



New Zealand Religious Community Responses to COVID-19 While Under Level 4 Lockdown

Theis Oxholm¹ · Catherine Rivera² · Kearly Schirrmann³ · William James Hoverd⁴

Accepted: 10 October 2020 / Published online: 3 November 2020
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020

Abstract

Social scientific research into the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities is emergent. This research combines interview data ($n = 12$) collected, as New Zealand moved into Level 3—Restrict and then Level 4—Lockdown, with Facebook and online news media analysis to understand how religious leaders and their communities responded to COVID-19. Our data found four challenges: (1) The requirement to reassess worship practices, (2) the need to mitigate any potential for community transmission, (3) significant difficulties related to social distancing for communal religious practices, and lastly, (4) welfare and pastoral concerns for congregations and others in need.

Keywords New Zealand · COVID-19 · Lockdown · Religion · Social distancing

Introduction

This article investigates how New Zealand's religious communities responded to the COVID-19 lockdown. It draws on a unique qualitative interview dataset that was collected from New Zealand religious leaders, as the country rushed into a COVID-19 related National State of Emergency and lockdown. As such, it draws an emerging and diverse picture of how New Zealand religious leader's understanding of COVID-19 evolved as the lockdown response impacted their communities and worship practices. Our data suggest four central challenges emerged for these religious

✉ William James Hoverd
w.hoverd@massey.ac.nz

¹ Religion and Culture, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

² School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

³ Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

⁴ School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

communities: (1) the requirement to reassess worship practices, (2) the need to mitigate any potential for community transmission, and (3) significant difficulties related to social distancing for communal religious practices. Lastly, we found there were (4) welfare and pastoral concerns for congregations and others in need.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Communities

Social scientific research into the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities across the world is still emerging. Nevertheless, there is a history of public health concerns around the risks that can occur within religious mass gatherings (Ahmed and Memish 2019). Hyung-Ju et al. (2020) note that amongst Korean religious communities, there was a delay in reporting transmission of the virus. Yezli and Khan (2020) discuss how in Saudi Arabian communities' religious norms and international religious worship practices such as the Hajj (Atique and Itumalla 2020) have created significant concerns about the ability to practice social distancing.

Transmission mitigation lessons have already been developed from how nations such as South Korea responded to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Hartley et al. (2020) noted that religious services in Malaysia and South Korea amplified the transmission of SARS-CoV-2. As such, they state that: "Traditions such as handshaking, embracing, touching the Torah, use of prayer mats, and passing offering plates, for example, could place persons at risk for acquiring CoV 2, in close proximity to those who maybe asymptotically or inapparently infectious (Hartley et al. 2020)." These SARS-CoV-2 lessons are being drawn on in the discussion around COVID-19 transmission by religious communities. Most sources suggest restrictions on, or the cessation of mass gatherings and religious practices to mitigate the risk of virus infection occurring within religious communities (Atique and Itumalla 2020; Escher 2020; Hartley et al. 2020; Rodriguez-Morales et al. 2020). Transmission concerns have led to Christian praxis being tweaked to allow for adaptation of sacramental practices, such as receiving and administering the Eucharist/communion and the 'passing of the peace' (Church of England 2020; Lange 2020).

Scholars have noted that the provision of pastoral care for COVID-19 related spiritual concerns (Drummond and Carey 2020) and transmission anxieties (Peteet 2020) is difficult to administer. Religious communities are potential sources of transmission (Hill et al. 2020). This was demonstrated by the deaths of Italian priests after comforting the infected (Chirico and Nucera 2020). Transmission concerns have led to many religious groups suspending physical services and turning to virtual gatherings (VanderWheele 2020; Galiatsatos et al. 2020). However, virtual mediums for pastoral care and community gathering do not necessarily alleviate isolation concerns, especially for the elderly (Byrne and Nuzum 2020). For some religious groups, the provision of welfare and pastoral care to those in need remained a priority despite the risk of transmission. In Detroit, religious communities are some of the only groups providing welfare and food assistance (Modell and Kardia 2020). Critically, Levin (2020) argues that religious organizations and leaders have the health resources, discursive power, and pastoral drive to help communities through the pandemic.

Together, the nascent global literature suggests that until the virus is better understood, mitigated new forms of religious practice and communal gathering need to be developed. We find that the extant literature suggests four primary social challenges for religious communities posed by the risk of COVID-19 infection.

1. The requirement to reassess worship practices.
2. The need to mitigate any potential for community transmission.
3. Significant difficulties related to social distancing for communal religious practices.
4. Welfare and pastoral concerns for congregations and others in need.

Our research sets out to understand how these four challenges played out for New Zealand religious groups as they were placed into COVID-19 lockdown and to assess whether there were any additional challenges experienced by these communities.

New Zealand's Religious Landscape

New Zealand is a small island nation with a population of five million people. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady decline in the number of New Zealanders who identify as Christian, dropping from 95% of the population in 1956 to 38% in 2018 (Stats NZ 2019). In general, the religious affiliations of the population are no longer Christian per se, rather they should be understood as religiously diverse (Hoverd 2019). Non-Christian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Sikhism have increased in number, leading to such initiatives as the *New Zealand Human Rights Commission's Statement on Religious Diversity* in 2007, and the launch of a *Religious Diversity Centre* in 2016. It has been observed that New Zealand has evolved into a very secular society (Pratt 2016; Troughton 2016; Ward 2013). Troughton argues "...if the numbers are to be believed, New Zealanders have in recent decades become a pretty godless lot (Troughton 2016, p 11)." Census figures from 2018, bear out Troughton's statement with 48% of the population indicating they have no religion (Stats NZ 2019). However, many who identify as having 'no religion' are not necessarily atheists. Findings from the *International Social Survey Programme* have indicated that individualized spiritual experiences are more important than belonging to a formal religious institution (Vaccarino et al. 2011). These findings are backed up by an Australian study which found many youths identified as 'spiritual but not religious,' a category obscured by census data (Halafoff et al. 2020). Given these demographic shifts, studies need to include a diverse range of religious groups and include non-religious perspectives.

New Zealand Religion and Health

To date, there has been little systematic investigation into the potential relationships between religion and health in New Zealand. Nevertheless, amongst the nation's doctors, there has been a strong historic tradition of Christian belief (Franklin 2018;

Irvine 2015) and an increasing religious diversity (Henning et al. 2015). There is a rigorous understanding of the contemporary issues facing chaplaincy (Carey et al. 2015, 2014; Carey and Cohen 2015; Carey 2012), which in contexts such as the New Zealand Defence Force (Hill et al. 2016) needs to carefully craft pastoral care for a spiritually diverse constituency. Studies of the relationships between religion and health in New Zealand have found weak correlations between religion, spirituality, and well-being (Zhang 2020; Hoverd and Sibley 2013). This extends to the relationship between religious belief and coping (Zhang and Zhang 2017; Krägeloh et al. 2012). However, others have struggled to discern meaningful findings between secular and spiritual approaches to health in New Zealand (Lauricella 2016). Our qualitative data add to this literature by reporting on how New Zealand religious communities responded to the COVID-19 transmission threat during the move into lockdown.

Timeline of the New Zealand Virus Prevalence and State Responses to COVID-19

In New Zealand, the response to COVID-19 has involved a lockdown, restrictions on mass gatherings, and the ongoing requirement for social distancing in combination with the implementation of strict border controls (Wilson et al. 2020). Preliminary national studies of how the population have responded to COVID-19 suggest a high trust in government, but potentially higher rates of mental distress (Sibley et al. 2020). On January 28th, 2020, the Government set up the *National Health Coordination Centre* as a preemptive response to monitor the global transmission of the COVID-19 virus (MoH 2020a). On February 28th, the first New Zealand case was confirmed (id., 2020b). On March 21st, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a new *Pandemic Alert Level System*. The New Zealand Government Alert Levels are:

Level 1: Prepare—The disease is contained in New Zealand.

Level 2: Reduce—The disease is contained but risk of community transmission remains.

Level 3: Restrict—High risk the disease is not contained.

Level 4: Lockdown—Likely that the disease is not contained (NZ Government 2020).

On March 21st, Ardern explained that the country was then at Level 2—Reduce. This meant that the disease was currently contained, but the risk of an outbreak, and community transmission was a threat (Cheng 2020a). On March 23rd, the number of cases rose to $N=102$ and it was declared that there was suspected community spread and the national alarm level was raised to Level 3—Restrict (Otago Daily News 2020).

On March 25th, Level 4—Lockdown was implemented with the infected numbering $N=205$ (NZ Herald 2020a; Cheng 2020b). Ten days later, on April 5th, the total population infections numbered $N=1039$. Virus prevalence data were released by ethnic group: Pākehā (Europeans)=74%, Asian=8.3%, Māori=7.6%,

and Pasifika = 3.3%, with 6.8% unreported (Andelane 2020b). On April 20th, infections numbered $N=1440$, and the Level 4—Lockdown was extended until 11:59 PM, April 27th, 2020. The transmission rate was now 0.48, in that on average one infected person would infect 0.48 other persons, thus indicating that the virus transmission was declining (Roy 2020). On the April 27th, the alert level was reduced from Level 4—Lockdown to Level 3—Restrict, because transmissions were slowing with $N=1469$ (MoH 2020c). On May 14th, Level 2—Reduce was declared, $N=1497$ (Cooke 2020; MoH 2020d). All data for this research were collected between March 1st and April 27th, 2020. This manuscript was prepared between May 19th and 30th, 2020, during Alert Level 2—Reduce.

Methodology

This research combines interview data collected as New Zealand moved into Level 3 and then Level 4—Lockdown with two forms of media analysis (Facebook and online news media) to understand how religious leaders and their communities responded to COVID-19 restrictions.

Interview Data Collection

Initially, the interviews did not set out to study how religious leaders responded to COVID-19. When they were first designed, the focus was a comparison between the cities of Wellington and Christchurch investigating how the State engages with religious communities, in terms of responding to the Christchurch Mosque attack and the removal of the words ‘Jesus Christ’ from the parliamentary prayer. However, the participant selection and the interview process coincided with, and was directly affected by, the rapid entry into the COVID-19 Level 3 restrictions and then the Level 4 lockdown. Directly, after our first interview, it was apparent that COVID-19 was the primary community concern and fell under the broader research question of the relationship between religious communities and the State. Consequently, after Interviewee 1, we explicitly included a two-part question to address how religious communities were responding to COVID-19. Interviewee 1 did discuss COVID-19 and those general responses were included in the dataset (Table 1).

Interview participants were initially selected by employing census data to identify the largest religious groupings (Stats NZ 2018; Hoverd and Kühle 2018). Utilizing a comprehensive search of digital media, we contacted 34 religious communities across these two cities to participate in our interviews. These communities included Anglicans, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodists, Pentecostal, Latter Day Saints, Buddhists, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Humanists. There were University ethical restrictions¹ regarding conducting interviews with the Muslim community because of March 2019, Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic

¹ The research project entitled *Religion, State and Cohesion Project* has been assessed as low risk by Massey University Research Ethics under the Ethics Notification Number: 4000022282.

Table 1 New Zealand religious leaders interview chronology

Interview number	Date	Alert level	Number of total NZ COVID-19 infections, recoveries, and deaths (MoH 2020d)	Interview method
Interviewee 1	2020-03-14	No system yet	6/0/0	Face-to-face
Interviewee 2	2020-03-17	No system yet	11/0/0	Face-to-face
Interviewee 3	2020-03-17	No system yet	11/0/0	Face-to-face
Interviewee 4	2020-03-18	No system yet	19/0/0	Face-to-face
Interviewee 5	2020-03-31	Level 4—Lockdown	572/74/0	Zoom
Interviewee 6	2020-03-31	Level 4—Lockdown	572/74/0	Zoom
Interviewee 7	2020-04-01	Level 4—Lockdown	625/82/0	Zoom
Interviewee 8	2020-04-14	Level 4—Lockdown	729/628/9	Zoom
Interviewee 9	2020-04-16	Level 4—Lockdown	622/770/9	Zoom
Interviewee 10	2020-04-16	Level 4—Lockdown	622/770/9	Zoom
Interviewee 11	2020-04-17	Level 4—Lockdown	582/816/11	Zoom
Interviewee 12	2020-04-20	Level 4—Lockdown	458/970/12	Zoom

Centre attacks where 51 people were killed (Hoverd 2019). Therefore, Muslim communities were not contacted.

All communities were initially contacted by email, on March 10th, with a request to participate in an interview. Follow-up emails, and later phone calls, were sent to those who did not respond. At this stage, March 17th, we encountered challenges in accessing participants due to the increasing prevalence of COVID-19 concerns and pressure on religious organizations to cease communal worship. Consequently, the communities were working from home, and their offices could not receive our emails or pick up our phone calls. Sixteen communities did not respond, six were not interested in participation, and 12 communities agreed to participate.

Just prior to and throughout the Level 4 lockdown, 12 interviews were conducted (Anglican=2, Catholic=2, Pentecostal=2, Latter Day Saints=1, Buddhist=1, Jewish=1, Sikh=1, and Humanists=2). Four face-to-face interviews were conducted before Level 4, the last eight were conducted via Zoom during the lockdown. Given the unprecedented disruption for both the communities and researchers of moving suddenly into Level 3 and then Level 4, between March 19th and March 29th, no interviews were conducted.

Initially, we employed 19 semi-structured questions. These questions were in five parts, divided by theme. These were; ‘Background’ (3 items), ‘Change of the Parliamentary Prayer’ (4 items), ‘Social Media/Online Extremism’ (3 items), ‘Christchurch Attack’ (5 items), ‘Questions about the New Zealand State and Government’ (3 items), and then asking if the respondent wanted an interview transcript. Once it was recognized that the rise in COVID-19 was the primary concern of our interviewees, we added an additional question; “Concerning COVID-19, what has your community been talking about? And what have you been doing?” At the beginning of the interview, all participants were advised that an additional question regarding

COVID-19 had been added. They had the option to opt out of that question if they so desired. No communities opted out.

All the interviews were recorded either by voice recorder (in person) or via Zoom recording (virtual). Prior to the lockdown, we obtained written consent (in person), and during Level 4, consent was given and recorded verbally (via Zoom). Our informants remain anonymous, but some risk of identification remains because we interviewed religious leaders in a relatively small nation. The interviews were doubly transcribed, meaning one person did the initial transcription and another went through afterwards for accuracy.

Facebook Data Collection

Additionally, we reviewed the public Facebook pages of the twelve communities we interviewed to create a supplementary dataset. We noted and recorded any Facebook posts relating to the community's experience of and response to COVID-19. We reviewed content posted between March 1st and April 27th, 2020. All relevant posts were copied and a hyperlink to them was referenced for subsequent analysis. In total, we found 151 Facebook posts made by our interview groups; Anglican=22, Catholic=33, Pentecostals=12, Latter Day Saints=14, Buddhist=2, Jewish=none, Sikh=13, and Humanists=55.

Online News Media Collection

To contextualize the interview and the Facebook data, we also collated an online news media review of 31 media articles relating to religious groups and COVID-19 published during this time. This was used to create a national overview of how other religious groups outside our dataset responded to the lockdown. The collection took place from March 1st to April 27th, 2020.

Findings

From our review of the current literature, we derived four social challenges for religious communities posed by the risk of COVID-19 infection. (1) The requirement to reassess worship practices, (2) the need to mitigate any potential for community transmission, (3) difficulties related to social distancing for communal religious practices, and (4) welfare and pastoral concerns for congregations and others in need. We now discuss these in detail:

The Requirement to Reassess Worship Practices Here, we outline where certain New Zealand religious leaders and communities discussed the reassessment of worship practices. This is important because there was a religious community link with one of the first New Zealand cases when it was reported on March 17th that “The sixth coronavirus case in New Zealand shared communion with several others at Mass, days [March 8th] before he tested positive (Block 2020).” Further discussion of this

early incident showed that at that stage, worship practices had changed within that Church.

Hand sanitizer was in use during the service and the people would not have sipped from the same location on the rim of the chalice, Fr Murphy said. "We always turn the cup so you're not drinking from the same place (Block 2020).

Hand sanitizer was made available and communion chalices were objects of concern, but droplet transmission worries from communal singing were never reported. More broadly, after this case, it was evident in New Zealand that religious worship practices were a potential locus for virus transmission and that change would be required.

Once lockdown occurred, many leaders found that Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype offered a new alternative for their communities to virtually undertake religious worship together (Towle 2020; Fountain and Troughton 2020; NZ Catholic Bishops 2020). How to stay connected and maintain relationships (both with the divine and within communities) without being physically together was a critical question for several religious communities. One group arranged for 'bubble' churches, in which every family participated in the meetings from home via Zoom. For one interviewee, it was an immediate priority to get every locked-down family a Zoom account (Interviewee 10).

Easter fell between our first and last interview and had to be celebrated at home without communion (Tan 2020). Lyndsay Freer of the Catholic Diocese of Auckland explained;

Because our churches are in lockdown, we are attempting to provide recorded daily Masses to our Catholic people via our diocesan website and the Bishop's Facebook...we are negotiating to have some television time during this period, and are very grateful that this is likely to be a possibility (ibid., 2020).

On Easter Sunday, April 12th, the national news site *The Herald Online* posted an article discussing the meaning of Easter and linked to over 30 different online sermons (NZ Herald 2020b). Darren Gammie, National Secretary of the Assemblies of God, called their Easter service the "Bubble Church" and stated; "This year most churches would be hosting online prayer meetings, sharing encouragement and devotions and live streaming services through their websites and social media throughout Easter weekend." (Foon 2020). For Easter, one of our interviewees uploaded to *YouTube* a video about the importance of partaking in the blood of Jesus Christ as the ultimate healing and absolving element in the universe (Jesus for NZ 2020). Another uploaded Easter video focused on love as a binding solution for the spirit and for addressing concerns around COVID-19 (1 News 2020). Of the Facebook posts made, eleven of the 151 related to this theme of reassessing worship practices in the light of COVID-19 lockdown. While some communities found the transition to virtual worship relatively seamless, others found aspects of virtual worship problematic. However, the virtual practice of the sacrament of shared

communion was particularly troubling for one community, because the medium did not allow for communal sharing.

We can't do communion virtually, it is a physical, real thing. It is not an experience that you can replicate online, so we have had to work out other ways of doing that, so all of our services are now online... Instead communion is a prayer that we are saying together, where we say that we long for communion, but we know that we can't at the moment. So, that has made us look at what our faith is quite differently. So, we have really had to think, and go deeper into other parts of our tradition to find that. (Interviewee 12)

The leader went on to explain how they experienced the 'feeling' of conducting the sacrament all alone when they streamed the services:

Okay, I will stream the Masses every day, and I did a few of them, and I was on my own of course, and there are major rules about that in our Church, you are not allowed to do it on your own, that is a rule. Now, my Bishop had said; '...you can do it, fine, you are not going to get in trouble even if it is breaking a rule'. But I noticed, day after day of doing it, it started to feel really wrong, it felt wrong not just because I was breaking the rules, because I've always thought those rules were stupid. It felt wrong that here I am, having communion, and my people however many were watching, were just watching me have communion, I mean, this is daft right? (Interviewee 12)

In this example, we can see that hierarchical permission was given to change the Church rules around communion practice as their worship moved online. However, this leader reflected both upon the bending of the Church rule (where the rule once overturned was viewed as 'stupid') and then despite this permission, the leader found that the new practice it allowed (virtual communion) created too much spiritual distance between him and his virtual community, consequently diminishing the practice.

Not all leaders were willing to change their worship practices. One leader (before entering Level 4) resisted the threat posed by COVID-19, and at that time refused to change.

We are not doing anything in particular, because I believe that this thing will go as quickly as it started. If you look at it, to me, it is fear driven. A lot of stuff is fear driven, and that is spiritual, right? Because my Bible tells me, we have not been given a spirit of fear as a Christian. Fear breeds control. And so, you have all these regulations and rules coming in immediately, to contain something that is not even going to happen, probably. (Interviewee 4)

This leader was sceptical about the virus threat and discounted its relevance for his community. He argued that to change his Church and community's worship, practice was unnecessary. Ultimately, for this leader, one could find appropriate strength, focus, and resilience within their biblical tradition and thus temporal and/or Government concerns about COVID-19 simply were a distraction.

The Need to Mitigate Any Potential for Community Transmission As noted earlier, from March 17th, evidence that a coronavirus patient had shared communion whilst likely infectious (Block 2020) indicated that religious communities needed to mitigate any potential transmission. Despite one interviewee's scepticism about the transmission threat of COVID-19, across our participants, we found a general desire for identifying people at risk, whether it was the elderly, already sick, or people with immune deficiencies. In our first interviews, several leaders prioritized identifying vulnerable community members in advance of any increased virus transmission (Interviewee 3). Although, with large congregations, one leader noted that identification can be difficult when not every member is known by name or contact information (ibid.)

Given international publicity about churches being potential loci for community transmission overseas, some churches decided to stop handing out flyers and written material, because it was suggested that the virus can survive on paper for at least 24 hours (van Doremalen 2020). For example, one leader related a discussion that they had with their Bishop about mitigating community transmission:

The first line that came out from the bishop and his responses was we as a church want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem... so there was a real desire to be quite strict in order to be safe and protect life. (Interviewee 5)

Many leaders were cognizant that their worship practices might create risks for community transmission. One leader described how the community delivery of dinners for the elderly had to be cancelled before entering lockdown (Interviewee 3). Before Level 4, religious leaders were cancelling services due to the fear of community spread, with their concern mainly focused on vulnerable people and/or the elderly. For example:

Sunday the 22nd [March] we were going to be worshipping, but then found out that on Saturday the 21st those who are 70 or older shouldn't be at worship and those who do come along should be two meters apart, we could have done that, but we decided to not worship that day because we thought there was a concern that some older folk or some compromised people might come along anyway thinking that it is actually not a big worry. (Interviewee 5)

This type of concern for community transmission, particularly to the elderly and vulnerable, also led to the cancellation of events. Our Buddhist community had to cancel a major celebration. They were expecting a high-level delegation from Japan to come with various events planned, but the visit was cancelled due to the outbreak in Japan (Interviewee 6). The traditional Maori Catholic Easter celebration *Hui Aranga* (Murray 2020) had to be cancelled as well due to COVID-19 lockdown. It was expected to have 1500 participants, and one interviewee stated that the cancellation required that the community refocus on the meaning of the festival, instead of just the social gathering aspect: "I think the community itself is shifting towards protection of *kaumātua* [elders] so that's a really good thing" (Interviewee 3). All in all, the cancellation of events, whilst regrettable were framed by interviewees as being 'the best' thing for the community.

With the commencement of Level 4—Lockdown, all religious organizations closed. Several groups had closed earlier, e.g. the Church of Latter-Day Saints had suspended their Sunday gatherings across the world on March 13th (Perich 2020). Nine out of 12 communities made a Facebook post confirming and explaining the closure following the news on March 20th. Furthermore, all communities, except the Jewish community (who did not comment), stated on Facebook that they cancelled an event. Thirty-five of the 151 Facebook posts discussed cancelled events whether they were regular services, major events, or engaging with international guests. Only one example in the data was found where a religious individual engaged in faith-related behaviour that intentionally flouted the Level 4 rules, when on April 10th, a woman from a Baptist Church violated lockdown rules by proselytizing door-to-door resulting in the Police being called (Mather 2020).

Difficulties Related to Social Distancing for Communal Religious Practices As we saw above, a great deal of social media attention was given to the cancellation of events. Twenty-two of the 151 posts are related to how to have communal religious practices with social distancing. Ultimately, the cancellations of religious practice and the subsequent shift to virtual community meant that social distancing was less important for participants. Social distancing was a nonissue during the State ordered Level-4 lockdown. Most communal religious practices moved to a virtual forum, either via Zoom or YouTube. For example, in the media analysis, Equippers Church Auckland suggested on March 19th that services should be streamed. “Executive Pastor Matt Gregory said given the congregation sizes they could still meet but they’ve chosen to be proactive” (Fusitu’a 2020).

Prior to Level 4, one interviewee from a large group noted that in a nation where earthquakes are a present danger, they already had an established and adaptable emergency response plan (Interviewee 2). However, that plan involved creating communal hubs and centralized service distribution and with COVID-19, the need for social distance and the risk of transmission invalidated this entire approach (ibid.).

One New Zealand religious community was publicly resistant to closing or complying with government COVID-19 guidance. Destiny Church Leader Bishop Brian Tamaki was quoted as saying: “I’m not about to let a filthy virus scare us out of having church. To equate fear with common sense is nonsense” (Andelane 2020a). It was reported that Destiny intended to keep their churches open for as long as possible, though with added precautionary measures (Tokalau 2020). Once Level 4 was announced, Destiny Church did close its doors.

Welfare and Pastoral Concerns for Congregations and Others in Need How to effectively continue to maintain welfare services and pastoral care for those in need was a major challenge for our interviewees. Religious communities running local food banks, such as St Vincent de Paul, had to change their way of both receiving and distributing food before moving into Level 4 (where activity ceased). Many volunteers were over 70 years of age and thus at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

How does St. Vincent de Paul, which is one of the main charitable groups here, have food to be able to support people? How do they shift from, ‘you can come

down to our food bank and pick it up’, to where we try and get it from their place to somebody’s door?...St Vincent de Paul, most of their volunteers are over the age of 70 so they won’t be the people that we send, so we need to find another group of people to do that. (Interviewee 3)

For the foodbank, they were normally reliant on people dropping donations of food to them, now they needed to ask their ‘younger’ volunteers to do both the pickup of food from suppliers and then deliver it to those in need (ibid.)

Under Level 4, pastoral concerns arose around maintaining their community’s well-being through virtual methods. One leader explained that Zoom offered the following pastoral function:

The big issue, I think, has been about how we continue to be caring to our community. So, we are not only socializing, and using social networks as best as we can. But we also have programs that we put into place to keep our people well connected. For example, we have Zoom home groups, small groups, so everyone in our congregation, our community, is being regularly connected visually or by phone or whatever. (Interviewee 7)

The key challenge here was how to continue providing pastoral ‘care’ and keep virtually ‘connected.’ Moreover, with the forced switch to virtual platforms, leaders were worried about losing contact with elderly congregation members, many of whom did not have internet access (Interviewee 5).

Another community noted that their fasting practices allowed them spiritual reflection and the opportunity to donate the cost of those meals to those struggling to find food during lockdown. For example:

We believe in fasting and that is where we go without meals and we donate a cost of, well we hope it is more generous than the cost of those meals, but we donate that to the welfare. Not just for our members, but people who aren’t members of our church. And there is a spiritual aspect to fasting where we also fast to be relieved from reflection, such as COVID-19 and things, so we are definitely fasting on that front but also the welfare front is important. (Interviewee 10)

Here, fasting allowed the individual to reflect and meditate upon temporal matters (often COVID-19 related) as well as spiritual concerns. Overall, our Facebook data indicated that twenty-eight of the 151 posts were related to some form of volunteering or assisting with welfare organizations. Notably, the humanists produced twelve posts and were promoting a diverse range of causes including international humanist organizations in countries badly hit by the virus and the need for domestic assistance for groups such as immigrants who could not access State supplied welfare.

Conclusion

New Zealand's sixth coronavirus patient had shared a communion cup while likely infectious on March 17th, 2020 (Block 2020). From this date onwards, the risks associated with COVID-19 community transmission were a salient issue for religious communities. Overall, New Zealand religious communities stood united and in agreement with the State response to COVID-19. In our pre-Level 4 interview data, there was clear evidence that religious communities did not expect to enter a lockdown, but that they did expect to have to mitigate significant transmission risks, particularly for their elderly and vulnerable populations. Moreover, our data suggest prior to lockdown, groups were unsure about how to effectively social distance in order to continue to maintain pastoral contact with the elderly and safely supply welfare to those in need. When the Level-4 lockdown occurred, all groups shut down and restricted their services in compliance with the Ministry of Health guidelines (Stewart 2020). Our data evidence sustained religious innovation in terms of virtual worship. There was a clear shift to social media communications and the continuation of worship practices online, albeit reassessed. These findings are broadly in line with our review of the current (albeit nascent) global literature on religious communities and COVID-19. This literature indicated that there were four primary social challenges for religious communities posed by the risk of COVID-19 infection. They are:

- 1) The requirement to reassess worship practices,
- 2) the need to mitigate any potential for community transmission,
- 3) difficulties related to social distancing for communal religious practices,
- 4) Welfare and pastoral concerns for congregations and others in need.

Our interview data suggest that community welfare and pastoral concerns were front and centre in our leader's minds, particularly in terms of the elderly and vulnerable. This concern was echoed in the Facebook analysis, but not evident in the Online News media data. This is unsurprising considering that we focused on how religious leaders understand their communities (interview and Facebook data) and then contextualized these concerns with a broader online news review which tended to focus on stories that would generate wide readership.

Our data suggest that the four COVID-19 social challenges for religious communities should not always be understood as distinct, separate categories. There is significant overlap between them. For example: concerns over the spiritual purpose of fasting were reassessed and consequently, the meal money saved was directed into donations for those most in need under lockdown. This example encompasses both the reassessment of religious practice with welfare and pastoral concerns for the broader community. Likewise, concern around infection of primarily elderly volunteers impeded the ability of some welfare groups to distribute food. Additionally, in our communion example despite sanctioned moves that reassessed virtual religious practice, it was not always deemed pastorally to be in the best interests of the community's spiritual needs. The four categories list distinct issues for religious

communities, but ultimately, COVID-19 concerns around transmission, pastoral care, changed worship, and social distancing are all interrelated.

In our data, social distancing was less of a discussion than it will be in other studies, this is because most of our interviewee's communities were closing or already under lockdown during the interviews. However, as New Zealand's religious groups have now moved from lockdown into a period of sustained social distancing, we expect that future research could focus on how the need to socially distance in religious communities might lead to changed theology and/or practice. Lastly, we suggest that further research should investigate whether virtual religious communities and practice are sustained once the lockdowns are lifted.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Dr Henrik Reintoft Christensen for facilitating our collaboration and Massey University Research Funding for financial support.

Funding This research was conducted under a research Project entitled the *Religion, State and Cohesion Project*. The 2019–2020 Massey University Research Fund (MURF) approved project funding of NZ\$2,125.00 (US\$1317.00) to be spent on this research in 2020.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interests involved in the gathering and product of this research.

Ethical Approval The larger research project entitled *Religion, State and Cohesion Project* has been assessed as by Massey University Research Ethics under the Ethics Notification Number: 4000022282. All participants in this research gave informed consent and have been kept anonymous.

References

- 1 News. (2020). *Worshippers navigate new ways of attending church amid coronavirus lockdown*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/worshippers-navigate-new-ways-attending-church-amid-coronavirus-lockdown?fbclid=IwAR1L_nC7FZ8IhbuUfS9nB5dmhJgiO1MMP7PZYnQ_5y8duRgfWnEMhJDmAVQ.
- Ahmed, Q. A., & Memish, Z. A. (2019). From the “Madding Crowd” to mass gatherings-religion, sport, culture and public health. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*, 28, 91–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmaid.2018.06.001>
- Andelane, L. (2020a). *Coronavirus: Destiny Church ‘does not fear’ COVID-19, will remain open*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/03/coronavirus-destiny-church-does-not-fear-covid-19-will-remain-open.html>.
- Andelane, L. (2020b). *Coronavirus: Ministry of Health confirms 89 new COVID-19 cases in New Zealand*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/04/coronavirus-ministry-of-health-confirms-89-new-covid-19-cases-in-new-zealand1.html>.
- Atique, S., & Itumalla, R. (2020). Hajj in the time of COVID-19. *Infection, Disease and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.idh.2020.04.001>
- Block, G. (2020). *Coronavirus: Patient six shared communion chalice at south Auckland church*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/120317684/coronavirus-patient-six-shared-communion-chalice-at-south-auckland-church>.
- Byrne, M. J., & Nuzum, D. R. (2020). Pastoral closeness in physical distancing: The use of technology in pastoral ministry during COVID-19. *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*, 8(2), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1558/hsc.41625>
- Carey, L. B. (2012). Bioethical issues and health care Chaplaincy in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51, 323–335. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9368-1>

- Carey, L. B., & Cohen, J. (2015). The utility of the WHO ICD-10-AM pastoral intervention codings within religious, pastoral and spiritual care research. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *54*, 1772–1787. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-014-9938-8>
- Carey, L. B., Polita, C., Marsden, C. R., & Krikheli, L. (2014). Pain control and Chaplaincy in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *53*, 1562–1574. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9748-4>
- Carey, L. B., Willis, M. A., Krikheli, L., & O'Brien, A. (2015). Religion, health and confidentiality: An exploratory review of the role of Chaplains. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *54*, 676–692.
- Cheng, D. (2020a). *Coronavirus: PM Jacinda Ardern outlines NZ's new alert system, over-70s should stay at home*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12318673.
- Cheng, D. (2020b). *Covid-19 coronavirus: Fifty new cases, state of emergency declared to police lockdown*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12319699.
- Chirico, F., & Nucera, G. (2020). An Italian experience of spirituality from the coronavirus pandemic. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01036-1>
- Church of England. (2020). *Church of England updates advice on coronavirus*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/church-england-updates-advice-coronavirus>.
- Cooke, H. (2020). *Coronavirus: New Zealand will start to move to level 2 on Thursday*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300009818/coronavirus-new-zealand-will-start-to-move-to-level-2-on-thursday>.
- Drummond, D. A., & Carey, L. B. (2020). Chaplaincy and spiritual care response to COVID-19: An Australian case study—The McKellar Centre. *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*. <https://doi.org/10.1558/hssc.41243>
- Escher, A. R. (2020). An ounce of prevention: Coronavirus (COVID-19) and mass gatherings. *Cureus*, *12*(3), e7345. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7345>
- Foon, E. (2020). *Covid-19: Easter services become 'bubble church' under lockdown*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/414041/covid-19-easter-services-become-bubble-church-under-lockdown>.
- Fountain, P., & Troughton, G. (2020). *Covid-19: Why religion will look different*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2020/04/29/1148292/religion-will-look-different-after-coronavirus>.
- Franklin, P. (2018). *Faithful physicians: Discourses of professionalism in Christian general practitioners in New Zealand (Thesis, Master of Arts)*. University of Otago. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://hdl.handle.net/10523/8332>.
- Fusitu'a, E. (2020). *Coronavirus: Auckland church encourages streaming services*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/covid-19/412123/coronavirus-auckland-church-encourages-streaming-services>.
- Galiatsatos, P., Monson, K., Olyinka, M., Negro, D., Hughes, N., Maydan, D., et al. (2020). Community calls: Lessons and insights gained from a medical-religious community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01057-w>
- Halafoff, A., Singleton, A., Bouma, G., & Rasmussen, M. (2020). Religious literacy of Australia's Gen Z teens: Diversity and social inclusion. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, *41*(2), 195–213.
- Hartley, D. M., Reisinger, H. S., & Perencevich, E. N. (2020). *When infection prevention enters the temple: Intergenerational social distancing and COVID-19. Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology* (pp 1–2). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ice.2020.100>.
- Henning, M. A., Krägeloh, C., Thompson, A., Sisley, R., Doherty, I., & Hawken, S. J. (2015). Religious affiliation, quality of life and academic performance: New Zealand medical students. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *54*, 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9769-z>
- Hill, E., Egan, R., Llewellyn, R., & McBride, D. (2016). New Zealand defence forces and spirituality: What does it mean? What are their spiritual needs? How is spiritual health care practised? *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*. <https://doi.org/10.1558/hssc.v4i1.28488>
- Hill, T. D., Gonzalez, K., & Burdette, A. M. (2020). The blood of christ compels them: State religiosity and state population mobility during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *2*, 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01058-9>

- Hoverd, W. J. (2019). The changing New Zealand national security environment: New threats, new structures, and new research. *National Security Journal*, 1(2019), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.36878/nsj201901.17>
- Hoverd, W. J., & Kühle, L. (2018). Constructing and deconstructing religious diversity: The measurement of religious affiliation in Denmark and New Zealand. In L. Kühle, W. Hoverd, & J. Borup (Eds.), *The critical analysis of religious diversity* (pp. 63–82). Leiden: Brill Publications.
- Hoverd, W. J., & Sibley, C. G. (2013). Religion, deprivation and subject wellbeing: Testing a religious buffering hypothesis. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 3(2), 182–196.
- Hyung-Ju, K., Hyun-Seong, H., Yong-Hyuk, C., Hye-Yeon, S., Ji-Seong, P., Chae-Young, Y., & Sukhyun, R. (2020). The delay in COVID-19 confirmation among cases from a religious group in South Korea. <https://doi.org/10.3961/jpmph.20.088>.
- Irvine, Z. (2015). Evangelical doctors belief and practice: A case study of the Wellington Christian medical fellowship, New Zealand 1971–1980. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 54, 1320–1330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-014-9920-5>
- Jesus for NZ. (2020). *The most potent element in the Universe: The Blood of Jesus!* Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=355967591965429>.
- Krägeloh, C. U., Chai, P. P. M., Shepherd, D., & Billington, R. (2012). How religious coping is used relative to other coping strategies depends on the individual's level of religiosity and spirituality. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51, 1137–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9416-x>
- Lange, D. G. (2020). *Digital worship and sacramental life in a time of pandemic*. Lutheran World Federation. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic>.
- Lauricella, S. (2016). The ancient-turned-new concept of “spiritual hygiene”: An investigation of media coverage of meditation from 1979 to 2014. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 55, 1748–1762. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0262-3>
- Levin, J. (2020). The faith community and the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak: Part of the problem or part of the solution? *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01048-x>
- Mather, M. (2020). *Coronavirus: Church member going door to door to spread The Word breaks Covid-19 lockdown*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/120960073/coronavirus-church-member-going-door-to-door-to-spread-the-word-break-s-covid19-lockdown>.
- Ministry of Health (MoH). (2020a). *Novel coronavirus update 27th January 2020*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/novel-coronavirus-update-27th-january-2020>.
- Ministry of Health (MoH). (2020b). *Single case of COVID-19 confirmed in New Zealand*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/media-releases/single-case-covid-19-confirmed-new-zealand>.
- Ministry of Health (MoH). (2020c). *COVID-19—current cases*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200427011958/https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-current-cases>.
- Ministry of Health (MoH). (2020d). *COVID-19—Current cases*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200514084324.https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-current-cases>.
- Modell, S. M., & Kardia, S. L. R. (2020). Religion as a health promoter during the 2019/2020 COVID outbreak: View from Detroit. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01052-1>
- Murray, J. (2020). *Hui Aranga—Cancelled but still celebrated this Easter*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/teahikaa/audio/2018741823/hui-aranga-cancelled-but-still-celebrated-this-easter>.
- NZ Catholic Bishops. (2020). *NZ Catholics flock to online mass in response to Covid-19 lockdown*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/CU2003/S00208/nz-catholics-flock-to-online-mass-in-response-to-covid-19-lockdown.htm>.
- NZ Government. (2020). *New Zealand Covid-19 alert levels summary*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/resources/tables/COVID-19-alert-levels-summary.pdf>.
- NZ Herald. (2020a). *Covid-19: State of emergency declared in New Zealand*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/news/national/coronavirus-covid-19-state-of-emergency-declared-in-new-zealand-50-new-cases-confirmed/>.

- NZ Herald. (2020b). *Covid 19 coronavirus: Easter Sunday service form St Matthew in the City*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12323415.
- Otago Daily News. (2020). *Ardern raises NZ to alert level 3, schools to close*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.odt.co.nz/star-news/star-national/ardern-raises-nz-alert-level-3-schools-close>.
- Perich, B. (2020). *Churches across Aotearoa suspend services—Covid-19*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.teaomaori.news/churches-across-aotearoa-suspend-services-covid-19>.
- Peteet, J. R. (2020). COVID-19 anxiety. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01041-4>
- Pratt, D. (2016). Secular New Zealand and religious diversity: From cultural evolution to societal affirmation. *Social Inclusion*, 4(2), 52–64. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v4i2.463>
- Rodriguez-Morales, A., Sah, R., & Paniz-Mondolfi, A. (2020). Should the Holy Week 2020 be cancelled in Latin America due to the COVID-19 pandemic? *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmaid.2020.101633>
- Roy, E. A. (2020). *New Zealand plans to ease coronavirus lockdown in a week*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/20/new-zealand-plans-to-ease-coronavirus-lockdown-in-a-week>.
- Sibley, C., Greaves, L., Satherley, N., Wilson, M. S., Overall, N., Lee, C., et al. (2020). Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown on trust. *Attitudes Towards Government, and Wellbeing*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000662>
- Stats NZ. (2018). *Religious affiliation (total responses)*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/index.aspx>.
- Stats NZ. (2019). *Losing our religion*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/losing-our-religion>.
- Stewart, I. (2020). *NZ churches back govt restrictions, cancel mass gatherings. Except destiny*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/first-up/audio/2018738815/nz-churches-back-govt-restrictions-cancel-mass-gatherings-except-destiny>.
- Tan, L. (2020). *Covid 19 coronavirus: New Zealand's Catholics to celebrate Easter in front of screens at home*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12321331.
- Tokalau, T. (2020). *Coronavirus: Destiny Church continues Sunday service with precautionary measures*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/120474471/coronavirus-destiny-church-continues-sunday-service-with-precautionary-measures>.
- Towle, M. (2020). *Faith in quarantine: How religion has been affected by Covid-19*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/in-depth/413675/faith-in-quarantine-how-religion-has-been-affected-by-covid-19>.
- Troughton, G. (2016). Introduction: Sacred stories in secular New Zealand. In G. Troughton & S. Lange (Eds.), *Sacred histories in secular New Zealand* (pp. 11–23). Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Vaccarino, F., Kavan, H., & Gendall, P. (2011). Spirituality and religion in the lives of New Zealanders. *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 1(2), 85–96. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v01i02/51159>
- van Doremalen, N., Bushmaker, T., Morris, D. H., Holbrook, M. G., Gamble, A., Williamson, B. N., et al. (2020). Aerosol and surface stability of SARS-CoV-2 as compared with SARS-CoV-1. *New England Journal of Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMc2004973>
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2020). Love of neighbour during pandemic: Navigating the competing goods of religious gatherings and physical health. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01031-6>
- Ward, K. (2013). *Losing our religion? Changing patterns of believing and belonging in secular western societies*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Wilson, N., Barnard, L. T., & Baker, M. (2020). *Rationale for border control interventions and options to prevent or delay the arrival of Covid-19 in New Zealand: Final commissioned report for the New Zealand Ministry of Health*. Wellington: University of Otago.
- Yezli, S., & Khan, A. (2020). COVID-19 social distancing in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Bold measures in the face of political, economic, social and religious challenges. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmaid.2020.101692>
- Zhang, K. C. (2020). Unended quest: Life goals, values, and immigrant parents in New Zealand. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01017-4>

Zhang, K. C., & Zhang, A. (2017). Dare to dream: Personal values, life goals, and international students in New Zealand. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 56, 1503–1514. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0307-7>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.