

Loving Churches in a Time of Covid

- ❖ Why have people visited churches during the 2019–2021 Covid pandemic?
- ❖ What have people missed most when they have been unable to visit churches due to lockdowns?
- ❖ Are historic churches perceived differently from other heritage buildings in times of personal or national crisis?
- ❖ To what extent do 21st-century needs include quiet, peaceful, set-aside spaces in which to contemplate life – and death?

In the first lock-down in March 2020, churches and other places of worship in the United Kingdom were closed to the public: This resulted in an outcry from religious communities as well as from many secular church enthusiasts, often dubbed 'church crawlers'. In June 2020, the churches opened again for 'private prayer'. People of all faiths and none took up the offer to sit in 'private prayer' in these buildings, a discovery in line with the statistics that reveal that while the majority do not consider themselves religious, few call themselves atheists, and most pray. (NatCen, 2015; ComRes, 2018)

According to the National Churches Trust (NCT), the numbers of visitors to churches have traditionally been underestimated. The NCT's digital visitor counters show that the number of visitors to churches is 15 times higher than estimated. In September–December 2018, visitor counters showed a foothold of 1,761, compared with the 378 visitors who signed the visitor books all that year. Ongoing surveys indicate that numbers of visitors have even increased during the current pandemic. (University of York, 'Churches, Communities and Buildings During Covid and Beyond', 2020) We are only beginning to realise that far more people visit churches than is generally assumed. Data on *why* these visits are made is even more limited.

In the course of my research into the present roles and future fates of the medieval churches in the English county of Norfolk, I conducted a couple of informal online polls last year, with the intent of determining whether, and if so to what extent, the Covid-19 pandemic was in any way affecting the relationship people, both religious and non-religious, had with churches. These online polls, conducted on the Historic Churches of Norfolk and the Church Crawlers Anonymous Facebook pages in December 2020, suggest that a significant proportion of people visit churches for reasons other than worship. Many of these people self-identify as non-religious, despite which their visits – for peace and quiet – can be labelled as self-care.

Poll results.

Reason for visit:

<i>public worship</i>	30%
<i>private prayer</i>	24%
<i>peace and quiet</i>	17%
<i>church crawling</i>	62% – whereof 21% also profited from the peace and quiet

A preliminary conclusion must be that far from an irrelevance, historic churches are, at least in the time of Covid, being used as a spiritual resource for the religious and non-religious alike. The current pandemic seems to highlight the continued spiritual needs of the non-religious and to suggest that a straightforward correlation of shrinking numbers of Sunday worshippers with a decreasing spiritual engagement with our historic churches may be a mistake.



Marie S. E. Clausen, MA

COVID-19: Adventure in a Secular Age: Anecdotes of Durham Cathedral (Burlington 2018-2017)
Marie S. E. Clausen, MA, is an Assistant Professor of Art History, Uppsala University, Sweden and PhD student in Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada
My research explores the current role and future of (medieval) religious heritage, with a specific focus on the possibility of continued spiritual use of historic churches in a post-Christian – but also increasingly post-secular – Western world.



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