

Challenges, stress and support reported by church workers of the LCA/NZ during Covid-19 pandemic restrictions

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On 22 January 2020 Australia recorded its first case of what came to be known as Covid-19. In the months that followed, life in Australia and New Zealand changed in hitherto unseen ways. On 23 March, the Australian Government banned churches from holding public worship and introduced a range of other restrictions, and the New Zealand Government effectively locked down the entire country into their homes. Much of what we had taken for granted was no longer possible, no place to worship publicly, no Holy Communion, no gathering in fellowship. The wider societal implications were no less unimaginable. It was almost impossible to buy toilet paper, pasta, flour or tinned vegetables, and we were essentially confined to our homes. Throughout this time the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Lutheran Church of New Zealand (LCA/NZ), its workers and members worked hard to support each other and the communities they serve.

To support church leaders, the Church Worker Support Department (of the LCA/NZ) commissioned the Australian Lutheran College to undertake a survey of church workers at two time points so that accurate information could be provided to key decision makers. Pastors, lay workers and other employees were invited, by email, to respond to the two surveys. The initial survey was open to respondents from 30 March to 14 April (Time 1) and the second from 12 to 25 May (Time 2).

While the final report, including data from the second survey, is still in preparation, some preliminary data is available to enable this short report back to the church to be written. The findings from these surveys will not result in academic publications as they were intended to be for internal (to the church) purposes.

Overall 182 people (22.2% of invited church workers) responded to the Time 1 survey and 164 people (20%) to the Time 2 survey. Both surveys include good representation of church workers (pastors, lay workers and other employees) from all districts and in various places of service. Across both surveys approximately 60% of respondents were male, 62% respondents were employed/serving full-time, and approximately 46% of respondents were pastors, 27% lay workers and 27% other employees.

Church workers were asked at Time 2 to indicate the extent of change to their workload. Just over 50% of respondents indicated a moderate or significant increase. Figure 1 shows changes to workload by role type of church workers. While a majority of individuals experienced an increase in their workload, around 25% reported that their workload remained consistent, and a further 25% reported a decrease. Significant increases or

decreases in workload may contribute to [work-related stress](#), with excessive or chronic stress in turn likely to contribute to poor health (physical and psychological).

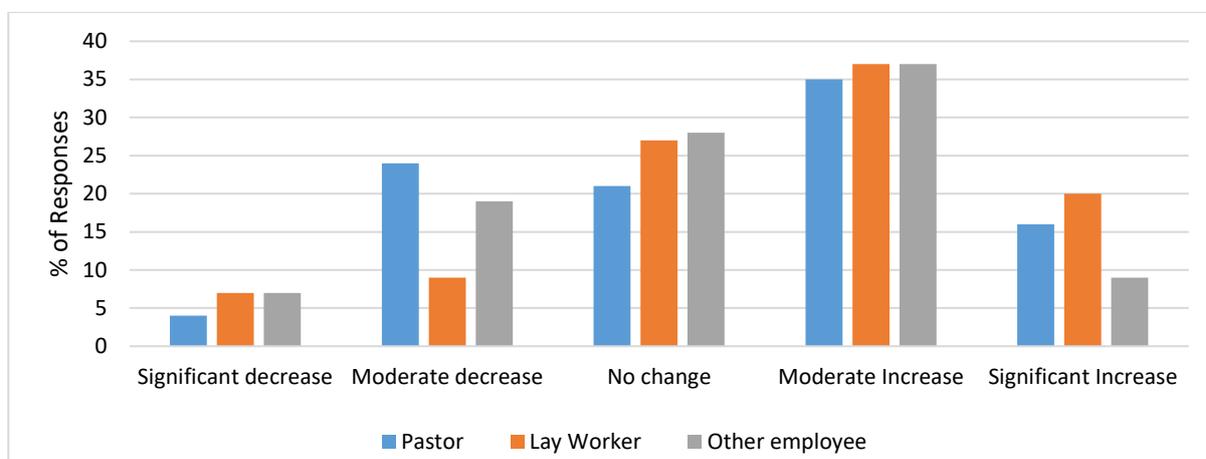


Figure 1. Extent of workload change

Church workers were asked to identify their single greatest challenge at each time point. The free text responses were analysed and fell into six main themes as follows:

Spiritual practices—e.g. prayer, maintaining worship, loss of Holy Communion

Isolation—e.g. loneliness, distance from loved others, lack of face to face contact

Fear—e.g. fear of COVID-19 and health, financial insecurity, uncertainty about future

Technology—e.g. online content, video production, streaming, Zoom or MS Teams

Concern for Others—e.g. support for older members, serving others, impact on members

Work—e.g. change to work or team, changed routine, impact on role.

Figures 2 and 3 show the responses by role type at Time 1 and 2 respectively. It is clear that at Time 2 more church workers were reporting an aspect related to fear as their single greatest challenge. It is possible that as effective responses evolved to deal with technological issues and supporting others (evidenced by fewer people reporting these as challenges at Time 2), attention switched to other matters. At Time 1 pastors were particularly challenged by issues around worship, prayer and devotional time, and as this period was immediately preceding Easter and at a time of great uncertainty about ability to worship publicly (as restrictions came in to effect), this is hardly surprising. As time passed and mechanisms for remaining in contact with congregation members and worshipping in different ways emerged (together but apart, e.g. church@home), pastors and others faced different and often unknown challenges by Time 2 which were reflected in the theme of fear.

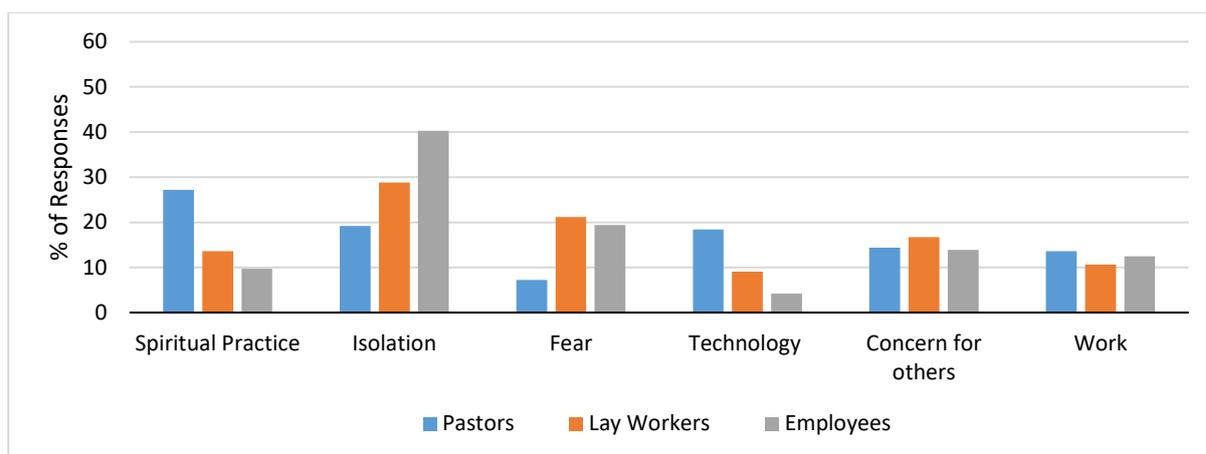


Figure 2. Single Greatest Challenge Time 1

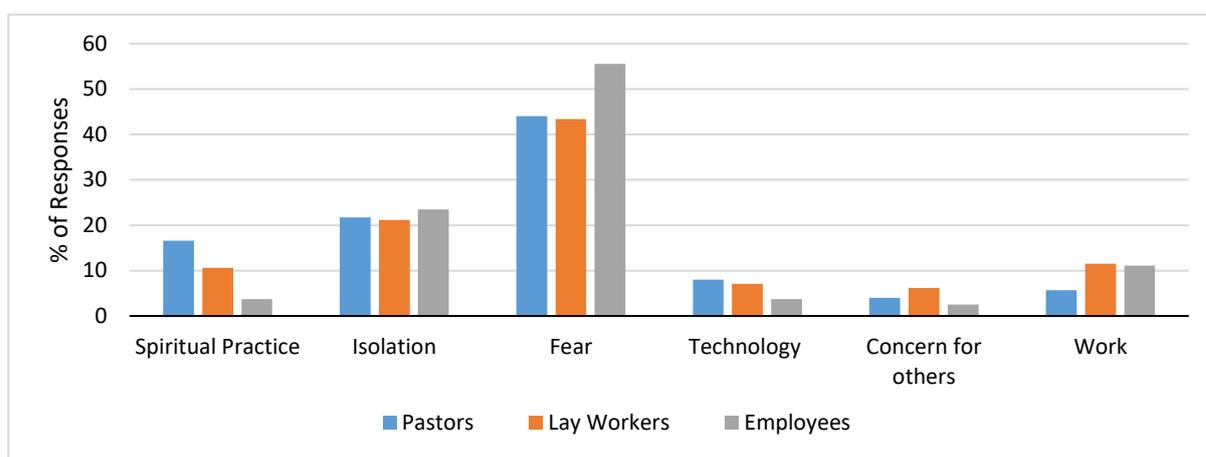


Figure 3. Single Greatest Challenge Time 2

There were similar patterns when people were asked to identify their single greatest cause of stress. Along with the themes related to challenges, 'Fear' was replaced by 'Uncertainty' (related to change, insecurity, no certainty, etc.) and an additional theme of 'Finance' emerged (related to their own personal financial situation, or that of the body they served). At Time 1, family, work and finance were causing the greatest stress. Clearly the greatest source of stress for all church workers at Time 2 was related to uncertainty. It is likely that with JobKeeper and other structural supports in place, some of the early stressors related to finance and welfare of family were relieved to an extent.

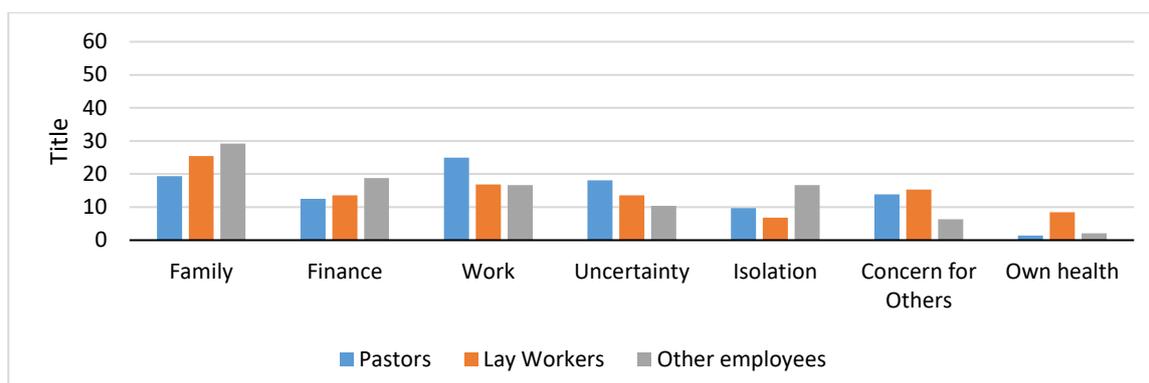


Figure 4. Cause of most stress Time 1

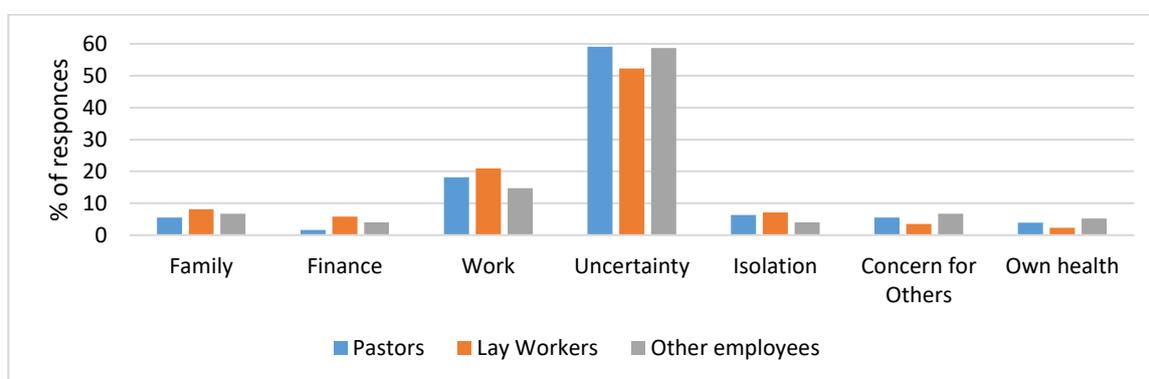


Figure 5. Cause of most stress Time 2

On a positive note, at both points in time, the overwhelming majority of respondents (94% and 96% respectively) could identify a positive outcome from the Covid-19 pandemic. These focussed around opportunities for greater connection, deeper spiritual practices, more time for enjoyable activities, opportunities to develop new skills, and re-evaluate life choices and activities. These suggests some level of resilience or hope in most church workers, but this has not been explored in more detail as yet.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify what provided the greatest support to them at both time points. Free text responses fell into 6 main themes:

Spiritual practices—e.g. devotions, worship, prayer, Bible, God

Colleagues—e.g. work colleagues, team, leaders

Friends/church community—e.g. friends, church family, other networks, pastor

Family—e.g. parents, children

Spouse/Partner

Technology—e.g. online resources, internet, Zoom/MS Teams

Pastors tended to more frequently report that their spouse was the main source of support than lay workers or other employees. Lay workers and other employees tended to draw support from colleagues to a greater extent, particularly at Time 2. Spiritual practices provided high levels of support for all church worker types at both time points. Given that Christians place high emphasis on relationship with God and fellowship with others, it should not be surprising to see that spiritual practices and colleagues were frequently reported as sources of support during these periods.

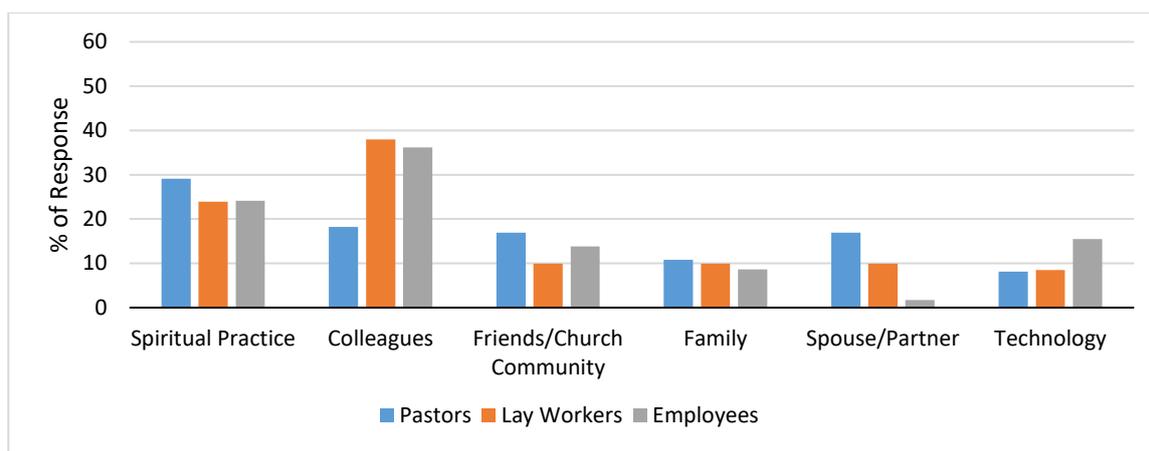


Figure 6. Greatest Support Time 1

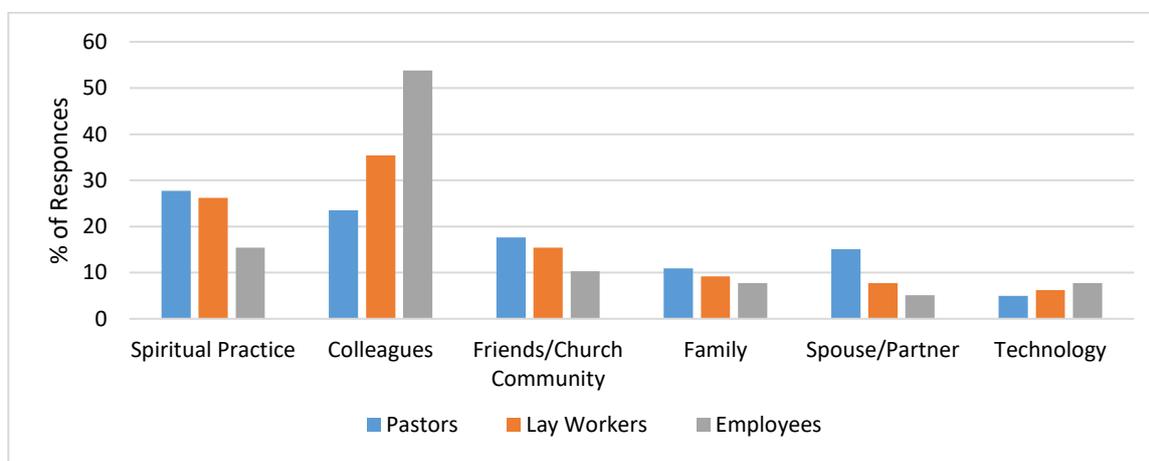


Figure 7. Greatest Support Time 2

The pandemic forced us to consider the rapidity and scale of change that could be forced upon us which resulted in so much uncertainty. One thing the surveys confirmed was that for the vast majority of church workers, the pace and scale of change required in a short period of time led to stress. Moving forward, do we need to increase the ability of church workers to respond to changing circumstances in a way that results in less stress? While the message of the gospel is unchanging, the way we share it can change as was shown

by a great many congregations and church workers, even if they were stressed as a result of the rapidity of the changes they made to maintain connection and community.

What these surveys also show is the need for the church to be able to provide support for those serving it. The inter-individual differences highlighted in the survey confirm the need for approaches that can be flexibly applied to suit individual and local needs. There cannot be a 'one-size fits all' approach to support. That the greatest supports for church workers were spiritual practices (27%) and connection with people (64%) should not be surprising for Christians and yet 'Isolation' was reported as a challenge by about 25–30 per cent of church workers at both time points. Moving forward in the short term, this suggests there is an opportunity to work on forging stronger supportive networks for church workers to minimise isolation.

Finally, these surveys have provided a sound rationale for a more fine-grained research project to investigate and monitor church worker wellbeing in more detail and over a longer period of time. A shared understanding of the issues will provide a platform from which to explore opportunities to create flexible, agile, evidence-based frameworks to support church workers in their local contexts.

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