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RELIGIONS IN A TIME OF CRISIS: LESSONS FOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

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Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, religious leaders and institutions sought to meet the needs of their members and the wider society; as well as to play a civic and public role through promoting public health measures including social distancing, masking, and vaccinations.

The pandemic experience appears to have contributed to changes in religious practice in the long-term, with declines in in-person practice among Christian groups, especially Catholics in the Republic of Ireland. Monthly or more religious attendance in the Republic declined from 45% to 35% (European Social Survey, 2018 and 2023-24); while in Northern Ireland, pre and post-pandemic Life and Times surveys show monthly or more attendance holding steady for Protestants at about 45% and declining slightly among Catholics from about 45% to around 40%. At the same time, the pandemic has confirmed religions' continued significant – but declining – public role in its relationships with governments and policymakers. The Covid-19 pandemic holds lessons for religious leaders and institutions in terms of serving their own communities and the wider society; and for playing civic and public roles.

The Common Good

Throughout the pandemic, the Christian churches and other religious groups emphasized prioritizing the common good, a term that was used widely in both Catholic and Protestant discourses. This positioned religious leaders and institutions as reasonable and civic minded actors.

Official representatives of religions supported social distancing, masking, limitations on

movement, and vaccinations. They did not frame government restrictions in terms of violations of religious freedom. Perhaps surprisingly, Christian leaders and institutions did not primarily rely on theological arguments to support their positions. In contrast, documents produced by the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland were more likely to draw on theological discourses in support of their positions.

Religious groups should:

- Reflect on how their discourses during the pandemic positioned religious institutions as public actors.
- Christian groups should reflect on to what extent the 'common good' is a secular concept and/or whether it can be developed as a theological discourse, enabling Christians to have a more distinctive civic voice.

Inter-Faith – not just Inter-Church – Cooperation

During the pandemic, official representatives of religions met with governments and policymakers, north and south. In Northern Ireland, the Executive established a dedicated Faith Forum, facilitated by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. Because of the Faith Forum, religious leaders in Northern Ireland felt policymakers were more open to listening to their concerns; while those in the Republic felt they were dictated to by the government.

Leaders from numerically smaller non-Christian groups were included in these meetings. However, their representatives felt that because church leaders met regularly through their own Christian networks, they came to meetings with pre-made decisions. Smaller faiths then had to accept those decisions. (Humanists did not report this concern). Church leaders, on the

other hand, saw themselves as senior partners who were leading by example and advocating for all.

While many religious groups were active in providing practical support to their own members and to the wider community, we found almost no evidence of increased inter-faith or even inter-church cooperation at grassroots levels.

“There were some meetings between the four main churches. I felt a bit betrayed. ... I felt like, ‘you had your discussions because you think you’re better than us’. That’s what it felt like.”

Female leader from a minority religion.

Religious groups (especially Christians) should:

- Ensure that larger Christian groups, through better communication, are supporting smaller religions by really listening to their concerns
- Consider how inter-faith and inter-church cooperation can be supported at grassroots levels (parish, congregation, mosque, etc.), especially for meeting people’s practical needs.

Digital Religious Options

The pandemic prompted almost all the island’s religious groups to create or increase their digital options for practising religion. This included initiating or improving the livestreaming of religious worship services; developing new digital options (such as online pilgrimages or prayer groups); and creating or maintaining connections through social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.). The numerically larger Christian groups had more resources available to initiate and develop

digital options. Protestants were more likely than Catholics to use digital options in multiple ways, i.e. utilising social media to foster supportive social connections among members.

Religious groups recognised that digital options could facilitate the religious practice of elderly and housebound people. But there was surprisingly little reflection on how digital options could facilitate the faith practices of younger generations, who have grown up influenced by the internet and other information technologies. Indeed, most religious groups’ digital options did not include the social platforms preferred by younger generations (Instagram, Snapchat, etc.).

“We were worried...but I was amazed that we had people in their 80s and 90s who were a little bit techy and were able to get on. So it was a minority of people who we weren’t able to help.”

Male Leader, Protestant

Once restrictions ended, some religious groups scaled back their online offerings. Christian leaders, especially Catholics and Presbyterians in Northern Ireland, reported that they felt online options were contributing to a decline in church attendance.

At the same time, religious leaders and institutions recognised that people increasingly live much of their lives online, and that the pandemic was an opportunity for religious groups to improve and increase their online options going forward.

Religious groups should:

- Continue to offer livestreaming, in recognition of its value for the elderly and housebound

- Develop a suite of digital religious options, better utilising social media to foster social and spiritual connections among members
- Invest in digital infrastructure and staff to support parishes, congregations, mosques, etc. in developing digital options
- Invest in training and support for members who struggle to access digital options
- Engage with young people about their preferences for blending in-person and digital religious practices.

Dying, Death and Bereavement

Religions provide resources, rituals and discourses to support people through death, dying and bereavement. Irish and Northern Irish cultures have long-standing and cherished death rituals, which were profoundly disrupted during the pandemic. Religious leaders also reported that providing pastoral care to the dying and bereaved was one of the most challenging and stressful aspects of their work during the pandemic.

Despite this, we found a surprising lack of theological reflection on dying, death and bereavement. Discourses focused on the practicalities of conducting funerals according to social distancing regulations.

Religious groups should:

- Consider whether or to what extent they have something distinctive to say about dying, death and bereavement; for example, by reflecting on theological virtues such as hope.

Pastoral Care and Training for Pastors

The pandemic was a time of heightened stress for religious leaders, whose ministries were challenged in new and unexpected ways. While

much of this burden fell on ordained leaders, non-ordained leaders also offered a high level of pastoral care for those who were struggling mentally, physically and spiritually.

Some religious groups came under increasing financial pressures, as tithes and offerings decreased.

The salaries of clergy and other staff were in some cases reduced; and/or difficult decisions around matters such as grouping parishes or closing church buildings came to the fore.

“It’s been left so much to the priests and there are very few volunteers to do things, they are feeling a lot of pressure. ... Some of the older volunteers ... [are] doing all sorts of things because they feel they have to do it because there is nobody to replace them and they know the priests can’t cope with more.”

Male Leader, Catholic

Religious groups should:

- Provide training and periods of retreat/sabbatical/respite for ordained and non-ordained leaders, including an emphasis on self-care and spiritual/emotional resilience
- Assist leaders in how to identify and encourage volunteers within their own faith communities
- Develop crisis management plans for future emergencies, which do not over-rely on ordained leaders, but rather take a whole-member approach to responding.

About the Research

This report is based on research conducted by Gladys Ganiel and Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill (2022-2025) as part of the Trans-Atlantic Platform/AHRC funded project, 'Religion in Societies Emerging from Covid-19' (project code AH/X001369/1).

The research focused on the Catholic Church, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, Irish Council of Churches, Muslims, and Humanists.

Methods included content analysis of 385 public documents produced by these groups during the pandemic as well as religious media sources (the Irish Catholic, Church of Ireland Gazette, Presbyterian Herald, Methodist Newsletter, and comparable web-based sources produced by Muslims and Humanists); 562 responses to online questionnaires of leaders and members, and interviews with 80 participants.

Further Reading

1. Ganiel, Gladys, Solange Lefebvre and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, eds. 2026. Special Issue: Religion and Covid-19, Journal of Religion in Europe, 19(1-2)
2. Ganiel, Gladys. 2026. Religious Discourses about COVID-19 Vaccination in Canada, Germany, Ireland/Northern Ireland, and Poland, Journal of Religion in Europe, 19(1-2): 148-175
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3. Ganiel, Gladys and Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill. 2024. Religion on the Island of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Religion, State and Society, 53(1): 4-24
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2369381>
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5. Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin, Solange Lefebvre and Gladys Ganiel. 2026. The Changing Role of Religion in Societies Emerging from COVID-19: Research Project Methodology, Bremen:
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She is author of six books and her articles have appeared in Religion, State and Society; Sociology Compass; The Review of Faith and International Affairs; and Sociology of Religion. She is co-editor, with Andrew J. Holmes, of The Oxford Handbook of Religion in Modern Ireland (2024). She has two forthcoming books, An Island of Faith? Religions and Change in Ireland, North and South (with Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill, Oxford University Press) and Christianity and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland (Cambridge Elements).

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Caoimhe's research interests lie in the field of Identity and Social Identity Theory. She has applied this to diverse topics, including Environmental Awareness and Public Behaviour, Sex Work, Ageing and Disability. Regarding sustainability, she has a particular interest in considering why people act in particularly environmentally responsible (or indeed irresponsible) ways.

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