockdown; and
- the **lessons** they feel it is teaching themselves, the church and the world at large.

A full list of questions asked is provided in **Appendix 1: The Questions**. How these questions were devised is explained in **Appendix 2: Devising the Questions**.

Whilst being a disciple is as much a *collective* experience as an individual experience, **the focus here is on personal experiences of being a disciple**. Although anyone could take part in the survey, it was mainly aimed at **adults who consider themselves to be practising Christians**.

We used two main methods of research:

1. An **electronic survey** in which participants were asked to give short (a phrase or single sentence) answers to 11 questions on discipleship, plus provide a few basic details about themselves.
2. Two follow-up **focus groups** (one of local church leaders, one of local church members), selected from survey participants who volunteered to take part in further research.

The *#lockdowndisciples* electronic **survey** was run during **July and August 2020**. Two follow-up **focus groups** took place in **November 2020**. 165 people took part in the electronic survey, and 8 took part in our focus groups. After a very encouraging start, the response rate was much lower than hoped – certainly too low to make any confident generalisations about Christian discipleship across the UK churches as a whole. The timing of the survey, so close to the summer holidays, may also have resulted in a lower response rate (however, it was decided to go ahead nevertheless, in case the pandemic was really about to pass and this was the last opportunity to hear people reflect in the midst of events). However, there were enough responses to feel that it was worthwhile writing up the results.

The primary purpose of the focus groups was to explore key themes emerging from the survey. The aim was not to test emergent theory but add texture and depth to the overall findings. In presenting the results, focus group has been integrated with the survey findings to offer a 'richer picture' of the topics under enquiry. The focus group comprised of Christians who were not ordained ministers was entirely comprised of older adults aged 60+. Some had a formal licensed or leadership role within their church (e.g., churchwarden or preacher); others did not. It had been hoped to organise a third focus group of younger adults, and sufficient participants were identified. However, in the end it proved too difficult to find a mutually convenient date to meet.

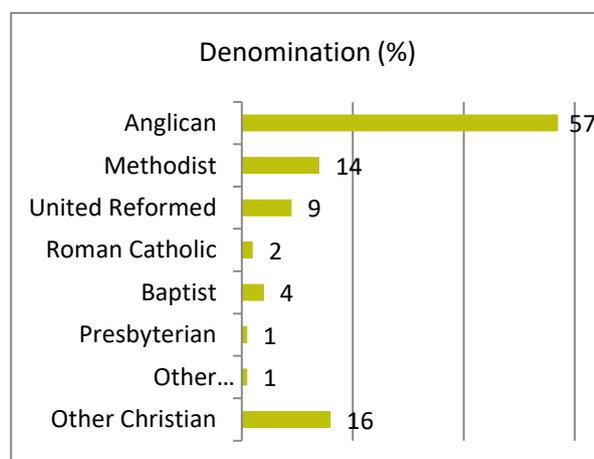
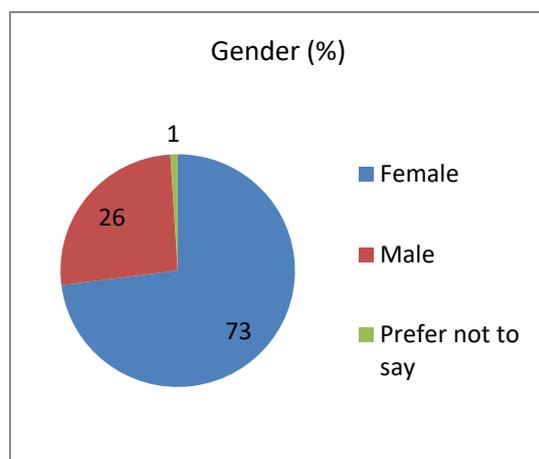
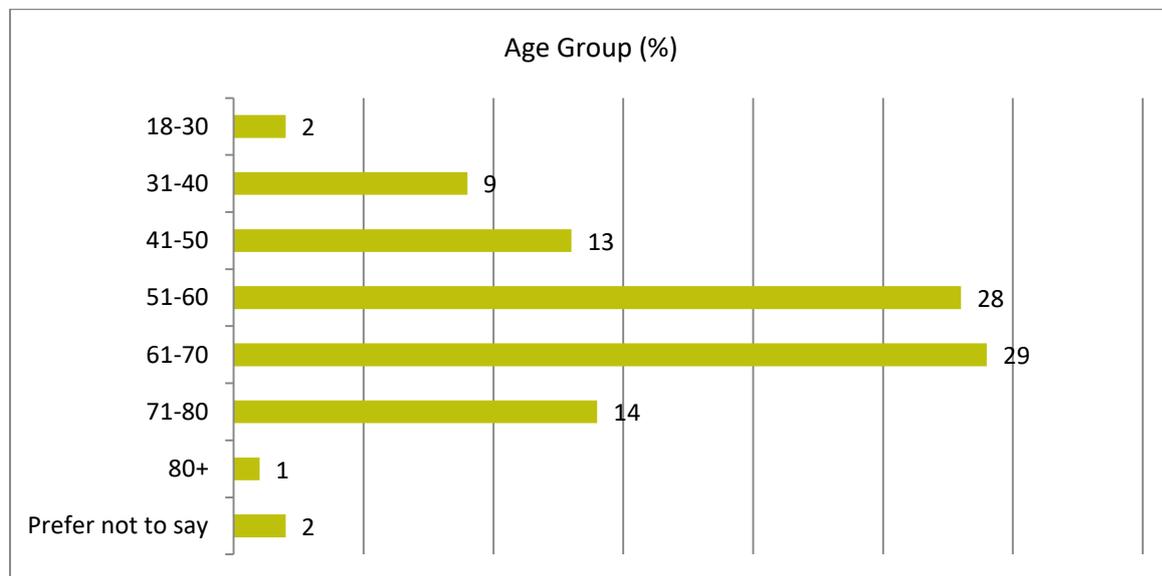
When reading the results, it is important to bear in mind the timing of the research. In summer 2020, coronavirus infections had dropped to very low rates in the UK, and many people believed that the worst of the pandemic was over. As a result, it is probable that most participants were looking back on an experience they were emerging from, rather than (as we now know) reflecting on

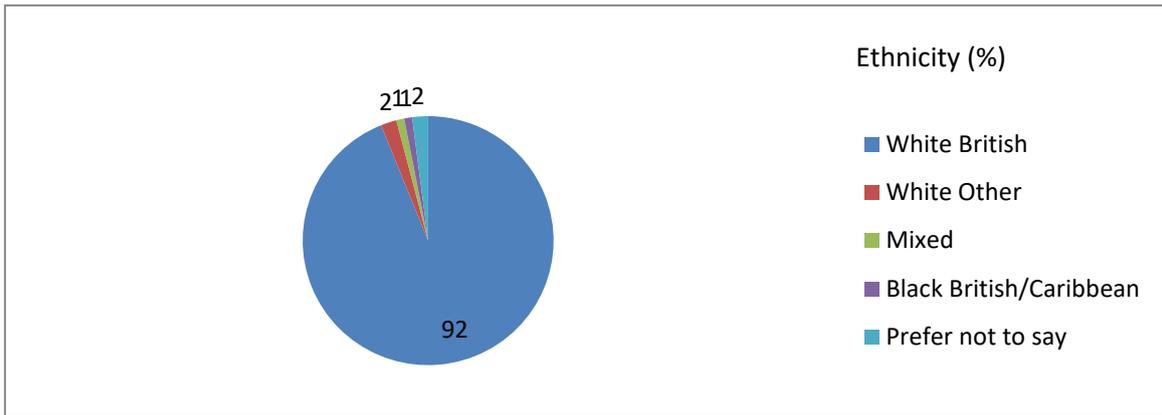
circumstances which had only just begun. The results may have been different if the survey had been conducted at a different time – for example during the second lockdown of early 2021.

More information about the research process, its challenges and complexities, is found in **Appendix 3: The Research Process**, at the end of the report.

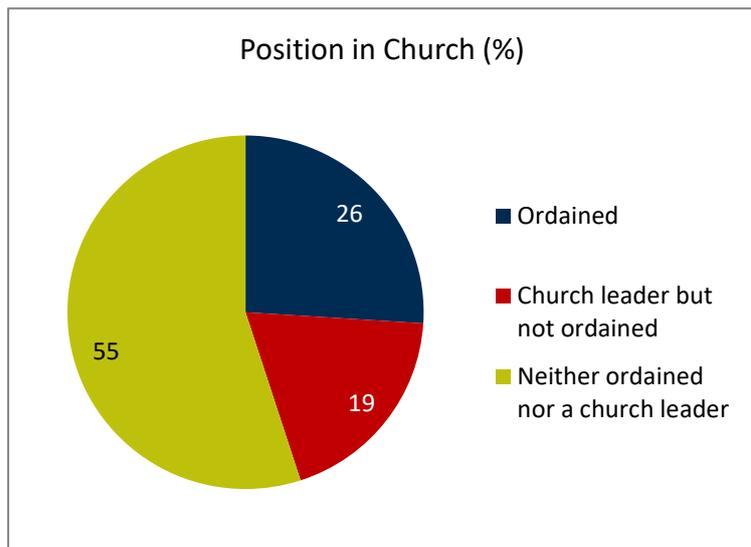
The Participants

Details of our 165 survey participants are provided here. Participants came from across the UK, albeit predominantly from England. Compared to the overall churchgoing population, **our sample was disproportionately female, white and in late middle age**. An effort to recruit further Black and Minority Ethnic respondents through denominational channels unfortunately added no further participants to the sample. **Anglicans were disproportionately represented** – perhaps reflecting St Peter’s Saltley Trust’s main networks and working relationships.

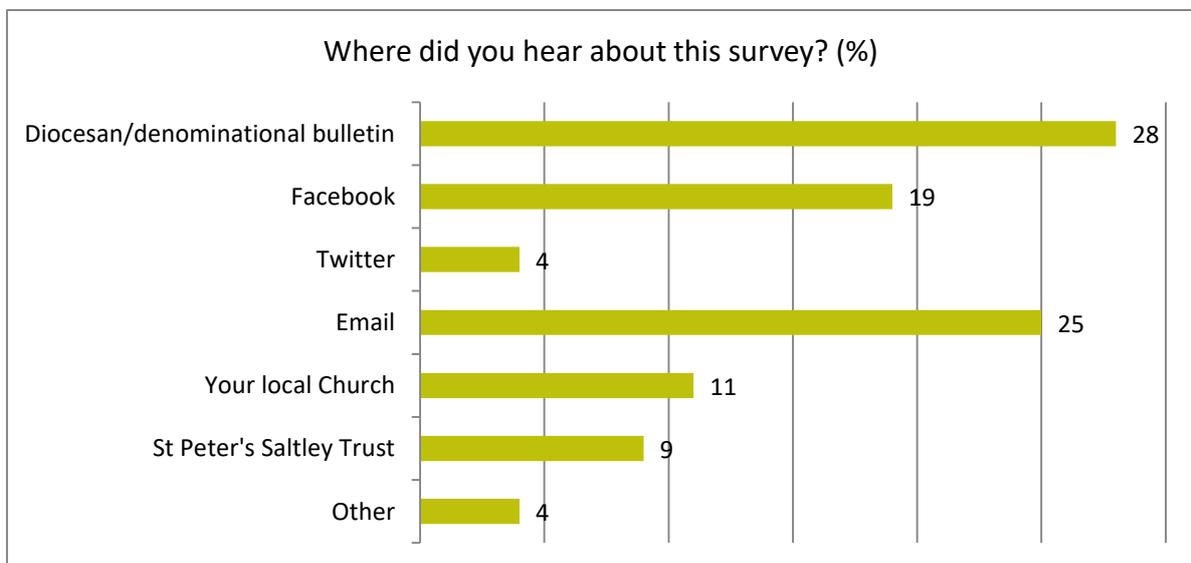




We also asked participants whether they were ordained, had another form of church leadership role, or neither. Ordained respondents were disproportionately aged in their 50s and 60s. Whilst women outnumbered men in all three categories, men made up a bigger proportion of the 'ordained' group (40%) than women. Respondents who were 'neither ordained, nor a church leader' covered a wider spread of ages than either of the two church leader categories, but were also disproportionately likely to be female (84%).



We also asked participants where they had heard about the survey. The most common answer was from diocesan or denominational bulletins – this was another reflection of the Trust's main networks and relationships, and means that the sample is quite heavily rooted within the mainstream, historic churches.

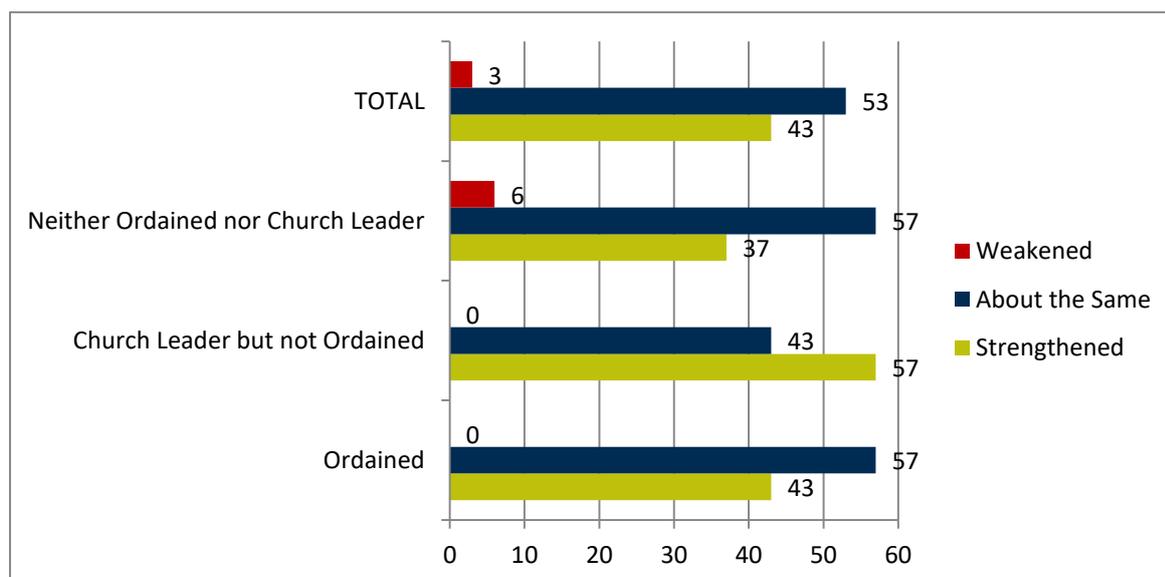


The Results

Trust in God: Strengthened? Weakened? Or about the Same?

A good place to start is with the final ‘discipleship’ question asked in the survey, since it provided respondents an opportunity to summarise the overall impact of the pandemic thus far.

Overall during lockdown, would you say that your trust in God has strengthened, weakened, or remained about the same? (%)



The results are remarkably similar to those in Francis and Village’s *Coronavirus, Church and You* survey, in which 41% of respondents felt they had become closer to God, with 50% ‘about the same’ and 9% ‘further from God’.⁸ Also similar was the fact that those offering some form of recognised ministry or church leadership role were slightly more inclined to have felt closer to God than those ‘receiving’ it (similar to the ‘not ordained and not a church leader’ category in this survey).

89 respondents took up the opportunity to explain why they had given the answer they did. One of the most common themes (which featured in about a quarter of the responses) was a strong sense of **trust in God regardless of circumstances**. One commented: ‘*I think I have always trusted God- and that has not wavered- He gives me the strength to do whatever I am needed to do - and friends to support me*’. A second important theme (for roughly one in eight respondents) was a sense of **growing strength arising from time spent in personal prayer, study or reflection**. One respondent wrote: ‘*Prayer has been more of a focus for many and for me has given a foundation of hope*’.

A number of other respondents mentioned how they perceived God at work in their lives or in wider events and circumstances; others drew upon God’s care in previous times of crisis to carry them through current challenges.

Of those whose faith had become weakened during lockdown, two asked why God allowed such suffering; only one felt as though they had been abandoned by their local church.

Discipleship 'Breakthroughs'

What has brought you strength?

First, we asked respondents what had most brought them strength as a Christian during the crisis. This was primarily a ‘heart’ question – about people’s emotional/experiential response (although in reality, all of the areas we asked about involve head, heart and hands to some degree).

The responses to this question were analysed in the light of some previous Saltley Trust research,⁹ which suggested that there may be four ‘pathways’ (or areas of Christian practice) which people find helpful in their growth in faith. These are:

- **Individual experience** (i.e., things we do by ourselves, which more of an ‘inward’ and ‘upward’ focus – e.g., times of private prayer, study or meditation)
- **Church worship** (i.e., congregational activity primarily focused on worship – primarily involved in church services)
- **Group activity** (i.e., things we do together as ‘gathered’ church but which are not worship services – e.g., small groups, participating together in a church community initiative)
- **Public Engagement** (i.e., the ways in which we seek to express and practice Christian faith as individuals beyond the gathered congregation)

Did respondents’ answers to this question relate to any of these ‘pathways’ more than the others?



Respondents most commonly cited some aspect of individual spiritual experience/ practice as their key source of strength

Times of personal prayer and Bible reading were the two most common practices to have brought survey respondents strength during lockdown (28 mentions each by respondents). Listening to worship music, connecting with nature and finding times of silence/solitude were also mentioned by a number of people completing the survey.



The single most common answer to this question related to church services

33 respondents cited some aspect of church worship as their key source of strength as a Christian through lockdown.



Group activity - the support of church, small group or friends - was also widely seen as a source of strength as a Christian

25 respondents said that support from their church had given them most strength. 20 mentioned a small group or prayer group. 17 saw close friends as their main source of strength as a Christian.



Social media and Christian content on the Internet was also a widely-mentioned source of strength

Some use of technology for discipleship purposes was primarily about 'individual experience' (e.g., 13 respondents found web resources which had helped with their faith); some was about the value of interaction with others beyond organised church groups.

Living and expressing Christian faith on one's individual frontline (what we've called 'public engagement' activities here) was least likely to be cited as a source of strength – but (as suggested on pp. 12-13) such personal, outward-facing activity was also one of the things most likely to have made people feel alive as a Christian.

What has brought you most strength as a Christian during the pandemic? Survey and Focus Group Responses...

Individual Experience

'Reading the Bible often on the back of our church Sunday Zoom meetings or my regular BRF notes or shared inspiration on social media e.g. Andy Croft, Justin Brierley. Also The Blessing. All help me turn towards God in my perspective'.

'I've found that I was drawn more and more to the Saints particularly the Celtic Saints and they have been of great help to me'.

'Walks looking for God's beauty and praying thankfulness on the way ...especially with my 4 year old'.

Church Worship

'Our daily vlog 10min service each day and valued Sunday service vlog. I have had more time with these to understand more and think more about myself as a Christian'.

'Sharing worship online, particularly watching the Eucharist services broadcast from the [...] Abbey, and also lay-led services organised by members of my own parish and uploaded to our church's website. It was good to see familiar faces as part of shared worship even if we were physically distanced'.

Group Activity

'A parish WhatsApp group set up at the start of lockdown. We've grown closer as a community through sharing prayer requests, news and a virtual 'sign of peace' during live-streamed Mass on YouTube'.

'A zoom home group every week and tea and coffee, virtual, after zoom service. Connecting with people, and sharing g and supporting each other has been my lifeline. In the church I grew up in, not where I live now.'

'Support from fellow members of our church. We have really gathered together as one team... during the good times and bad times ...

What has made you feel most alive as a Christian?

We asked participants: ‘**of all the ways you have been able to live out your faith during lockdown, which has made you feel most alive as a Christian?**’ This was a question about behaviour (‘hands’), but also the impact this had on respondents’ hearts.

A small number of people objected to the question, saying that the Christian life was not primarily about feelings. From one perspective this is quite true, but the question was used because most Christians have at some point felt the sense of joy and purpose which comes from living life as God desires (even if it involves struggle in the process). Most respondents seemed comfortable describing what made them ‘feel alive as a Christian’ as a way of expressing that.

Answers to this question were also analysed using the ‘four pathways’ – and the results were very different to the previous question.



Putting faith into practice beyond the congregation played a bigger part

A third of the responses described feeling enlivened in faith as a result of **putting their faith into practice in some way beyond organised church activity** – e.g., helping neighbours or vulnerable people, or engaging in conversation with non-Christians. Respondents who had no church leadership position were particularly likely to have felt enlivened by ‘public engagement’ activities.



A personal rhythm of devotion and taking part in group activity continued to be important

Regarding personal devotional practices, **prayer** was again the most commonly-mentioned (18 respondents), closely followed by **connecting with God through nature** (15 respondents). These were the most common answers by some distance. Respondents who were ordained were particularly likely to have felt enlivened by ‘group activity’ – for example, through helping their church family to stay in touch with each other – and by ‘individual experience’ (e.g., a rhythm of prayer).



Church worship was less significant in making people feel ‘alive as a Christian’

When asked what had most made them feel alive as a Christian, only 16/185 respondents mentioned something to do with worshipping together as a congregation. This is not to say worship was unimportant; simply that people felt most enlivened by other aspects of their life as a Christian disciple.

Feeling Alive as a Christian – Respondents’ and Focus Group Perspectives

| Individual Experience | Public Engagement | Group Activity |
|--|---|---|
| <i>‘Prayer walking the whole parish each month of April, May, June, July’</i> | <i>‘Initiating a not for profit village fruit and veg bag delivery cooperative to be a blessing to our village, so that people shielding, isolating or locked down could get fresh fruit and veg - and so we could also support local famers and suppliers under pressure’.</i> | <i>‘Setting up our virtual holiday club and sharing our zoom get together’.</i> |
| <i>‘Getting out into nature and walking and absorbing what I see and hear and who I meet along the way’.</i> | <i>‘Being a bit braver to write overtly Christian things on Facebook when it seemed appropriate’</i> | <i>‘We have had pastoral responsibility (phone only, obviously) for a small group of folk within our church - maybe 12/15. We have phoned each one once per week and have been able to chat, listen and where necessary take some action to help out. I’ve also been involved in the production of daily Bible Study blogs designed to keep folk together and to encourage folk to read the Word. Preaching at Virtual Services’.</i> |
| <i>‘Praying through each day & being grateful to make it safely bed every night’.</i> | <i>‘Befriending and supporting neighbours has been the most positive experience but this has had nothing to do with a Christian faith’</i> | |
| <i>‘Singing hymns on my daily walks’</i> | | |
| <i>‘Time to stop, pray and think’</i> | | |

As in one of the quotes above, not everyone explicitly connected their Christian faith to the way they were helping their community (this was also a feature of Saltley Trust and the Church Urban Fund’s *Christians in Practice* research¹⁰).

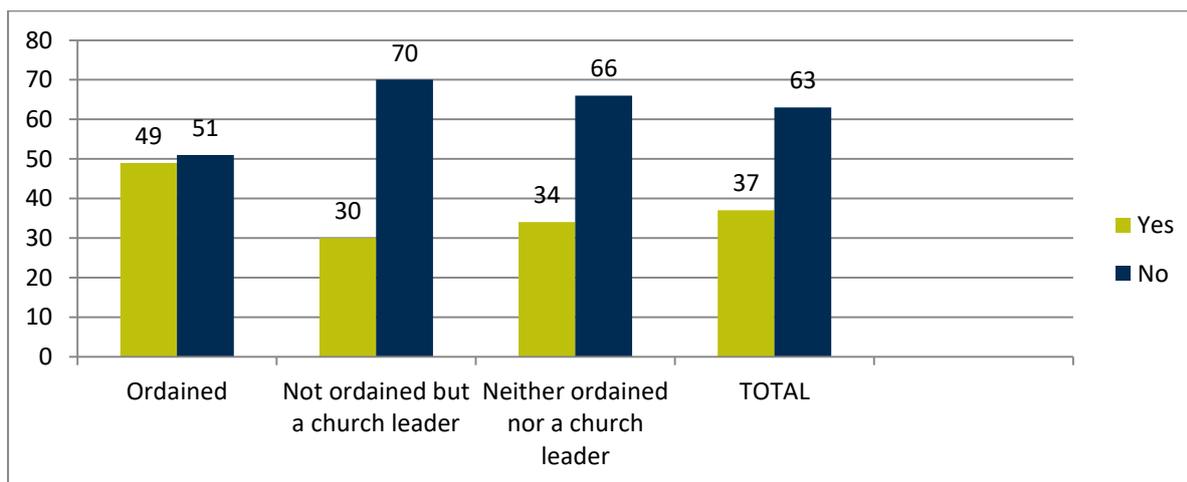
A number of respondents felt most alive in their Christian discipleship as a result of **opportunities to minister to others** – either through leading worship, coordinating a small group, offering pastoral care or leading on some aspect of community outreach or service. 22 respondents (about one in seven) mentioned this in their responses to this question. For example:

- *‘Being able to be of use - mainly through phone calls / emails to let people know they are not forgotten’*
- *‘I have been able to write daily posts of encouragement and Facebook has brought church into my home’.*
- *‘Recording some of the Sunday services or part of them and encouraging more of the Church family to take part and seeing them grow’.*

Discerning God’s Purposes for Us

In the survey, we asked people: ‘Has your understanding of God’s purposes for you changed during this crisis?’ This was primarily a ‘head’ question, in that although God’s calling can certainly come through emotions and experience, it nevertheless involves an important element of *understanding*.

Has your understanding of God’s purposes for you changed during this crisis? (%)



37% felt God’s purposes for them had changed during the pandemic

A significant minority of respondents have clearly felt prompted to re-evaluate their purpose, role or calling during the past year. Most appeared to see this as a positive process. A minority felt their existing calling or purpose had been placed on hold during the pandemic (particularly where they were required to self-isolate).



Nearly half of ‘ordained’ respondents felt God’s purposes for them had changed

Although ordained respondents mentioned a wide variety of issues at play, one common undercurrent was the impulse to concentrate their future ministry more on people and mission, and less on buildings and administration. As one put it, the pandemic *‘highlighted call to ministry among the community and kingdom building not looking after building’*. For another, it meant: *‘fewer rotas, more relationships’*.



Many were in the middle of discerning next steps

As a result, many survey respondents felt unable to say exactly how God’s purposes for them might be changing. Of the 69 people explaining their answers, 12 felt themselves at a cross-roads. For many of these, the way ahead was likely to become clear only as lockdown lifted. Only 5 expressed this crisis as negative.

Discipleship 'Challenges'

Changing Practice: what have we missed, or struggled to maintain?

Respondents were asked a two-part question: **'Thinking about the ways you normally practice your faith in a typical week before lockdown... a) which aspect have you most struggled to keep up during this crisis?; b) Which have you missed the most?'**

Struggled to maintain?



Not surprisingly, church services were the no. 1 practice which respondents had struggled to maintain

With church buildings closed for public worship during much of the middle part of 2020, 27 respondents (about 1 in 6) cited in-person church services as the aspect of their regular practice they had most struggled to maintain. This was the most common single answer to the question. Few people elaborated on this, but those who did sometimes mentioned the lack of singing, communion or fellowship, or added that online services were somehow not the same.



Many found a personal rhythm of prayer, study and solitude disrupted by lockdown

Whilst (as seen on pp. 10-13) times of personal prayer and study were a significant source of strength for many respondents, some also found their regular pattern disrupted by the changes brought by the pandemic/lockdown. 34 respondents mentioned different aspects of personal devotional practice as being the thing they had most struggled to maintain.

What was going on here? For some respondents, the upheavals had disrupted concentration: 'concentration is shot', wrote one; another said: 'Prayer. I found the concentration difficult. I resolved this by praying about others more'. For others, the lack of a familiar structure or pattern for the day was a key disruptive factor. For others, a busier home life was the issue: 'Routine of prayer life as husband is not going out to work'; and 'Quiet times more difficult as 4 young children at home all the time'.



Face to face fellowship and personal ministry were another major casualty of the pandemic

One respondent wrote that they had found it most difficult to sustain 'Being in deep, honest fellowship with people. Some relationships have shrunk. Others have grown'. Some lamented the loss of opportunities to serve others or hold face-to-face pastoral conversations.



A significant minority said that ‘nothing’ had changed

18 respondents said that little or nothing had changed for them. Few elaborated on their answers, but the minority who did tended to indicate that their experience of lockdown had been relatively spiritually positive: ‘I have found it easier – I have had time to think’, wrote one. Another reflected: ‘my prayer life is richer and more meaningful; I attend “gathered” worship more frequently’.

Most responses therefore related to aspects of corporate worship, personal practice or fellowship. ‘Public engagement’ (i.e., outward-facing missional activity beyond the congregational sphere) appeared to have remained largely unaffected – or at least, individuals did not choose to name them in answer to this question.

Missed the Most?

Respondents answered somewhat differently when asked what aspect of their usual rhythm of practice they had missed the most. The overwhelming majority of comments related to missing fellowship and aspects of church worship. No respondent talked about missing some aspect of personal spiritual discipline or private devotion, and only a handful said they had most missed some aspect of wider community engagement beyond the congregation. This is perhaps partly because for many (though not all) both of these things were still possible.



‘Fellowship’ was one of the most commonly used words in this answer, being given by about 1 in 6 respondents.

For many, worship and fellowship were bound up together – ‘formal services and the associated fellowship’, wrote one. ‘Meeting with my Christian family in church’, wrote another. It is clear that the pandemic has placed significant strains on bonds of fellowship in some congregations. Whilst many respondents had participated in (and appreciated) online gatherings, the ‘in person’ quality of previous patterns of fellowship was clearly regularly missed.



4 in 10 respondents mentioned some aspect of church worship as having been missed the most

Where respondents cited a particular aspect of worship, communion was the most common ‘missed’ aspect (19 responses), closely followed by music and singing (17). Participants in the clergy focus group spent some time reflecting on what specifically they believed congregations missed about worship. Most felt that the key missing ingredient was the face to face quality of worship – although some expressed an underlying concern that what their congregations most missed was not so much the ‘vertical’ dimension of worship as the opportunity to meet friends in church. Some of the discussion is shared on the following page.

There was some particular rich reflection in the focus groups on the experiences of missing church, and on socially distanced church services.

On the importance of 'spiritual connection' in person:

'I think the biggest thing people are missing is being present together with each other and it's not you know a lot of people will just say 'Oh I miss seeing people' but it's a lot more than that, it's that spiritual connection that we've got together when we're in one room, yes there is a spiritual connection when we're together on Zoom but it's not the same as when we're being present together and I think, I think that's what people are, are missing' (ordained minister).

'I agree church buildings aren't the church the church is the body of Christ, the people and but when we gather together there's a dynamic and that dynamic on your own is different, I'm not saying one's better than the other but it's different' (lay Anglican).

Another minister commented on the importance of fellowship and sociability in church services, but with somewhat more hesitancy:

'There's always a slight worry amongst ministers that you know are, are some of our folk coming to church because they see it as a social club or they coming to church for church I, you know and there's, there's a little bit of an element to that as well in that you know so yes they are missing to being together you know seeing each other but I think the biggest thing they're missing is the tea and coffee afterwards and, and that, that has caused so much angst in my biggest church. You know 'why can't we have tea and coffee? These rest, these, these cafés are open, why can't, why can't we be open?' (ordained minister).

Other participants in the clergy focus group commented on the challenges of leading face-to-face worship whilst maintaining Covid precautions and social distancing. One reflected that she had 'absolutely hated' leading services where no fellowship, no communion and no singing were possible, where everything had to be sanitised repeatedly, and face masks had to be worn. Another commented on feeling like the 'covid gestapo', having to give more attention to maintaining precautionary measures rather than offering warmth and welcome.

Questions to (or about) God or faith

Times of major crisis can often provoke questions, doubts or reassessment. As seen on p. 8, few felt that the pandemic had undermined their faith (more often the reverse was true). Nevertheless, the crisis also provoked plenty of questioning amongst respondents. In the survey, participants were asked: 'what questions have you asked God (or about God or your faith) during this crisis?' Free text responses were coded thematically, and the following clusters of response were the most common:



The most common theme was that of personal calling and direction

Roughly a third of respondents wrestled with questions of future direction and God's leading, as a result of the crisis. Responses included:

- *'What is God's call to me during these strange and uncharted times?'*
- *'How do I keep showing love when I can't welcome people into our home'*
- *'Challenged to question what is important about attending church and how else does God want me to reach out to other people?'*
- *'I'm here God, what now. What can I do to serve you today. What can I do to prepare for my future.'*

Whilst some versions of this question were negative, being born out of a sense of upheaval and familiar patterns of life being closed off, the majority of comments (as here) suggested a positive commitment to discovering new purpose or direction in this time of crisis.



Roughly 1 in 6 respondents raised questions about the meaning of suffering

Hardly surprisingly given the number of Covid deaths and disruption to existing patterns of life, questions of theodicy and suffering were also a prominent feature of responses. Sometimes this was simply expressed as a cry from the heart (for example one respondent who wrote 'where are you? Lord have mercy. What should the church be doing now?'). Others raised more philosophical questions about a good God in the face of suffering. For others, the pandemic through a spotlight on the human causes of the tragedy and its lessons for the planet.

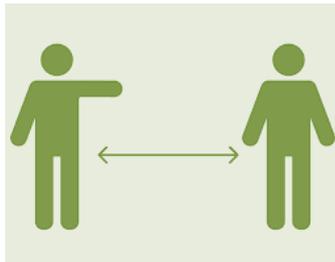


A significant minority had no questions

Remarkably, the third most common cluster of responses (18) was that the pandemic had raised no significant questions. The minority who gave longer answers tended to feel either that the pandemic had done little to disturb their basic trust in God, or that they had already worked through questions of evil and suffering and that the pandemic had posed no new challenges to their faith.

The Hardest Part of the Crisis

'This crisis has been hard for most people one way or the other. Which aspect of it has felt hardest for you?' Respondents' answers to this question were often particularly poignant to read, and were most likely to focus on general human experience rather than the discipleship dimension of the pandemic specifically.



Being distanced from family or friends was by far the most common theme

Roughly a third of respondents wrote specifically about missing family or friends (as opposed to a more general feeling of isolation or loneliness). Comments about the loss of close human encounters ranged from being separated from loved ones at point of death, to the reassurance of everyday human contact when shopping.



Roughly 1 in 6 felt the hardest part had been watching others suffer and being unable to help; about the same proportion spoke of their own feelings of loneliness and isolation

Regarding the former, one respondent wrote that the hardest part of the crisis had been: 'not being able to visit elderly Dad - phone calls hearing how isolated he feels have been awful'

Regarding their own feelings, another respondent wrote: 'we were hands on grandparents looking after grandchildren regularly each week - not seeing them and our children, being unable to cuddle and kiss them has been agony'.

As hinted here, the lack of physical touch was also a common theme, with 16 respondents mentioning this specifically.



Work-related challenges also proved hardest for a significant minority of respondents

About 1 in 8 respondents cited work-related challenges. For the most part, these related to the challenges of maintaining work-life balance – either through home-working or whilst involved in key work. However, for some, the challenge was rather a lack of work – either through furlough or unemployment, leading to a reduced sense of self-worth or lack of clarity of direction and purpose.

Discipleship 'Lessons'

New Practices to Build Upon

The online survey asked: 'What new habit, activity or practice have you started during lockdown (as an expression of your Christian faith) which you would like to keep doing in the future?' Of course, only time would tell whether respondents stuck to these practices, but here the question was designed to explore the behavioural dimension of looking to the future as a Christian disciple.



Some aspect of personal prayer was the most common 'new practice' taken up during lockdown which respondents hoped would continue.

In this question, prayer was mentioned more than twice as often as any other Christian practice or activity. One respondent wrote: 'Daily prayers, reflections and readings. I didn't have time during the week due to working long hours however now I will make time'. Another wrote: 'Lost work structure in Covid ...gained prayer!' Whilst for many respondents breakthroughs in prayer had been a largely personal matter, there were exceptions. One respondent wrote of creating 'family church - putting together our own 'service' each Sunday afternoon with wings [sic.], memory verse, story, quiz'. Several respondents felt that the pandemic had forced them to take greater responsibility for their own spiritual health; something for which they were grateful.



Worshipping and meeting together online was also noted by several respondents

Roughly 1 in 8 respondents answered this question by noting the novelty of online services and other church gatherings. One commented: 'My hope is now that we are online with the churches own YouTube channel, that we find the time and the resources to continue to be a presence online even when we return to our building'. Another wrote: 'mid-afternoon mini service (online) - I love it and hope it continues - it's exactly what I need'. Online worship was mentioned here by both congregation members and church leaders.



Reconnecting with God outdoors, or simply reconnecting with nature

10 respondents noted the value of regular walks or time spent outdoors; 8 specifically spoke of the value of reconnecting with God's creation, or with God through creation. (As seen below, many respondents felt the pandemic had also taught important lessons about caring for the planet).

Whether inside or outside, a desire to maintain solitude, stillness or Sabbath was another important theme. Others wished to maintain some aspect of outreach or community engagement begun during lockdown.

Qualities or Virtues needing Further Development

Respondents were asked: 'has this crisis highlighted any Christian quality or virtue which needs further developing in you? Which one, and why?' This question was included to recognise the way in which our developing in holiness of life is as much about our disposition, the way we allow the fruit of the Holy Spirit to grow within us, as it is about belief and activity. Remarkably, one particular quality dominated respondents' answers here.



Almost a third of respondents felt lockdown had highlighted the need for them to develop more **patience**

50 respondents cited patience – more than four times the number who identified any other quality or virtue for further development. Many simply responded with one word answers. However, amongst those who elaborated on their response, some cited the need for patience amidst the pandemic; others highlighted their need for greater patience with family, friends or colleagues; a few focused on the need for patience with oneself, with God, or even with politicians who infuriated them!

We tested out this finding with the two focus groups. All focus group participants could relate to the way in which the pandemic/lockdown had tried their patience in various ways (for example, in relation to technology, liaising with others about work or ministry, or patience when unable to worship or serve in familiar ways).



Those who highlighted a different quality varied widely in what they cited

Other virtues or qualities highlighted included: self-discipline/self-control, love/compassion, and serenity. However, none of these were mentioned by more than a dozen respondents.

A number of respondents answered this question not by highlighting a quality, value or virtue, but by focusing on particular practices – for example, prayer, stillness, hospitality and study. 10 respondents wrote about a particular form of ministry. 11 answered that the pandemic had highlighted no particular virtue or quality which needed developing in them. Given that a third of respondents did not answer with a fruit, virtue or quality, does this suggest that the language of virtues is not universally used or recognised within the churches at grass-roots level?

Lessons for the Church

Respondents were asked a two-part question: What do you think are the main lessons from this crisis... For the Christian Churches? For the world as a whole? Here, it should be remembered here that questionnaire responses were collected in July/August 2020, at a time when virus rates were dropping, lockdown was easing, and many observers were cautiously confident that the worst of a relatively short pandemic was behind us. In this respect, the answers have neither the flavour of the early, anxious and disorientating phase of the pandemic, nor of the feeling of bleakness which many experienced in early 2021.

When asked to identify lessons for the Christian churches, respondents offered a wide variety of answers: no topic was mentioned by more than a quarter of respondents, and more than half of the lessons offered were noted by less than ten people each. That said, some themes were more prominent than others.



1 in 4 respondents felt the pandemic had highlighted the importance of seeing Church as people; not buildings or organisations

Even whilst many respondents longed to return to face-to-face worship in their local church building, many felt that the pandemic had forced (or should force) church life to prioritise human relationships. 'We don't need dedicated buildings to have a church community', wrote one respondent. For another, 'We need to engage with our communities in ways they understand - coming out of our buildings has been enlightening'.

For some respondents, the point was that whilst buildings were helpful, they should not be the primary focus. For others, buildings and administration placed an unhelpful burden on local church communities. For others, the need to leave the building behind had had positive consequences in prioritising fellowship and mission. However, these attitudes should also be read in the light of other survey data which suggests a complex array of attitudes to the role of church buildings during and after the pandemic.¹¹



1 in 6 felt the church was being taught to look outwards, reaching, loving and serving the community

These responses continued the overall theme of needing to look outwards, rather than inwards. For some, the key point was a need to move away from an insular, club-like attitude. For others, looking outwards related to the need for bolder, more confident sharing of faith; for others, it related to the need to work for justice and offer practical loving service. For one respondent, the lesson was for 'Church people [to be] visible and integrated in community response and witnessing to Kingdom values'.



1 in 6 focused on the need to continue with a blend of face-to-face and online church

Of those who offered comment, the majority wanted to see some form of online worship continue, although not as the only form. As one respondent put it: 'We can keep the best of virtual church, whilst still meeting together as the body of the church, in church'. Several noted how online worship was being accessed by a range of people not normally connected with church. Many felt the overall lesson was that the church should more actively embrace contemporary communications technology.

Other themes to emerge from responses to this question included: a generalised sense of the need for change; the emergence of new missional opportunities as a result of the pandemic; the importance of fellowship but also personal discipleship; and various comments (some positive, some negative) on the resilience or otherwise of the church and the spiritual temperature of the nation.

The focus group comprising older Anglicans who were not ordained reflected quite extensively on the pandemic's lessons for the Church. For one there had been a 'failure in discipleship' (i.e., to nurture Christians who were fully committed to Christ as opposed to being nominal churchgoers). Several noted the climate of nervousness and fear around the virus, suggesting that the Church should not be so afraid of the virus as to cease to act in positive ways in society. One felt that the pandemic had highlighted the liberties which church and society had previously tended to take for granted. Another focused upon the need for Christians to learn to care better for creation: 'I think we have all learnt that we need the creation that God gave us all around us in nature and that everything on the earth was put there for a reason and we're meant to be stewards of this place and we've got to start looking after it and the people around us and yeah everything within this earth really'.

Lessons for the World

What lessons did respondents see the pandemic teaching the world as a whole? Here again there were a wide range of answers, but also some regularly recurring themes.



We are more interconnected than we thought, and/or should be more interconnected than we are

50 respondents (nearly a third) highlighted this theme in their responses. Much of this focus on interconnectedness was as a result of the global nature of the virus: 'Disaster knows no national boundaries - humanity can't ever work alone in pockets', wrote one. For others, our connectedness to others had been highlighted by the experience of lockdown and social isolation: 'the whole world is deeply interconnected, we can't isolate ourselves and thrive. Relationships matter'. However, many also drew more specific moral lessons from this interconnectedness: 'the world is a community too and we should look after each other (we are all the same!!)'.



We need to live more simply and lightly

Roughly one in five answers to this question highlighted this theme. For some, there was an underlying feeling that the pandemic had been caused by humanity's abuse of nature ('Stop messing with nature. Do something about climate change'). For others, the major changes to life during lockdown were proof that humanity could make the radical changes needed to safeguard the planet. Sometimes this was underpinned by an explicit critique of rampant consumerism. For others, the need for simplicity was less to do with nature and more about living life at a slower pace, resisting over-busyness and prioritising relationships.



We need love, kindness and compassion

Roughly one in seven respondents commented more generally on the need for love, kindness and compassion, either as their sole response or in addition to more specific comments on other lessons learned. This comment was typical: 'We need to show more kindness and love, to share our wealth to help others'

12 respondents explicitly reflected on the way in which the pandemic had highlighted the frailty/fragility of life. One respondent wrote: 'Just because we have made great advances the world is still vulnerable to pandemics we need to acknowledge the fragility of our little world and not think we can sort it all ourselves'. Some connected this to the need for more kindness and compassion in society, or the need to live more simply. Strikingly, only two explicitly went on to suggest that the world's fragility demonstrated humanity's need for God.

However, overall, 11 respondents wrote in some way about the pandemic teaching the world of its need for God. Some of these responses concerned the need for humility in the face of the fragility of life, the challenges of the contemporary world and the arrogance of human beings in contributing to them. Others framed humanity's need for God in more apocalyptic terms, focusing suggesting that the pandemic was an early warning of judgement or end times).

Focus group participants were also asked to reflect upon the lessons from the crisis. Here, reflections on lessons for the church and the world were often interwoven. Our global interconnectedness and the need to live simply, lightly and with compassion were again common themes. However, taking place in November 2020, many expressed themselves less optimistic about whether we would learn the necessary lessons from Covid. One Free Church minister reflected the mood of caution expressed by participants in the clergy focus group:

...at the start it was all... these wonderful memes were going round and people were saying "The world will never be the same again" and "Let's build a better world" and that sort of thing... but I think we've got to be very honest about what's happened politically since and what's happened in America and around the world - so not just America - with people taking out in my view taking out their anxiety on others and electing populist leaders who have been playing on those anxieties, in part to deny interconnectedness... [...] so the world needs to wake up as to how things truly are and the church needs to wake up that significant mem, numbers of people in our congregations will share those views...(free church minister).

Others focused on the need for courage to re-learn patterns of hospitality and care that had been difficult to practice safely during lockdown.

3. Conclusions

Summary

- 165 people (almost all churchgoing Christians) took part in an online survey on their discipleship experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic in July and August 2020. A quarter were ordained church leaders; just over a half had no church leadership position; the remainder were lay leaders of one form or another. Older, white women were particularly strongly represented in the survey.
- 43% of respondents felt their faith had been strengthened during the pandemic. 53% felt it had remained about the same; 3% felt it had weakened. This pattern is similar to the results of the larger *Coronavirus, Church and You* survey (Francis and Village, 2020).
- When asked what had brought them most strength as a Christian during the crisis, most respondents cited some aspect of individual spiritual practice or experience – for example, a rhythm of prayer or Bible study, listening to worship music or spending time in solitude and/or nature. Online services and small groups, prayer groups and close friends were also commonly mentioned.
- By contrast, when asked what aspect of putting their faith into practice had made them feel most alive as a Christian, respondents (particularly those without a church leadership role) were frequently likely to describe helping or sharing faith with others outside of organised church activities. Ordained respondents were most likely to have felt enlivened by either group activity (e.g., leading an online small group) or some aspect of personal devotion (e.g., a pattern of prayer). Very few respondents felt that church services (online or otherwise) had been the main thing which had helped them feel most alive as a Christian.
- Overall, about a third of respondents sensed that God’s purposes for them had changed during the crisis – however, this rose to approximately half amongst clergy. A strong theme within the responses was the need to re-orientate away from spending significant time on buildings, administration and institutions, and towards people, relationships and mission. Many felt that they were still in the process of discerning God’s new call to them.
- When asked what aspect of Christian faith and practice they had most struggled to maintain during lockdown, the most common answer given by respondents was (hardly surprisingly) corporate worship. The second most common answer was ‘nothing’; other common answers related to fellowship, small groups or a rhythm of prayer and Bible reading. When asked what they had missed the most, worship continued to be an important theme, but less so than fellowship/being with others.

- Just under a third of respondents felt that the primary question they had asked God (or about God) during the pandemic related to their own personal vocation/sense of purpose or direction. Questions of theodicy and suffering were mentioned about roughly a sixth of respondents, whilst a number of others were keen to understand what God was teaching the world, and the Church through the crisis. However, a significant minority of respondents felt the crisis had prompted no serious questions for them.
- When asked what the hardest part of the whole crisis had been, by far the most common single response related to the experience of separation from family and friends. Work-related challenges and the distress of seeing other people struggle with the crisis were two of the other recurring themes.
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- Respondents were asked what new habit, practice or activity they had taken up during lockdown, and would like to continue. A stronger commitment to prayer was clearly the most common answer with approximately a quarter of respondents mentioning prayer in this way. Maintaining and developing a virtual presence or worship/discipleship activity in virtual spaces were also important themes.
- Given that the pandemic has tested all of our personal resources to some degree, participants were asked about which Christian virtue or value most needed further developing in them. 'Patience' was by far the most common answer, with 50 respondents (just under a third of the total) citing this. However a significant minority appeared to struggle with the question.
- Respondents were asked what lessons the pandemic was teaching the Church. As with the question on sensing God's calling change (above), the strongest themes within the responses related to the need to get out beyond church buildings, be more active in mission and build upon the Church's developing online presence, spending less time on administration.
- When asked what lessons the crisis was teaching the world, two major themes emerged: first that humanity is (and should be) more interdependent than we have tended to assume, and second the lesson of simpler living. Here, as elsewhere in the responses, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of appreciating and reconnecting with nature and being more active in caring for God's earth.

Reflections

- This was an experimental piece of research which also used an experimental method. In the event, the response rate was disappointing and the survey sample was insufficiently diverse to constitute a representative cross-section of UK church life. However, the richness of the responses, and the emergence of some clear patterns from the questionnaire results at least, suggests that there is **plenty of scope for further research on the experience of discipleship through the Covid-19 pandemic.**
- **Much will have changed since the survey was undertaken** in July 2020, and the focus groups in November of that year. At that point, many respondents appear to have been at a point of personal transition: at least a third felt that God was calling them into something new or different; questions about future direction were the most common single type of question asked of God, or about God. How might this be different a year on?
- Overall, the survey sample suggested a **remarkable degree of resilience** amongst Christians during the pandemic, for all the genuine struggles that our respondents encountered. That said, those who were struggling badly as a result of Covid-19 and/r lockdown may be considerably less likely to have the energy to participate in a survey of this kind. As a result the survey may well **not be fully representative** of Christian experience.
- A clear thread running through many of the responses concerned the **strength derived from a rhythm of personal prayer, worship and study** whilst churches were closed for public worship. For respondents who were not church leaders, **putting faith into practice** through community engagement had also frequently made them feel alive as a Christian. However, the relationship between personal resilience and a regular pattern of worship and service is more difficult to untangle – did the former enable the latter, or vice-versa?
- Despite the ways in which respondents had managed to develop or sustain a spiritually enriching pattern of personal practice, the **importance of the communal, relational dimension of worship, fellowship and mission** was strongly underlined in comments on what had been most missed during the pandemic. It was widely felt that this was easily lost amidst the demands of previous patterns of church life.
- **Some themes were remarkable by their comparative absence.** For example, the need for (or expectation of) religious revival or spiritual renewal was mentioned by only a minority of respondents. There was also relatively little critique (and a remarkable amount of forbearance) concerning limitations on freedom of worship and personal movement. This was not, by and large, a highly libertarian sample of respondent angry at the removal of their freedoms.

Questions and Recommendations

For Individuals

- Other research¹² suggests that UK Christians tend to think of their development as Christian disciples as being primarily their own responsibility (even as it may be important for this to be supported by a local church). To the extent that lockdown has provided opportunities to develop new rhythms of devotion or pursue new avenues of Christian outreach and service, how might these be maintained as the country seeks to return to some degree of normality. **How might you ensure that the positive insights and experiences of this challenging period are not lost?**
- **From the results presented here, which of the findings gives you most encouragement? Which offers most challenge for you?**

For Local Church Leaders

- The survey responses seem to indicate the importance and value of **helping people develop and maintain a regular rhythm of prayer, worship, study and service**. Prayer was particularly important in this respect. How can a local church be more intentional about helping people learn to pray and develop a rule of life?
- Given the importance of fellowship and the relational dimension of church, how can local churches **support people to step back into hospitable and relational patterns of life** after such a long period of comparative isolation? What will help rebuild strong local fellowships which are nevertheless not simply clubs for those who happen to like church?
- Patience appeared to be a key virtue which respondents felt needed most further development in them. (This has also been a key preoccupation of the Church at other times of crisis in history¹³). Accepting that patience is often only taught through life experience, **how can local churches nevertheless support individuals in the growth of character dispositions which are conducive to discipleship?** To what extent does the large body of recent research on character and virtue education help in that?
- Given that a significant minority of respondents felt that they were at a turning point in understanding what God was calling them to do, how can local churches make space for gentle exploration of new avenues of life, calling and service?
- Given that a significant number of respondents highlighted the need to focus **more on people than structures and buildings**, how can local churches keep relationships central, whilst keeping in place sufficient structure to ensure that things work smoothly, without the whole burden of administration falling upon just a few key people? How can buildings and structures enable?

- For many (though by no means all) respondents, lockdown provided opportunities for re-connection and refreshing, for a closer relationship with nature, a degree of solitude and stillness, or simply a change from existing rhythms of life. Given that many others will be tired by increased workload (at home, paid employment or voluntary service), **how do churches create a culture which strikes the right balance between refreshing and mission, activity and rest, and between releasing church members for discipleship in the world whilst guarding against the creation of passive, over-clericalised congregations?**

For Denominations

- Respondents who were ordained were noticeably more likely to feel that God’s purposes for them had changed during lockdown – and the responses suggested this was not purely a temporary change of role or daily working pattern as a result of lockdown. How best can denominations support clergy to navigate this new territory?
- Regarding lessons for the church, a major theme was **the need to spend more time in mission, less time in administration**. How can we structure the life of local churches, circuits, districts and networks, so that the essential administration is done, *and* people are released for mission?
- A further more specific issue concerns the **spiritual and emotional wellbeing of clergy** as a result of the pandemic. It was particularly striking how several members of the ‘ordained’ focus group voiced struggled to maintain a personal rhythm of prayer – either before or during lockdown (though with a small sample this may have been coincidental?). How can local church leaders be supported to carve out the time and space so badly needed for prayer and reflection, but also to maintain an appropriate focus on mission?

For Future Research

- Whilst the overall response rate was disappointing, the research questions themselves generated some rich reflection, even in the short answer format. The questions in Appendix 1 are offered as a resource to others wishing to explore the experience of discipleship during and after the pandemic. You are free to use them, but please acknowledge the original source (and if you could share your results with us, this would be much appreciated).
- The research questions are most likely to be of value if used with a defined population – for example, across a congregation, a diocese/district or a local area. There may be a particular need to be proactive about recruiting groups which tend to be under-represented in the Church – for example, the very youngest and oldest, Black and Minority ethnic communities, people on the fringes of church, and communities with low levels of educational attainment. This may also require a different method of delivery (i.e., not necessarily an online survey, but some facilitated conversations).
- On a practical note, the research is likely to be more effective with some dedicated, paid staff time allocated to it and careful timing to avoid holiday periods. Running the survey through social media is only advised if the research already has a strong social media profile and network.

Appendix 1: The Questions

| 10 questions on discipleship during the Covid-19 crisis | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <i>(Numbers refer to the order in which questions were asked in the electronic survey. Question 1, which does not appear here, simply asked participants to indicate they were 18 or over and gave consent)</i> | | | |
| | Head (Cognitive) | Heart (Affective) | Hands (Behavioural) |
| 'Breakthroughs' – i.e., ways in which discipleship has developed (mainly but not always experienced as positive) | 4. Has your understanding of God's <i>purposes for you</i> changed during the crisis? <i>Yes/no. If yes, please tell us know. A short phrase or sentence is enough</i> | 2. What has most brought you strength as a Christian during this crisis? Please tell us who or what it is, and why. <i>(Could be anything: a particular hymn/song, Bible passage, poem, experience of God, support from a Christian friend, family member or church, or something else). Please tell us what it is, and why. (Please give brief details).</i> | 3. Of all the ways you've been able to live out faith during lockdown, which has made you feel most alive as a Christian? <i>(Give your gut response in a short phrase or sentence).</i> |
| 'Challenges' – i.e., the struggles, hurdles and obstacles encountered (mainly but not always experienced as negative – although with the rider that challenges are often formative in themselves) | 6. What <i>questions</i> have you asked God (or about God or your faith) during this crisis? | 7. This crisis has been hard for most people one way or the other. Which aspect of it has felt hardest for you? | 5. Thinking about all the ways you normally practice your faith in a typical week... Which aspect have you <i>most struggled to keep up</i> during this crisis? Which have you <i>missed</i> the most? |
| 'Lessons' or 'Next Steps' – i.e., individuals' discernment of the agenda for their spiritual formation moving forward, as a result of all this | 10. What do you think are the main <i>lessons</i> from this crisis... For the <i>Christian Churches</i> ? For the <i>world as a whole</i> ? | 9. Has this crisis highlighted any Christian quality or virtue which <i>needs further developing in you</i> ? Which one, and why? | 8. What new habit, activity or practice have you <i>started</i> during lockdown (as an expression of your Christian faith) which you would like to <i>keep doing in the future</i> ? |
| Summary question (multi-choice) | 11. As a result of the crisis, would you say that your trust in God has strengthened, weakened or remained about the same? <i>Why? (closed answer options of: strengthened/about the same/weakened, with an option to comment on answer)</i> | | |

Appendix 2: Devising the Questions

To maximise the response rate to an open-ended answer survey, it was important to keep the number of questions to what most people would find manageable in ten minutes. But how far is it possible to explore a life of discipleship comprehensively in less than a dozen questions?

In one sense, this is of course impossible. It was therefore necessary to find a framework which would take the survey some of the way. Writers on discipleship and education have often thought in terms of a three-dimensional understanding of development: cognitive, affective and behavioural (or ‘head, heart and hands’). Not only does this have some foundation in Christian thought (we are to love the Lord our God with our heart, mind, soul and strength); it also has a solid basis in educational theory.

From this starting-point, some further assistance was provided by a large-scale review of scales and conceptual frameworks for the measurement of religiosity, rooted in a range of theological, missional and psychological literature. This identified six different dimensions of faith and practice:

| Head (cognitive) | | Heart (affective) | | Hands (behavioural) | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Beliefs, including... | Values, including... | Dispositions (or virtues), including... | Experience, including... | Behaviour, including... | Fruit, including... |
| ‘Believe that’ and ‘Believe in’ | Priorities and ethical choices | The manner in which we believe, practice, etc. | Feelings and Experiential encounter | ‘Practices’ – and ‘Spiritual Disciplines’ | Results in our own lives and wider social impact |

Some sociologists, philosophers and psychologists of religion would assert that the ‘fruit’ is ‘merely’ the outcome of our discipleship rather than an intrinsic component of it. However, from a more theological perspective, the Bible frequently challenges the idea that there can be genuine holiness without some practical outworking in the world; otherwise religiosity becomes purely a matter of intellectual re-ordering, personal ritual practice or self-management.

The research also aimed to explore three different aspects of discipleship:

- Reflection on the **breakthroughs** participants might have experienced (i.e., areas of growth, fruitfulness or simple perseverance)
- Reflection on the **challenges** or obstacles one might have encountered
- Reflection on possible **next steps** for the future

Exploring these questions within the ‘head, heart and hands’ framework generated nine broad areas of questioning which then generated the specific questions given in Appendix 1. (More explanation of the precise wording/focus of these questions is given in a fuller report on findings, available on request). A tenth question asked participants to indicate whether, overall, their faith and strengthened, weakened or remained about the same during the crisis, which echoed – and enabled comparison with - several other surveys.¹⁵

Appendix 3: The Research Process

The research method was experimental. Since we wanted to find out about *experiences*, it was felt that open-ended questions were better than closed answer questions. However, social distancing also prevented setting up large numbers of face to face interviews or focus groups (our recent experience of this and other projects suggests that many people are still reluctant to participate in interviews over Zoom or equivalent). Yet since the large-scale move online during lockdown, it was decided to use an electronic short-answer survey. For this, we used the SmartSurvey package.

Online surveys pose several challenges: unless one is targeting a particular group of people, it is very hard to claim that the results are ‘representative’ of any particular demographic. With churches closed for public worship, we could not ask congregations to complete the survey as part of the service (as we did with the 2016 *What Helps Disciples Grow?* research, for example). Instead, it was necessary to find participants via existing contacts; for example, through Saltley Trust’s own mailing list, through wider colleagues and contacts and their networks, through Facebook and Twitter. Yet this posed its own difficulties. There is good evidence that electronic surveys tend to miss those who have least access to (or familiarity with) technology – including the oldest and poorest demographics. This relates as much to how the survey is publicised as to whether people feel confident about completing the survey itself. There is also some evidence that people behave differently online as compared to off-line. An attempt to generate a separate body of data via Facebook and Twitter conversation largely failed – probably due to the fact that my own social media networks are relatively small. However, for a well-networked researcher, this remains a method of great promise, albeit one with its own methodological challenges.¹⁶

The decision to use an open-ended answer format also had a number of advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage was that we could hear participants’ own words, rather than simply how they responded to our words. The main disadvantage was that open-ended answer surveys tend to get a lower response rate than closed answer/tick box questions, and this may indeed have affected the number of responses adversely.

Open-ended answers also generate several problems of interpretation. In order to interpret the results, the survey answers were coded and then grouped into themes. This is inevitably a subjective process. Had there been sufficient research capacity, it may have been more rigorous to invite at least two people to code the responses, and compare their findings. That said, coding short answers of a single phrase or sentence is considerably less complex than coding longer (interview or focus group) conversations, and mostly respondents answered in fairly direct/straightforward terms.

In order to present the results, there has to be some way of indicating which themes were more prominent than others. The aggregation of qualitative answers into quantitative data (i.e., indicating which themes or answers were most popular using numbers) is something that most social researchers have to do at some point. Not giving any indication of which themes were more common than others would be unsatisfactory. However, the approach is not without its methodological difficulties: does it over-simplify something that is actually rather rich and complex? Do the numbers give a misleading veneer of objectivity to patterns which have been discerned

rather subjectively? As a result, in this report I have tried to avoid the use of graphs to represent the results, except where the questions required a closed answer response.

Methodologically, the two focus group conversations were more straightforward, albeit that it was novel for most participants to take part in research via Zoom. In the event, most participants appeared to feel comfortable with the format, and in any case there was little prospect of taking an alternative approach to focus groups during 2020. The lack of a younger adult focus group was regrettable. This was primarily due to difficulties coordinating participants' availability, and in hindsight it may have been better to try holding a series of individual interviews with younger participants.

Notes

¹ H. Schuman and J. Scott, 'Generations and collective memories', *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989), pp. 359-81; June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* (Buckingham 2002).

² See the *Coronavirus, Church and You* research conducted by Leslie J. Francis, Andrew Village and Christopher Lewis – e.g., <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/coronavirus-church-and-you/survey-results/> [accessed 27 May 2021].

³ A round-up of the earliest results for the UK can be found in the May 2020 edition of *British Religion in Numbers*: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/2020/06/> [accessed 27 May 2021]. Further global research has been undertaken by the Pew Forum: <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/> [accessed 27 May 2020].

⁴ Chris Baker and Adam Dinham, *Keeping the Faith: Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic* (All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, 2020).

⁵ *Hope beyond Church: Church Survey Results* (All Churches' Trust, 2020).

⁶ *Churches, Covid-19 and Communities: Experiences, Needs and Supporting Recovery* (Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, University of York, 2021).

⁷ On the wellbeing of US evangelical Christians see: Barna Group, *A Year Out: How Covid-19 has impacted practising Christians* (Barna Group, 18 March 2021) [<https://www.barna.com/research/a-year-out/>] [accessed 27 May 2021]. On personal devotional habits and practices, see: Evangelical Alliance, *Changing Church: Autumn Survey – Discipleship, Evangelism and Community Engagement* (Evangelical Alliance, <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Changing-church-autumn-survey-discipleship-evangelism-and-community-engagement.pdf>) (Evangelical Alliance, London, 2021) [accessed 27 May 2021]; and for the US context Lifeway Research, *Protestant Churchgoers' Views on Church Participation during Covid-19* (Lifeway Research, 2021) [<https://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Churchgoers-Feb-2021-Report-3.pdf>, accessed 27 May 2021].

⁸ Francis and Village, *Coronavirus, Church and You*, p. 4. Compare also the results of the international Pew Forum Global Attitudes survey in summer 2020, which found that only 14% of Britons thought that the pandemic had strengthened the religious faith of their country, compared to 8% who thought it had become weaker and 61% who thought it was largely unchanged. This was roughly at the median for the thirteen developed countries surveyed in the study (<https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/>). In the same survey, a slightly higher percentage (10%) said their faith had become stronger, compared to 4% saying it had become weaker. 81% said their religious faith was largely unchanged.

⁹ Simon Foster, *What Helps Disciples Grow?* (St Peter's Saltley Trust, Birmingham, 2016); Leslie Francis, David Lankshear, Simon Foster and Ian Jones, 'What Helps Christians Grow? An Exploratory Study Distinguishing among Four Distinctive Pathways', *Pastoral Psychology* 68 (2019), pp. 379-92.

¹⁰ Simon Foster, Ian Jones, Heather Buckingham and Elizabeth Bramley, *Christians in Practice: Connecting Discipleship and Community Engagement* (St Peter's Saltley Trust/Church Urban Fund, 2018).

¹¹ For comparison, Francis and Village's *Coronavirus, Church and You* survey found a complex array of attitudes to buildings: 67% of their respondents felt that church buildings were an important witness to the community; 29% of their respondents felt that the church building was personally important in their own faith; 25% felt that other people may lose faith in church buildings were closed; 33% felt that they needed a church building in order to fully express their faith. 36% felt that the closure of church buildings had forced the Church to focus on its proper priorities; 7% felt that the crisis had demonstrated that church buildings were burdensome (Francis and Village, *Coronavirus, Church and You*, p. 17).

¹² Foster, *What Helps Disciples Grow?*, p. 6. 94% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that their Christian growth was their own responsibility, compared to 37% believing it was their church's responsibility.

¹³ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids MI, 2016).

¹⁴ This framework, as expressed here, is my own, but owes much to several sources: Jeff Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflections on Adult Christian Education* (Gracewing, 2000), pp. 5-6; M. Cornwall, S.L. Albrecht, P.H. Cunningham and B.L. Pitcher, 'The Dimensions of Religiosity: A Conceptual Model with an Empirical Test', *Review of Religious Research* 27 (1986), pp. 226-244; Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning* (Carlisle: Langham, 2014) ; and Cris Rogers, *Making Disciples* (Essential Christian, 2018).

¹⁵ See 2020's Pew Forum research (<https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/>) and the *Coronavirus, Church and You* survey developed by Leslie Francis and Andrew Village (p. 4).

¹⁶ Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase, *The Sage Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (Sage, London, 2017).
