

For Immediate Release (Monday 24 August 2020)

Offline and Online Religious Activity in the UK during Lockdown and Post-Lockdown

During the summer of 2020, a research team at Durham University have been exploring the spiritual life and religious activity of the UK through a tracking poll with Savanta ComRes. We have asked an online panel, properly representative of the UK's population, about their offline faith-related engagement prior to the lockdown back in March and their online faith-related engagement now as we shift from lockdown to whatever we call the post-lockdown period. We have focussed on six faith-related activities: prayer, meditation, corporate/organised worship, reflection on nature, choir, and yoga. We asked for the data to be broken down into age categories and UK regions/nations.

The research is ongoing but we are releasing three highlights from the research so far and Savanta ComRes will also be releasing the data tables for the survey results for July and August.

1. London is the UK's Capital of Faith.
2. Over 1 in 4 people in the UK have engaged regularly in online organised worship during lockdown
3. Half of the countries' young people (18-34) say that during the later lockdown they regularly engage in online faith-related activity including regular prayer and regular engagement with online worship.

Throughout the research findings, we are aware that some of the figures given contrast with those found in similar YouGov polling published recently by the Theos Think Tank. The figures in that poll are much lower for faith-related activity in general. However, our own figures can be compared with a number of other polls such as Youth For Christ's recent research on the Spirituality of Gen Z (<https://yfc.co.uk/gen-z-the-digital-generation/>), other polling from SavantaComRes for TearFund (https://www.tearfund.org/en/media/press_releases/many_brits_look_to_faith_during_lockdown/) and Christian Aid (<https://comresglobal.com/polls/spirituality-during-lockdown-christian-aid-poll/>), and Gladys Ganiel's research of hybrid church on the island of Ireland, *People Still Need Us* (<https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/resources/People-Still-Need-Us-May-2020.pdf>). The last piece of research is faith leader-based research rather than opinion polling and so we are aware that the tendency could be to overestimate the effect on online presence/increase in numbers.

However, we also note that the poll asked about a wide range of faith-related activity. Indeed, the overall activity does not suggest a focus on Christian practice but on spirituality as a whole. However, as Abby Day's research into poll findings and actual faith-practice found, the figures given may offer an aspirational answer from those polled rather than a factual answer: "I'd like people to think that I did" rather than "I did"? More work will need to be done from religious organisations' perspectives about how many people were attending online religion during this period and whether such figures are justifiable. We have been conducting a micro-research project with one local church in the North East, alongside other projects with the Everyone Welcome Online project, which suggest similar

increases in potential congregation size for online worship from user figures rather than opinion polling.

1. London is the UK’s Capital of Faith

Our survey results showed that London topped all regions of the UK in its engagement with faith-related activities.

	London				UK Average			
	July Poll		August Poll		July Poll		August Poll	
	Offline	Online	Offline	Online	Offline	Online	Offline	Online
Prayer	53%	43%	49%	43%	34%	26%	35%	29%
Meditation	49%	45%	48%	44%	34%	28%	34%	33%
Corporate Worship	52%	42%	47%	44%	31%	26%	32%	29%
Reflecting on Nature	65%	49%	68%	49%	62%	36%	60%	36%
Choir	41%	38%	42%	42%	26%	25%	28%	27%
Yoga	48%	53%	48%	56%	31%	28%	32%	29%

We note that over a range of faith-related activities, both online and offline, the polling figures for London are considerably higher than the UK average. So, for corporate worship across the two months and two platforms, London’s average is 46%, while for the UK as a whole the average is 30%. Reflecting on nature shows less of a shift with the London average of 58% still higher than the UK average of 49%. Moreover, the figures across the different faith-related activities are all higher – not just for prayer and corporate worship but also for meditation, choirs and yoga.

We note that this reflects a finding in previous work by one of our team, Peter Phillips, that Digital Millennials in London were more positively disposed towards the Bible and spirituality than those elsewhere in the country. At the time, we put this down to the metropolitan nature of London and the sense of spiritual openness fostered within a multicultural society. After our work on *Digital Millennials and The Bible* was published, Theos Think Tank did some research on “Religious London” and produced a report outlining and analysing how the capital differed from other regions of the UK (<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2019/02/19/religious-london>). Similar to our own research findings, Theos found that Londoners were more likely than other UK residents to pray regularly, attend worship regularly, and to be more socially conservative in a raft of different ways. This research, as with our own, was also conducted by Savanta ComRes (https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Theos-Religious-London-Research_GB-ex-London_tables-final.pdf).

We note that when we compare faith-related activity in different regions of the UK, the first two months of the survey findings show that West Midlands and the Yorkshire/Humber region are also above average in terms of UK faith-related activity. Again, we note the multicultural nature of these regions and also note YFC’s findings that young people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic populations are much more likely to strong faith affiliation than those from a white British background. One muslim commentator in a recent webinar pointed out that “the idea of secularised youth in the UK needed to be questioned”.

London's role as faith capital, alongside increased faith-related activity in the West Midlands and Yorkshire/Humber, seems to reflect that multiculturalism promotes engagement with faith as a reality of multicultural metropolitan life. Living in a multicultural society where different faiths work and pray together seems to foster an increase in faith-related activity across the whole of society.

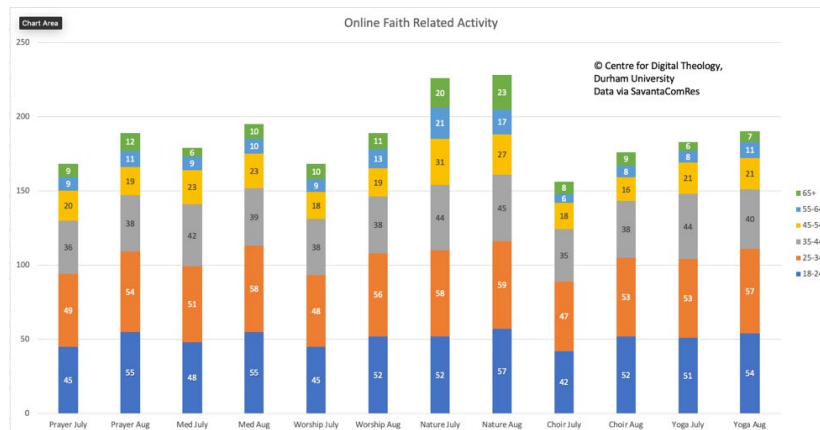
2. Over 1 in 4 people in the UK have engaged regularly in online organised worship during lockdown

Across the UK, respondents were asked if they had engaged in corporate worship (an online group devotional meeting) regularly during the pandemic. 26% of respondents in July and 29% in August responded that they had engaged in corporate worship online regularly. We defined regularly as "at least once a month" in order for the results to be comparable with the accepted figures for regular church attendance in BSA research run from the National Centre for Statistics. Those figures generally show that about 1 in 10 people attend church on that basis. However, research by Clive Field based on attendance has argued that by 2015 the figure was closer to 5% (<http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/findingsfromtheenglishchurchcensus2005/english-church-attendance-2005/>). Since both BSA and our figures are based on responses of attendees rather than attendance figures, we'll use the higher BSA figure. However, even if we accept that 10% is the norm, we are seeing research which suggests that up to 30% of existing church attendees are not engaging in online worship. So, the comparative figure may be around 6-7%. As such, the figures for attendance suggest a quadrupling of that figure for online engagement in July and August. In real term figures this would see the attendance at online corporate religion rising from 4 million per Sunday to 19 million during the pandemic. Again, that may be an aspirational response from those polled. But it does tally with research being garnered through the Everyone Welcome Online research team and other sources (<http://durham.ac.uk/digitaltheology/ewo>). Moreover, because it is not based on attendance, agglomeration or multiply viewing of different services is not a factor in the numbers. This is not the 4 million attending five services each across the regions!

We also note that in August, when churches and other places of corporate worship, had been cleared to be open, the percentage of other engaging in online worship increased rather than decreased – from 26% to 29%.

3. During the later lockdown period, half of the countries' young people (18-34) say that they regularly engage in online faith-related activity including regular prayer and regular engagement with online corporate worship.

Finally, the data reports that over half of young people in both the 18-24 and 25-34 age categories are engaging in online (and offline) faith-related activities regularly. In the following charts, each column represents the percentage of each age group engaged in a particular online faith-related activity in the two sets of data:



This data shows faith-related activity/spirituality among Gen Z and millennials to be higher than other generations and compares well with emerging research from Barna in the United States (<https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>) and Youth for Christ in the UK (<https://yfc.co.uk/gen-z-the-digital-generation/>). Although we have noted the high engagement in terms of prayer and worship, we also need to note that engagement with all faith-related activity is higher than among other age groups. As such, this seems to reflect a wider spirituality among Gen Z rather than signalling engagement with institutional faith. There is evidence in the Barna and YFC research and elsewhere of a wider engagement with other spiritualities (<https://medium.com/futurists-club-by-science-of-the-time/the-revival-of-spirituality-amongst-millennials-and-gen-z-ee00c4f28fc8>).

Dr Phillips, Director of the Centre for Digital Theology at Durham University said: “While these figures may reflect the aspirations of the online panel if they don’t reflect actual engagement, they show how engaged the British public are in online or hybrid forms of religion. Lots of people are keen to engage online and religious bodies should take seriously the move to online expressions of religion during the pandemic crisis.

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- [Durham University Research Impact Fund.](#)
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