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# From acting as a crutch to activating as a catalyst: a spectrum of responses from Irish adults regarding religious education and faith development in COVID times

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## ABSTRACT

The Adult Religious Education and Faith Development project (AREFD) was launched in 2018 at the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education, DCU. As part of the study, the research team consulted variety of people involved in AREFD across a range of contexts. The purpose of these consultations was to harness their 'lived wisdom', showcasing the wide variety of opportunities for engagement in and identifying possible new approaches to AREFD. When COVID-19 struck, the research team availed of the opportunity to discuss the impact of the pandemic on the religious education and faith development of this particular cohort of Irish adults. Thematically analysed, the data showed a spectrum of responses. The pandemic prompted deep reflection and a re-evaluation of the importance of religion and faith in their lives. Ranging from gaining comfort and solace from their faith to being moved to acts of compassion and altruism based on their religious beliefs, the impact of the pandemic on the faith lives of these Irish adults was diverse. This paper provides an account of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the faith lives of some Irish adults, prompting reflection on how this impact might shape the future of AREFD in Ireland.

## KEYWORDS

Adult education; faith development; Ireland; COVID-19

## Introduction

This paper emerges from a research project that started in a pre-Covid world, continued throughout the pandemic, and although based in Ireland may contribute to discourse on the impact of COVID-19 on adult religious education in other contexts worldwide. The Adult Religious Education and Faith Development (AREFD) project was launched in late 2018 at the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education in Dublin City University. With a projected timeline of 3 years, COVID-19 and the consequent restrictions and lockdowns emerged just under halfway through that timeframe. As to be expected, this greatly impacted upon the original trajectory of the AREFD research study. On a positive note, over time it opened up unforeseen avenues for investigation within the project. The research team were now dealing with participants whose daily lives had suddenly changed. For some, their previous engagements with religious education and faith development were being seen through new and unfamiliar lenses. An overview of the AREFD project as originally envisaged is provided below and brief commentary given on how the research team had to recalibrate due to the impact of COVID-19. It also provides a parallel narrative to the experiences of the Irish adults

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regarding their religious education and faith development in COVID-times according to the AREFD data. This narrative is structured as follows:

- (1) Stop and reflect
- (2) Recalibrate and articulate
- (3) Learn and act

The data for this paper are presented using the same structure. These data are from the consultations in phase 2 of the AREFD project, and any direct quotations are given pseudonym labels such as P1, P2, P3 and so on. Reference to literature is offered concurrently as this reflects the reality of the thematic data analysis process. Connections between the emergent literature and the data evolved as the AREFD project continually adapted to the COVID-19 context.

### **The AREFD project: an overview**

Launched in October 2018, this was initially a three-year project and due to the impact of COVID-19, it was extended to December 2022. Broadly speaking, the project was created to facilitate a re-energising of adult religious education and faith development in Ireland. Prior to the AREFD project, the bulk of research in religious education and faith development in Ireland concentrated on the school setting and the sacramental preparation of young people. While there have been religious education and faith development activities underway across Ireland involving adults for many years, there was a sense that most were either in the formal education or training for ministry scenarios (Codd 2017). There have been occasional talks and short-term projects at local level, though often involving the same groups of people according to anecdotal evidence. An overarching aim of the AREFD project was to empirically explore the AREFD sector in order to discover and document the needs of adults in relation to their religious education and faith development. The research team also sought to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches and hopefully propose new models of AREFD in Ireland and beyond, building on research-based evidence. The original strategy was traditional in its approach. Year 1 would see a literature review commence and an online scoping survey designed and conducted. Year 2 would involve some follow-up qualitative research on individuals and/or groups already established in AREFD in order to learn from their 'lived wisdom'. Pilot projects would be identified and supported moving into Year 3. Finally, this would culminate in reports and proposals for new initiatives in the AREFD domain. The COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, just as the research team had begun phase 2. It would impact upon the practical aspects of conducting the research yet also provided a new lens to examine data as well as shaping the future development of the overall project.

### ***The AREFD project in COVID times: stop and reflect***

As everybody's 'normal setting' had stopped, so too did the AREFD project timeline. In the short term, work such as analysis of data from the phase 1 survey and the preparation of manuscripts for publication became the initial focus. Over the course of the first year of the AREFD project, the research team were aware of a growing level of interest in the study and were eager to keep up this momentum. While the total number of respondents to the survey was only 738, it was more so the opening up of the conversation around AREFD that encouraged the research team to pursue the research in spite of the obstacles imposed by COVID-19. One key learning from the early analysis of the survey data that spurred on the research team involved the responses to the question 'What would encourage you to become more involved in AREFD?' Respondents highlighted the 'atmosphere of respect' (48%), and a feeling a sense of 'contributing to the 'bigger picture' (48%). 'Blending learning' (43%) was also the preferred mode. More detailed analysis of the data can be found in Byrne and Sweetman (2021b); Sweetman (2021). It was noteworthy, however, that whilst

respondents were quite vocal in the online survey about describing past experiences of religious education and faith development, there were less data gathered when respondents were invited to articulate future opportunities. In other words, the desire for new or updated AREFD and how it might be developed was not clearly communicated. Religious literacy was an obstacle. COVID-19 unexpectedly would put some spotlight on this issue of religious literacy. As time passed, the research team could see opportunities to contribute to the development of religious literacy and normalising discourse on AREFD from data gathered in the consultation phase of the project.

The Phase 2 consultation phase comprised of individuals and focus groups involving 22 people working in adult religious education and faith development, in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and across a variety of settings. Contexts in which the participants worked included retreat centres; pilgrimage sites; Catholic school management; academic research in religious education; training for voluntary pastoral ministry; evangelical ministry; diocesan advisory services at primary and post-primary level; youth ministry; and parish ministry. Having conducted five interviews/focus groups prior to lockdown, continued restrictions necessitated that the research team resume the consultation phase fully online. All remaining consultations were conducted online between March 2020 and April 2021 in accordance with the DCU protocol for Zoom, in addition to the existing Ethics protocols. As the consultations progressed, the impact of COVID-19 naturally arose in the conversations insofar as the participants explained what they had to stop doing, change doing, and why. It is noteworthy that some consultations conducted pre-COVID had already raised the significance of reflection and reflective practice. Participants who before now implemented reflective practice were able to explain its benefits:

The process has also allowed us to begin to understand that and to help us have the confidence more than the understanding, but the confidence as a team to move forward and make some of the changes that we know are necessary to make. (P2)

Some also commented on the collaborative nature of evaluation:

I think one of the benefits of self-evaluation is to actually audit where you are at a given period, a given point in time. That's a snapshot of where you are and what you're doing. But one of the biggest things that I've got out of this is that by involving so many stakeholders in the auditor evaluation process ... it has actually challenged all the participants, all the stakeholders to look at what they can invest and what they can own and by owning in then, how much do they value it and what part can they play. (P3)

While it was practically mandatory during the pandemic that normal activities stopped, reflection and reflective practice was something of an unexpected offshoot for some. As the consultations continued, the research team noted a growing awareness amongst participants as to their current levels of reflection and reflective practice:

It's funny to sit down to talk, because we never do this. (P13)

We don't. We've never talked like this. We just work. (P12)

Being faced with having to reflect because of their 'new normal' highlighted how such a practice was or was not already in place:

But we don't really know what we realised because we're doing it because we have to. (P5)

One referred to the sense of urgency brought about by the restrictions and the sudden impact it had on their work:

we found ourselves that we had a plan ... a program. All these things set up and we just closed down. I think pretty much as soon as Leo said to close down and I just had the sense that we must go online, we must do something, because otherwise we get lost. (P17)

COVID-19 interrupted our lives in a largescale manner that was unprecedented for the majority of people. Interruption in theological terms is not a new concept however. Boeve (2007) in

particular presents this theology of interruption in many aspects of his writings across multiple contexts. For this paper, two struck the research team as they dealt with the impact of COVID-19 on the AREFD project. In the specific formal learning environment, Stuart-Buttle (2014) discusses a number of ways how 'learning viewed through a lens of interruption carries resonance for theological education' (69) She goes on to explore the relevance of interruption 'when traditional courses are moved into the online environment' (69). Recalling how P17 above commented about have the sense that they 'must go online ... must do something ... otherwise we will be lost', the language in the literature of Boeve (2007), Stuart-Buttle (2014) as well as Stern (2013) when he explains that real learning involves surprise is very helpful when attempting to put words on these new experiences in COVID-19. It may seem somewhat contradictory to say, but the speed at which everything stopped due to COVID-19 resulted in actions, and more often reactions, occurring before they could be properly articulated. Speaking specifically about Church, Pillay (2020) contended that COVID-19 shifted churches into a 'revolutionary' space, by which he meant 'fast, forced and very different ways of thinking and being Church today' (267). This echoes how we are accustomed to a much slower pace, not just in Church but also in education and society generally, where we would have what we now see to be the luxury of time for planning, discussing, refining strategies and so on.

### *The AREFD project in COVID times: recalibrate and articulate*

Commentary during the initial period of COVID-19 largely focused on early reactionary responses (Sweetman 2020). Some indicated that faith was helping them 'to cope' with the pandemic – reiterating the often cited image of religion or faith as a crutch (Foster 2019). Others discussed the immediate measures being put in place, particularly by clergy and ministry teams to 'deal with' the closure of churches (Ganiel 2020). Most discourse at this stage was of a practical and pragmatic nature. The AREFD research team were keen to explore how the language used by those involved in AREFD for a substantial time already might correspond with these 'new-normal' experiences emerging in the general public when forced to stop and reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on their religious education and/or faith development.

The first consultation to take place online after the COVID-19 restrictions were declared had originally been scheduled for the last week of March 2020. Having anticipated an in-person engagement, the participants were already prepared for the discussion and were equipped to conduct the consultation via Zoom without postponement. The consultation involved three members of the team at Lough Derg. Located in the Northwest of Ireland, on an island, this Sanctuary of St. Patrick has been a place of Christian pilgrimage since the fifth century (see [www.loughderg.ie](http://www.loughderg.ie)). The theme of pilgrimage and retreat had emerged as a possible avenue of interest from the online survey. In addition, there has been increased interest across Ireland and elsewhere in rediscovering and rejuvenating pilgrim paths, holy wells and retreats (see Brennan 2019; O'Dwyer 2019; Scriven 2021; Brumec 2022). Being a well-established location of pilgrimage and retreat, the research team anticipated that much could be learned from the 'lived wisdom' of those working at Lough Derg over the years. Unexpectedly, however, the research team soon noticed how the language used by the team in Lough Derg could also be attributed to the experiences of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Lough Derg team were invited to comment on what they felt to be the key characteristics of such a place and the pilgrim experience there. The first response was:

all these experiences where people go to the edge and push the boundaries and so on. So you would need that. You need this thing of a liminal to use that language. You need a liminal space. I mean, in a sense, this is part of the way that Groome sees things that that, you know, you take people from what they're familiar with and you invite them to move into a more liminal space where they are prepared to make something that that they're not

familiar with, that they find that they don't know so securely. . . What they thought they knew and where their feet are always standing. And so there's a chance to shift and to move to somewhere else. (P1)

The first characteristic therefore is named as a liminal space which goes beyond a person's comfort zone bringing with it a possibility for transformation. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 pushed people out of their comfort zones. The parallel is already clear.

Another participant named resilience as an important characteristic. In particular, the conscious building of both physical and mental resilience by way of some form of test was mentioned:

I think that if you were to try to recreate the essential elements of Lough Derg, . . . there would have to be a challenge that tests resilience, that actually tests physical and mental resilience. There would also have to be a sense that it has to be a challenge that can be done either on your own or in community in the sense that you have the option to face this challenge on your own or to share the journey with somebody else. So there has to be an option within it. (P3)

Given the inclement weather, austere conditions, the practice of fasting and the choice of the participants to leave behind their 'creature comforts', it is easy to see how Lough Derg is an ideal environment in which to test physical and mental resilience. COVID-19 created an environment where people's physical and mental resilience, and more, was being put to the test.

The Lough Derg team noted that there is a mixture of individual pilgrims and groups of pilgrims. Some return many times. It is interesting to notice then how one member of the team (P3) pinpointed the significance of the option of community on the island. P3 commented above that the pilgrim facing this test that could build physical and/or mental resilience could face this alone or 'share the journey with others':

There is a sense of a common denominator. You're on an island, you're on a community. You're cut off from the rest of the world. You're all the same. You're all in your bare feet. You're not dressed in your Sunday best. So you're not trying to outdo somebody in fashion. You are there as a humble praying community who is usually there for a purpose. (P3)

P3 speaks of a 'common denominator' and a 'community who is usually there for a purpose'. Similar language was used at government level in Ireland early in the pandemic. In April 2020, the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) launched the nationwide #InThisTogether campaign whereby he called for people to 'Stay Connected, Stay Active and Stay Mentally Well during COVID-19' (Government policy on COVID-19, 2020)

Recalibrating is a natural consequence of an interruption to a journey. COVID-19 forced many adults to become aware of their landmarks that they may have taken for granted. It forced them to acknowledge where they were on their journey and how they might navigate a new direction. In relation to faith, with closure of churches, changes to ceremonies and the realisation of what really matters when the comfort of the habitual is removed, many people searched words to express their feelings and explore how to move forward. This articulation was similar to pressing a fast-forward button on the general level of religious literacy amongst Irish adults. The AREFD team sought to bring the religious literacy of the study participants, notably the Lough Derg team, into conversation with ongoing general discourse of COVID-19's impact on people's overall wellbeing. In doing so, it contributes to normalising discourse on faith-related matters.

### *The AREFD project in COVID times: learn and act*

Beyond the reactionary responses and initial steps put in place to 'cope' with COVID-19 in religious education and faith development, the AREFD research team sought to examine key learnings from this experience and how these could be strategically built-in to future developments so as to be proactive and ready whatever may transpire. As consultations continued during the period of 2020–2021, while lockdowns and restrictions were eased and reintroduced,

it emerged for some of those consulted that their community had changed. This is to say that, as providers of AREFD, they felt their communities, the people with whom they were engaged, had altered:

And, you know, we're discovering what the needs are from the people who don't normally show up at the door. Yes. Yeah, I well, I say we're discovering it's embryonic for us ... And you know, the crowd on social media are different and they communicate differently. (P5)

A big talking point in public discourse was how churchgoing 'moved' online and how people felt about this. For some time, numerous religious organisations have had an online dimension (Campbell 2010). The difference has been that COVID-19 forced some religious organisations to embrace an online presence and this has produced a variety of effects depending on the context (see Kühle and Langholm Larsen 2021; Taragin-Zeller and Kessler 2021).

Studies exploring churchgoing amidst the pandemic showed high numbers of online presence (see [www.yorkstjohn.ac.uk/coronavirus-church-and-you/](http://www.yorkstjohn.ac.uk/coronavirus-church-and-you/)). As Pillay (2020) commented, the pandemic forced many churchgoers, and perhaps those who had not previously regularly attended church, to rethink 'how we gather' (268). Not only did Irish adults have to find new ways of gathering but perhaps also articulate why they wished to gather in the first place.

In the beginning, the online space provided an atmosphere of novelty but proved challenging when it came to maintaining a sense of connection over a longer period.

So that's the sense of the excitement, of the newness of coming into a Zoom group has gone and people just don't want information. (P17)

It was not particularly surprising that physicality was raised as a characteristic of the Lough Derg experience. This pilgrimage is located on an island in the northwest of Ireland where the weather is often severe and pilgrims choose to fast, walk barefoot and get by on very little sleep. As COVID-19 progressed, however, the AREFD team noted the emergence of the theme of physicality in religious education and faith development in two ways. The absence of in-person gathering highlighted the significance of physical presence. On a zoom call or through a webcam, one cannot experience the same sensations. The smell of incense at a funeral, or the surrounding sound of a congregation singing, even the motion of kneeling, sitting and standing throughout the order of the mass could not be the same in an online environment as it would be when physically gathered. These rituals became more important for people as the COVID-19 restrictions continued. Perhaps, it was a case of not realising the importance of something until it was removed. The second aspect of physicality related to action and agency. One member of the clergy involved in the consultations noted how laypeople during COVID-19 were taking more responsibility for their own religious education and faith development. Speaking about funerals, he remarked that more people were leading prayers, saying the rosary, blessing with holy water and so on, than he was previously accustomed to. Similarly, he commented about the way parents had to take a stronger leadership role in the faith formation of their children when school involvement altered and Communion and Confirmation ceremonies were postponed. Baptisms and marriages were similarly affected. P6 saw the COVID-19 experience as having a catalyst effect on people literally 'taking action' and living out their baptismal call more readily:

often we go in because we do everything for people robbing them of their own capacity and their own skills, kind of going in as the experts. (P6)

P6 raises the issue of agency and empowerment that has been a significant feature of the overall AREFD data analysis. Respondents to the online study referred to their understanding of certain 'work' within the Church being the remit of either the clergy or a certain type of person who is 'holy enough' for the task. Overall, in both the online survey and consultations, there was a clear sense of inertia and a resultant despondency for the future of the faith in the landscape of religious education

and faith development (see Sweetman 2021). In conversation with a layperson (P8), P6 emphasised the importance of strategic investment, training and support for those involved in adult religious education and faith development:

that won't happen by just hoping it will happen. You know, there needs to be another layer. (P6)

But at the same time, if there isn't somebody who can be a catalyst for drawing people together to think for creating a new model. Nothing can happen, you know?. (P8)

This suggests that there is a significance in incorporating more strategic planning in AREFD, particularly in the area of competent and confident personnel.

## Discussion and recommendations

### *Acting as a crutch to activating as a catalyst: the importance of reflective practice and religious literacy*

Reflective practice had already emerged as an important theme in the early consultations of phase 2 of the project pre-COVID-19 whereby those people with a lot of experience in AREFD were articulating how they evaluate their positions on a regular basis. Such evaluation helps them to ensure that they are still operating optimally, addressing people's current needs and updating their methodologies and materials accordingly. The existing competency in religious literacy and articulation among the participants involved in the consultation phase enabled them to discuss their COVID-19 experience in ways that may have challenged others less accustomed to reflective practice. In contrast, for the general population during COVID-19, reflection on their religious practices and faith development needs was somewhat forced upon them by the sudden closure of churches, and the postponement of sacramental ceremonies such as Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmation and Marriage. Possibly, the religious ceremony most impacted upon was the funeral (see Shortall 2021; Lefebvre 2022). Such forced reflection led some people who were not in the habit of thinking deeply or conversing with others about faith-related matters to do exactly that. Being able to put words to these reflections was important so that people could process these unprecedented experiences both as individuals and then share them as communities. As time progressed, it was evident that there was a development from describing faith as a means of coping or dealing with the shock of the pandemic, to describing how faith moved people towards action. In particular, reflecting on the newly articulated value of faith in one's life propelled some people into action, working as a catalyst. Learning from the pandemic is a feature across many aspects of society that is leading towards strategic action in the future. In education, this includes the increased use of IT in the classroom and hybrid learning especially in higher education. For churchgoers and those involved in adult religious education, they too can learn from the pandemic and use this learning to best inform new approaches and initiatives. The issues and themes raised by the participants as reported in this paper may prove useful as baseline prompts in broader studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the faith lives of adults more generally.

### *Normalising discourse on adult religious education and faith development: the importance of connection highlighted in a time of crisis*

From social distancing to 'being in this together', connection and disconnection were strong features of the COVID-19 impact on society. How we felt isolated and what created a sense of connection during such times of isolation differed. For many, vulnerability and risk were heightened experiences during the pandemic. It is interesting to note then in particular the emergence of the theme of resilience, specifically in relation to the data from Lough Derg. Resilience relates to vulnerability. Ayres (2021) explored trauma-informed education stating that 'religious education for precarious times cultivates open-heartedness and resilience' in contrast to being seen as a spiritual escape from vulnerability (329). This also rings true when looking at the COVID-19 scenario. Culture teaches us to strive for certainty, assurance and security but

often ignores the reality of the vulnerability we all have. COVID-19 was a sharp and sudden global reminder that life is precarious. Ayres also cites Butler (2004) when explaining how all humans are vulnerable, prone to all sorts of pain, and certain of death and yet society would seem to tempt us to strive for invulnerability (327). Invulnerability, Butler (2004) continues, disconnects us from each other. This disconnection is the antithesis of one of the core aspects of faith and religious education – that of community and relationship. COVID-19 reminded everyone of our interdependence.

Shortly before the pandemic, Callid Keefe-Perry and Moon (2019) wrote about the importance of trauma-informed adult religious education. Based on the principle that trauma damages a person's capacity to relate, they began to weave insights from trauma analysis with the insights of theologians Mary Elizabeth Moore and Rebecca Chopp. They proposed that adult religious education would benefit from more strategic approaches and targeted interventions built on developing 'imaginative practices of courageous risk-taking for connection' (p.30) Those involved in AREFD could benefit from their recommendation of recognising how religious education can assist in developing for adults the "skills for living with the instability" (35).

## Conclusion

Adults' faith lives and their engagement with religious education and faith development have been and will continue to be affected by myriad of events ranging from cultural, political and social. In the past, scandals have rocked the Church, while Christian witnesses have inspired generations. In the future, there will no doubt be more change, positive and negative. The unusual aspect of this pandemic has been its explosive and sometimes implosive nature. Its speed and its vastness quickly forced people to stop and reflect with little or no notice on aspects of life that some may have felt unable to deal with. The stealth of COVID-19 in spreading across so many areas of daily life necessitated creative thinking to adapt to the 'new normal'. It also pushed people to articulate their values in justifying why they felt such losses or such new opportunities as their lives changed. As the pandemic progressed and people became more accustomed to their 'new normal', conscious decisions were made to either return to old ways, create new possibilities or perhaps a blend of each.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a deep impact on many, if not all, areas of life and society. The extent of this impact and the identification of specific consequences will take years to uncover. Just as with broader social and educational effects from the pandemic, it is also important to continue to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on people's faith lives and their engagement with adult religious education and faith development in particular. Some recommendations for further investigation include an examination of the variance of impact of COVID-19 when stages of faith development are taken into consideration. It would also be worth exploring the negative as well as positive effects on the faith lives of individuals and communities as a result of the pandemic.

This paper offered some insights and springboards for discussion. Purely as a result of the timing of COVID-19 in the AREFD project, the participants of the phase 2 consultation process who had already committed to explorations on topics related to adult religious education and faith development now had the opportunity to shape their reflections in the context of COVID-19. It is hoped that the learnings from the AREFD project in this regard offer some guidance for ongoing investigation and development in years to come.

## Note

During the pandemic, the AREFD team was invited to conduct the Republic of Ireland sections of two large-scale quantitative studies *Coronavirus, Church & You* and *Covid-19 & Church-21*. These studies were led by researchers at York St. John University in collaboration with Birmingham University and the AREFD team. The data from these surveys no doubt inform the AREFD project in this particular historical time and context. Nonetheless, as the data did not emanate directly within and from the AREFD project, it is not included in this paper. For further information on these studies, please see Byrne and Sweetman (2021c); 2021a; Sweetman (2020); <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/coronavirus-church-and-you/>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

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