

GENERAL SYNOD 2022
FEEDBACK FROM BREAKOUT GROUPS
THURSDAY 9 JUNE 2022

SESSION 2 - STANDING COMMITTEE: PRESENTATIONS ON EXAMPLES OF CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Questions:

1. *What has encouraged you in church life in the last two years?*
2. *What have you found challenging in church life in the last two years?*
3. *What have you learned and what will you take forward from the last two years?*

Table 1

Q1:

1. Pulling together – nucleus – but heart still beating. Encouraging each other, strengthening.
2. Online worship, getting to know people – missional aspects, distant worshippers.
3. Resourcefulness – stepping into new roles. “Ask for forgiveness, rather than permission”.
4. Resilience – despite change. “Faith is real”.

Q2:

1. Maintaining the beating heart of the congregation – pressure on small group (especially technical skills).
2. Difficult for some people to access online worship – children/young people, technically challenged.
3. Pivoting worship into different forms.
4. Workload and mental health for clergy and lay readers; anger, frustration.
5. Church income.
6. Bereavement – problems of losing loved ones.

Q3:

1. Alternative formats for worship.
2. How to approach people reluctant to volunteer.
3. How to engage children/young people better.
4. Online worship techniques.
5. Recognising and identifying mental health issues, rest and time off, being kind to others.
6. Supporting bereavement and loss better.
7. Electronic giving.

Table 2

Q1:

1. That it accelerated, or made possible, a church that was present online, catching up with the rest of society.
2. That so many felt able to engage with our online offerings - even from far-afield or abroad.
3. The leadership which has given people confidence in a time of change and uncertainty.
4. The positive witness of a caring congregation.
5. That it enabled new gifts/people to come to the fore in church life.
6. That it enabled the housebound to join in.
7. That there was a desire, even a determination, to come back to church.

Q2:

1. Learning to do online worship and to do it well.
2. Awareness of those who can't make use of IT - perhaps the elderly, the disadvantaged, those with disabilities.
3. Those (often younger adults) who didn't find online church something that nourished them, and dropped away.
4. The anger felt by some younger adults about the impact of restrictions on their lives, and those of the disadvantaged, and how the church was felt to collude rather than speaking up for them.
5. Having to deal with so many issues, sometimes on one's own.
6. The desire of some people simply to "get back to normal".
7. Coping with Covid funerals and exclusion from care homes.

Q3:

1. A determination to live life from a better place, being more realistic about the time given to ministry.
2. Realising the divisions in society regarding access to it and not leaving people behind.
3. How important it is to be part of a fellowship.
4. More careful use of car.
5. Being clear about our priorities as church - is it the sanctity of life or money?

Table 3

Q1:

1. One church's choir started a Singing Together via Zoom – which encouraged others to join them.
2. Wednesday Evening Prayer was started and still continues.
3. Cathedral changed all their service times because of Covid – which became an opportunity as had Covid not come along, the times probably would never have

changed. The new times continue and now people are able to attend as the time fits in with the underground train service schedule.

4. Vestry meetings held on Zoom which has got more people volunteering as they don't have to travel after dark.
5. Creating new phone contact groups/one church already had this so it continued.
6. One church found financial giving had increased by 8%
7. Covid lockdown disrupted the "status quo", from which grew food shopping for neighbours increasing to a much wider scheme leading to a food bank being created.
8. The hour a day exercise and once a week shopping became a helpful discipline – and weight loss!
9. Live streaming of services has created an asset and especially when people link in from all parts of the country.

Q2:

1. Not having face-to-face, in-person, meeting especially with those in need – one church's rector said he found that hard (as told by a parishioner).
2. One person talked of the 'extreme stress clergy were under' feeling they could not do their pastoral work and with people needing personal contact.
3. Lack of pastoral care as one group of churches have no full or part time priest – just retired clergy.
4. A number of people who were volunteering have given up and not returned – so far.
5. Some people apparently didn't want to take up a place at a service when numbers were restricted and having to book a seat was challenging because it meant some people had to be turned away. This was particularly hard when people had to be turned away at Christmas.
6. Loss of 'community' (ie coming together) – was a common challenge.

Q3:

1. One church developed 'mission and ministry' and has become the most active congregation in the area – so that will be on-going.
2. Online services will continue.
3. Cathedral's new times will continue (see above).
4. Zoom meetings etc will continue because it means people can join in who would have had to go out in the dark.
5. Continuing to help people in need with food, aiding poverty in a 'welcoming way'.
6. Shorter services and shorter sermons which happened because of online worship will continue – "brevity a good thing as with long services people stop listening". "Audio matters more than video"
7. Continuing the hour a day walk whenever possible – which has meant "communing with nature" a great deal over the 2 years which has helped spiritually. Watching the seasons change and thanking Creator God for even the small things in nature which meant and mean so much.

Table 4

Q1:

1. Shorter vestry meetings!
2. Congregations kept going
3. Ease of catching up / “travelling” a diocese to visit different places online.
4. People coming back to church to pray (when they saw church was being closed).
5. New relationships / contacts with people stuck at home.

Q2:

1. Work / life balance more difficult.
2. Sustaining ministry amid change.
3. Changing habits / decreased regularity of attendance.
4. Collective trauma:
 - we’ve all been through one
 - we don’t know the trauma anyone else has been through: isolated experience.
 - some may not recognise even now that they have been through a trauma because there is no clear end to the pandemic.
 - there is likely to be a mental health reckoning in the offing – and in some contexts eg schools, it is already clearly manifest.

Q3:

1. We **can** make church participation possible for those who can’t easily come to church! ...opportunities we had missed for too long.
2. Change can happen!
3. Ways of relating to & empathy for people who are “locked down” all the time.
4. Working together / caring for one another.

Table 5

Q1:

1. The way we reached out to others in worship and met each other – even for the first time.
2. The way in which the Church learned to care for those in need both in church community and beyond.
3. Awareness of the Province (provincial service).
4. Bringing people living remotely together.
5. The way we learned to care widely.

Q2:

1. People who have chosen to stay away and stay online.
2. Children’s work.
3. Pastoral work/funerals.
4. Loneliness and feeling cut off.

5. Taking “bookings” for church attendance.

Q3:

1. Moving hybrid forward.
2. The Eucharist need not be central.
3. Continue to build on links made at distances.

Table 6

Q2:

1. New job.
2. Coping with vacancies.
3. Government interference with spiritual life.
4. Reduced congregation numbers.

Q3:

1. Church was not prepared to reach out to people.
2. Long distance learning proved valuable and is worth developing.
3. Wider participation / re-engagement via Zoom services.

Table 7

Q1:

1. Enabled a lot of people to appreciate what we take for granted.
2. We were pleased and often surprised how many people/vestries stepped up.
3. We realised how much we needed people and valued chats outside.

Q2:

1. We found lots challenging eg new parish in lockdown, too much time and unforeseen physical stress, too much time on computer.
2. Different opinions on Liturgy on Zoom or live streamed or even audio.
3. Biggest challenge for those who lost someone, had someone in care, arranged a funeral or visited in hospital.

Q3:

1. Shared prayer worked.
2. Could we have kept churches open?
3. There will be another pandemic, have we learned lessons?
4. We found out there is a lot we don't control and we are out of our depth.

Table 8

Q1:

1. Faithfulness of congregations:
 - actually using materials;
 - faithfully praying at home.

2. Accessibility of Zoom:
 - why had we not done this before;
 - can still be part of church;
 - funding for iPads and how to use them.
3. People stepped up:
 - new people came forward;
 - people finding new ways to serve;
 - ingenuity.
4. People not as adverse to change as we thought.
5. People's giving held up.
6. Doing things we had only dreamed of before.
7. Relationships that had sprung up between people.
8. Telephone service and pastoral care.
9. More effective pastoral care.

Q2:

1. Zoomed out.
2. Losing weekend.
3. Celebrating Eucharist alone.
4. Bereavement, death/dying, not able to do properly.
5. Losing more people than usual.
6. Keep food bank going.
7. Challenge to do pastoral care.
8. Exhaustion/confusion.

Q3:

1. How to use technology.
2. Realisation that old normal wasn't great.
3. Opening up different balances of power in church.
4. Thinking creatively.
5. Keep the freedom!
6. Cut through busyness.
7. Reaffirmation that presence is important.

Table 9

Q1:

1. Members of congregation stepped up to undertake pastoral care responsibilities.
2. In some charges there hadn't been a pastoral care team prior to covid.
3. Covid allowed a new ministry a bit of time to get 'feet under the table' in a way that would not have been available.
4. Brought people together in very different ways. On line, streaming etc.

5. Few masses meant more imagination required in order to keep congregations together.
6. Technological skills were developed.

Q2:

1. No music. No singing. Not getting together
2. Responsibility for congregations as the restrictions eased!
3. Concern around limited spiritual growth.

Q3:

1. Continue with some of the online services. Continue with the pastoral care.
2. Consider how to reach housebound without access to technology.
3. Extend current link.
4. Continue extending technological skills.

Table 10

Q1:

1. Online worship services really appreciated.
2. iPads from Connecting Scotland really useful and appreciated.
3. Zoom meetings created more connections and consultations within the community, worked well.
4. More people “came” to worship services.
5. Daily offices online brought people into this service for the first time.
6. Small communities survived very well indeed.
7. One new service was Café in the Park, which took off and continues.
8. People felt they’d got to know each other much better.

Q2:

1. Really missed being in-person, no church social life. And missed the after-service coffee time.
2. It seemed much harder to come out from lockdown than to go in.
3. For some – fear of returning to in-person meeting. Really difficult for those with mental and emotional problems.
4. But most people really happy to be back together.
5. ?Online worship -> not returning to church. Need to be not too good at quality online services which might have led to non-returning, so counterproductive in the long-term.
6. Debate about online communion and how useful that has been.
7. The prayer provided for those not able to take communion during the service was much appreciated.

Q3:

1. People found that they loved the church more than they had realised.
2. There was a feeling of needing to be in church in person.

3. The mute button in meetings was very welcome!
4. "Virtual" is actually real!
5. Readings sent out in advance to all members continues to those not coming to services.
6. New readers and intercessors started post-lockdown.
7. Adaptable thinking developed. Eg starting online worship in 1st 3 weeks of lockdown had more change and movement than had ever been imagined! Therefore change is possible...

Table 11

Q1:

1. Speed, communicating online.
2. Reaching where we couldn't reach – including round the world.
3. Increasing/new church members.
4. Outdoor ministry.
5. Eco – online business meetings.

Q2:

1. No communion/theology of communion by proxy/in one kind.
2. "Extra" restrictions on churches (more limits than a cinema).
3. Some people lost faith/stopped attending church/not back in our church/attending less frequently (so smaller weekly congregation).
4. People have less resilience – more negativity/less ability to cope.

Q3:

1. Technical skills (but how to keep up/volunteers to do the tech).
2. Importance of personal faith/discipleship/rooted commitment/discipline.
3. When the prop of Sunday church goes ...
4. Thinking outside the box/flexibly – new ways of mission/community.
5. Easier for people to come to us outside church!
6. Need for resilience – where is the support? Need to nurture one another.

Table 12

Q1:

1. Resilience and creativity of people to cope with changes.
2. Lot more pastoral care work - initiated by laity, not necessarily clergy.
3. Re-evaluating and re-planning.
4. Holding onto to faith, but re-thinking.
5. Re-creating communities.

Q2:

1. People not returning - out of the habit - congregations down by 1/2, 1/3, etc.

2. Lack of stamina – exhausted.
3. Inability to meet face-to-face. Online has its limits.
4. Volunteers no longer want to back to same jobs post lockdown
5. “Why go to church physically while online is easier?”

Q3:

1. Importance of community, relationship, pastoral care - need to grow community again.
2. How to get own people back - keep contact.
3. Used to adversity.
4. Online Morning Prayer had built a congregation.
5. Time of re-evaluation.
6. Tweeted psalm every morning open as soon as possible; young people coming in and sitting.
7. What are responses of faith - links.
8. What is church offering - naming stuff that is real.

Table 13

Q1:

1. Still here! Provincial Sunday service helpful.
2. Church more visible and outgoing to community.
3. Weekly phone calls from pastoral groups to folk in congregation.
4. Morning prayer by Zoom.
5. Continuing home communions.
6. Don't need to be in the building to be a church community.
7. People willing to volunteer.

Q2:

1. Technophobes unwilling to try Zoom.
2. Danger of losing sense of community.
3. Danger of thinking that getting back to normal means getting back to things as they were!
4. How to help people who may no longer be able to come to church due to illness (or petrol prices!).
5. Technical issues.
6. People “dropping out”. Some fearful about getting back.
7. Stupid advice eg about time wiping down pews.

Q3:

1. Importance of taking time for face to face conversations (Zoom not always ideal).
2. Cost benefits of not having to travel.

Table 14

Q1:

1. Building sense of community by phone/online.
2. Enabling/accelerating the process of change.
3. Enabling people who haven't been able to be at church to take a full and equal part in worship/church life.

Q2:

1. It was a challenge to continue a sacramental ministry.
2. Exhaustion because trying to do too much.
3. Responding to the different responses to Covid (fears, etc).
4. For curates it was not a proper/normal curacy.

Q3:

1. Will online worship survive – what is the hybrid future?
2. In Argyll it has enabled (online) communication.
3. It has raised some interesting theological issues about being church and sacramental theology.

Table 15

Q1:

1. The adaptability and resilience of the congregations; larger congregations, and drawing in people from community.
2. Increased pastoral work by congregational members.
3. Engagement with wider community.
4. Increased technology means younger people can live and work remotely, leading to younger people joining rural churches.
5. Online worship, Bible studies and meetings.
6. Increase in online giving (bank transfers, direct debits etc)

Q2:

1. Dealing with people's emotions – the church is seen as safe space in which to let off emotions – anger, frustration, grief.
2. Balancing different viewpoints.
3. People not coming back to church. Other things replacing the 'church slot'.
4. Processing trauma – dealing with the community PTSD. Fear of ongoing existence of Covid-19.
5. Fatigue, especially in clergy.
6. Difficulty in getting to know people who have joined church online.
7. Funerals and loss – delayed grieving process.

Table 16

Q1:

1. Adaptability of congregations – the speed with which they embraced change, especially technology.
2. The church kept us all connected.
3. Some have left / not come back, but we are left with really dedicated, committed people who have reflected deeply on their faith and discipleship through pandemic – often more sacramental because they realised the hunger when they didn't receive communion.
4. Churches feel really alive right now.
5. The amount of outreach that has been possible online.

Q2:

1. Difficult communication from 'centre' as questions / issues were changing so fast.
2. Isolation – for those who were new in post.
3. Difficult to do pastoral calls, especially if you were new in post.
4. Coming out of pandemic has often been harder as people coming out at different speeds, with different fears / expectations.
5. Trauma of the pandemic.
6. Funerals were really hard to conduct.
7. Preaching when looking at people in masks – hard to gauge especially for stories, so sermons had to be changed.

Q3:

1. The need to grab opportunities as they come along.
2. We can survive anything ... and thrive.
3. We can make a stand as a church, holding fast together and in faith.
4. Still more reflection is needed.

Table 17

Q1:

1. One person suggested 'nothing' is encouraging—that it's hard to find encouragement in this situation. This person felt 'stuck' and expressed a feeling that online services are simply not adequate.
2. Others found some encouragement in:
 - Encountering people who were kind and mindful of the needs of others
 - The fact that people kept coming to church despite adversity and challenge
 - Getting to know members of the congregation through 'long and deep' conversations (as opposed to quick exchanges at the end of the service)
 - Finding new skills in communicating and using technology
 - An appreciation of 'what we have'—a sense of gratitude.

Q2:

1. Members of the group expressed experiencing the following challenges in church life:
 - Connecting with elderly people using technology
 - Connecting with those who had no ability to access online content
 - Isolation—missing contact with people and the fact that EVERYthing was online
 - Being simply a ‘viewer’ of worship
 - Finding focus
 - The lack of corporate singing and the ‘noise’ of meeting together
 - Tiredness and the difficulty of going back to normal and finding motivation to re-engage.

Q3:

1. Members of the group intend to take forward the following learning points from the last two years:
 - The development and delivery of asynchronous content
 - Addressing a change in relationships and priorities
 - Developing an appreciation for those who are isolated
 - Recognising the various skills people have and can contribute to the life of the church
 - Recognising the power of online content to influence
 - Developing an increased adaptability and awareness of context
 - An openness to welcoming new people with different needs and desires to meet ‘in person’
 - Living by the motto ‘Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater’.

Table 18**Q1:**

1. People’s preparedness to try things.
2. Speed of being able to adapt to online.
3. Staying online/hybrid.
4. Generosity of people.
5. Welcome team introduced when stewards were needed has remained in place with a much better welcome than before COVID.
6. Skills of people.
7. Finding a place to share existing gifts that had not been obvious/used/offered before.
8. Virtual toe in the church’s door.
9. New view of church.
10. Daily offices via zoom.
11. Heart for prayer and people.

12. Engaging in conversations and with the conversations outside of the church.
13. Forced to prove that the church is not the building.
14. That 'we' still exist.

Q2:

1. Not able to say goodbye.
2. Not able to mark transitions/life events etc.
3. Wide variety of beliefs/opinions on what was 'safe'.
4. Different levels of cautious and managing those in a small congregation.
5. Recovering the 'habit' of going to church.
6. How to include all (digital poverty/exclusion etc).
7. Balancing time/self and well-being.
8. New ministry - getting to know people.
9. Not meeting everyone.
10. Vacancy/retiral - pastoral work/lay training/experience.
11. People waiting to try to get back to 'normal'.
12. People without access to IT couldn't get church.
13. Loss of congregational numbers.
14. Some have stayed with online only.
15. Vacancy during lockdowns.
16. Bringing people back in to church.
17. Losses to the wider community.
18. Loss of mixed community.
19. Different rates of vaccination meant an initial inequality in those who felt safer coming back to church/being in church.
20. Quick speed of changes.
21. Levels of anxiety.

Table 19

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Online Group 1

Q1:

1. Rural setting – appreciation of God in creation.
2. As Church we survived!
3. Lots of people threw themselves into volunteering and keeping some sort of show on the road and are continuing to do so. They are empowered!
4. We learned how to do Church online – the elderly, at risk and infirm were able to join in and be included.
5. Taken 'services' into care homes.
6. Can see people online and in church – from all over.

7. Online services by the SEC.
8. Building of community with pastoral teams and church buddying to keep in contact by phone or email. People know each other better. Conversations have gone deeper.
9. Opportunities for creativity, imagination and flexibility.
10. Gain in members!
11. Good for priests to be allowed to enter their charge churches all through lockdown in order to preside at the Eucharist and Zoom from the building. Helped hold community together and keep the church 'feeling holy'.
12. Visiting the sick and supporting the isolating; distributing palm crosses etc

Q2:

1. Expectation that we will go back to normal – meaning just as things were before!
2. Temptation to make online worship a performance (entertainment/perfectionism).
3. Struggling because of lack of expertise for online Church.
4. Distressing conducting funerals with so few – also unable to conduct pastoral visits in person.
5. Missing fellowship over refreshments after services.
6. Couldn't do practical stuff like Messy Church (though some things online were excellent – Children's Chapel).
7. Missing children and adults now we are back to church. Some have changed their life priorities.

Q3:

1. Learning what was important and still made "church" when so much was stripped away.
2. New-found respect for communion – a forced 'fast'!
3. Resilience. People tried to find different ways of engaging with God and were pleasantly surprised!
4. Growth through the challenges. Empowerment. New piety.

Online Group 2

Q1:

1. Everyone agreed that adapting and improvising was a great encouragement.
2. It was also noted that congregations gathered round to 'muck in' as best as they could.
3. Those churches in vacancy faced very different challenges to which were faced with great composure.
4. People were encouraged by the availability to join in and experience services across the world through the benefit of the internet.
5. The most surprising point made was that in some cases giving actually increased.

Q2:

1. Lack of personal contact was a great challenge.

2. General maintenance of church buildings was also a hurdle to keep a grip on.
3. The great challenge to many was the uncertainty as to when the very first lock-down would end, and that the knock-on from this was a lack of structure of where we were in any one week as each day morphed into another.

Q3:

No time to be more comprehensive with this question, but it was agreed that both two and three dimensional worship have equal value.