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The Rt Hon Baroness Hallett DBE
UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry
FREEPOST

Sent by email only

22 March 2024

Dear Lady Hallett

Re: Evidence on closing places of worship

Thank you for the work that you and your team are doing to examine the UK's response to, and impact of, the Covid-19 pandemic. This is essential for learning lessons for the future.

As we approach the fourth anniversary of the first UK-wide lockdown at the start of the pandemic, we are writing to share the findings of our survey on Covid and places of worship and to ask you to conduct a dedicated evidence session with faith leaders as part of this Inquiry.

As you may know, the Catholic Union works to represent the views and interests of the 4.5 million Catholics in Britain and advance the common good. We bring the experience and expertise of Catholic laity from all walks of life and every part of the United Kingdom into the public sphere.

The pandemic had an impact on people's lives in every possible way, and many continue to live with Covid or the effects of the virus and the lockdowns that were enforced. The particular impact on people of faith should not be overlooked.

We were pleased to see that the terms of reference for this Inquiry include specific reference to the closure and reopening of places of worship. It is vitally important that this is properly considered as part of the wider consideration of the public health response to the pandemic across the UK.

The closure of churches along with other places of worship was a source of deep sadness and regret to Catholics across the country. While many people endured hardships during the pandemic, there was a deep sense that decision makers did not fully understand the importance of churches to people of faith and were too slow in allowing them to reopen.

The need for better engagement with faith groups was acknowledged by the Government with the launch of the Independent Faith Engagement Review. The final report was published in April 2023, although this did not contain any specific assessment of the closure and reopening of places of worship during the pandemic or the impact this had on people.

At the last Census, over 60 percent of people in England and Wales described themselves as belonging to one religion or another. There is a clear public need and interest in this Inquiry taking matters relating to the closure and reopening places of worship seriously.

As you know, freedoms in relation to religious belief and worship are also underpinned by a number of international and domestic legal protections, including the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In Scotland, it was ultimately a legal challenge that resulted in places of worship being able to reopen fully.

Last year, the Catholic Union carried out a survey of our members and supporters about their views and experiences of the closure of places of worship during the pandemic. 62 percent of responders said that their physical or mental health had been affected by church closures, with 90 percent of people saying that places of worship should not be forced to close in any future pandemic.

The Catholic Union of Great Britain: The Voice of Catholics in Public Life

President: Professor the Baroness Hollins of Wimbledon FRCPsych, FRCPCH, FRCP hon, FCMSA, FHEA, FIPD
Vice-Presidents: The Baroness Hooper CMG DSG, Mike Kane MP, Mary Glindon MP, Alexander Stafford MP,
Rt Hon Ruth Kelly, Stephen Pound, Professor John J Haldane FRSE, Dr Terence Morris MBE, John Deighan KSG,
Dr Anthony P Cole JP KCSG KC*HS, Michael Henderson KSG KCHS

Our President, Baroness Hollins, described the results as “shocking” and said that “it’s clear from these results that places of worship should never be forced to close again.” The full results can be found as an Appendix to this letter.

We would be delighted to come and see you or someone else from the Inquiry team to talk about our survey results and how decisions around the closure and reopening of places of worship, and the impact this had on people, can be properly considered as part of this public inquiry.

We would be happy to provide any assistance that might be helpful in arranging a dedicated evidence session with faith leaders, and would be pleased to provide evidence ourselves.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Nigel Parker

Director, The Catholic Union of Great Britain

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Appendix 1

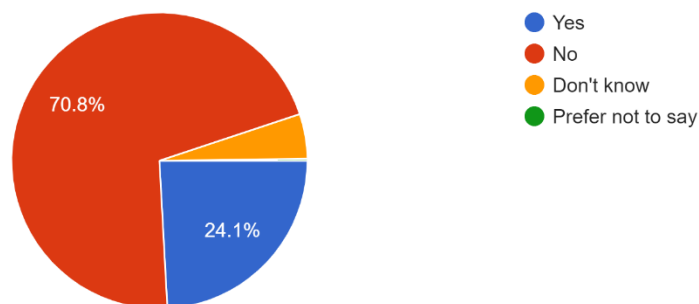
Results from the survey of the Catholic Union of Great Britain on Covid and Places of Worship

Background

- The survey was hosted on Google Docs and promoted to all members and supporters of the Catholic Union
- The survey was live from 16 October 2023 – 30 November 2023
- 907 people took part

Do you think it was necessary to close churches, and other places of worship, by law at the start of the pandemic?

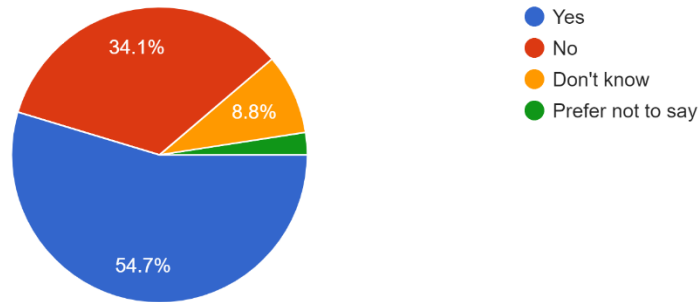
903 responses



Excluding “Don’t know” and “Prefer not to say”

- 25% of responders thought it was necessary to close churches and other places of worship by law at the start of the pandemic
- 75% of responders thought it was not necessary to close churches and other places of worship by law at the start of the pandemic

Did the closure of churches during the pandemic have an impact on your physical or mental health?
900 responses

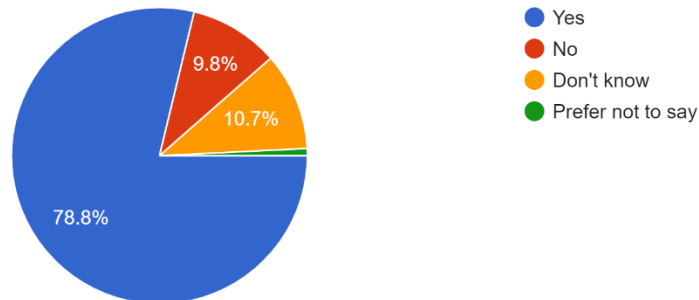


Excluding "Don't know" and "Prefer not to say"

- 62% of responders said that the closure of churches during the pandemic had an impact on their physical or mental health
- 38% of responders said that the closure of churches during the pandemic did not have an impact on their physical or mental health

Do you think that it was unhelpful having different legal restrictions on churches across different regions and nations of the UK?

900 responses

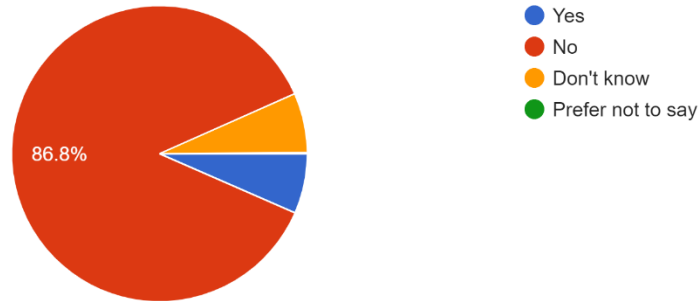


Excluding "Don't know" and "Prefer not to say"

- 89% of responders said that it was unhelpful having different legal restrictions on churches across different regions and nations of the UK
- 11% of responders said that it was not unhelpful having different legal restrictions on churches across different regions and nations of the UK

Do you think that politicians gave enough consideration to people's faith when making decisions during the pandemic?

903 responses

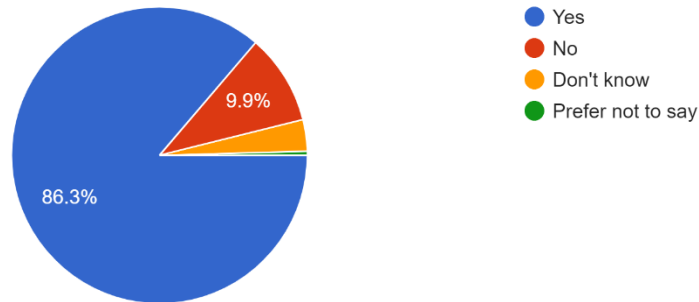


Excluding "Don't know" and "Prefer not to say"

- 7% of responders thought that politicians gave enough consideration to people's faith when making decisions during the pandemic
- 93% of responders did not think that politicians gave enough consideration to people's faith when making decisions during the pandemic

If there were another pandemic, do you think places of worship should be viewed as "essential" along with places such as food shops and healthcare facilities?

903 responses



Excluding "Don't know" and "Prefer not to say"

- 90% of responders thought that places of worship should be viewed as "essential" if there were another pandemic
- 10% of responders did not think that places of worship should be viewed as "essential" if there were another pandemic