



Church growth

The numbers



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Christianity has undergone profound change over the past decades in Britain, and overwhelmingly the dominant narrative of this change has been that the Church is in decline, perhaps irreversibly so. The picture does, indeed, seem bleak. However, research undertaken in the past five years indicates that perhaps the story is more complex than we sometimes hear. Indeed, there is good reason to believe the Church in Britain is growing, at least in some places. While the significant challenges facing the Church should not be ignored, finding growth where it is happening provides very real opportunity for impactful learning and reflection.

There are a number of ways of defining and thinking about 'church growth'. In this article, I will refer to three loose categories, with the acknowledgement that this treatment is far from exhaustive. Firstly, church growth can refer to an increase in the number of individuals attending church with some regularity, perhaps at least once a month. Secondly, church growth can refer to an increase in church communities (church planting or founding), underpinned by net increase in individuals participating in church as a whole. Finally, growth may be in trends that do not appear at top level, perhaps what we might term micro-growth. This could be, for example, where there has been significant demographic change within a church, with no change overall in net attendance, or by paying attention to congregation churn – where new people have been brought to church, but not enough to result in net growth of individuals due to loss of others.

Below I shall refer primarily to the first two types of growth, but it is worth noting here that measuring church growth has considerable methodological challenges. All approaches have some margin of error. Beyond this, however, it is essential to note that growth may be taking place in unexpected ways, among the margins of our view, and in ways that break long-held labels and boundaries. This growth is likely to be hidden and currently unaccounted for. As such, the trends we observe are only ever indicative of a far bigger and more complex picture.

Growth amid decline?

It is difficult to get a complete and conclusive view of church attendance in the UK. While a number of denominations produce detailed data sets, for a wide view, researchers must turn to large population surveys such as the British Social Attitudes survey.

Run every year since 1983, the British Social Attitudes survey reveals dramatic change in the religious landscape of Britain. Most notably, of the adult population describing their religion as Christianity has dropped significantly since the survey began.

Current Religious Affiliation <i>percentage of British population</i>		
	1983	2016
Christian	67	41
No religion	31	53

Affiliation with the Church of England/Anglican church has declined the most, falling from 40% to 15%. Roman Catholic and 'other' Christians have remained more stable.¹

Affiliation with Christianity is not necessarily indicative of active, participatory faith, however, and, when speaking of church growth and decline, it is perhaps more fruitful to look at patterns in church attendance. While self-reported church attendance is likely to have some margin of error that means we should approach the data somewhat cautiously, it is interesting to see that while decline in monthly or more churchgoing is present, it is nowhere near as pronounced as in affiliation.

The table below shows the steady decline in church attendance in England and Wales between 1997 and 2016, although other denominations have remained more consistent, rising slightly by 0.7% in the same period.²

Church attendance (at least once a month) in England and Wales, as a percentage of the adult population		
	1997	2016
Overall	16.1	13.9
Anglican	5.9	4.3
Catholic	4.7	3.4
Other denominations	5.5	6.2

While data sets such as these are valuable in elucidating long-term trends, inevitably smaller, less powerful counter trends, such as pockets of growth, can be hidden. Within 2016, for example, the Church of England report that while usual Sunday attendance has decreased in 38% of its parishes, in 11% attendance has increased, while in 52% there has been no clear trend.³ Similar trends are apparent in research undertaken by the Baptist Union of Britain in 2015. It was found that 26% of Baptist churches were growing, while 25% again showed neither growth nor decline.⁴ These pockets of growth are not enough to offset overall decline, but they do suggest a more complex picture than is typically depicted.

New communities

In addition to an increase in attendance in some parts of the Church, a number of sources indicate that there have been a considerable number of churches opened in the past decades. Peter Brierley, for example, estimates that 2,950 new churches were stated between 1989 and 2005 in Britain, while David Goodhew raises this figure, arguing between 1980 and 2010 it is likely over 5,000 new churches were founded.⁵

Regionalised studies are helpful in providing evidence that this trend is nationwide, but also considerably varied. The London Church Census undertaken in 2012, for example, reports the capital has seen significant church growth in recent years. Indeed, Brierley finds on average two

churches every week have been opened – a pattern which has continued for more than seven years.⁶ While concurrently, there have been closures, the net movement is of growth, and is predicted to continue, driven primarily by Pentecostal churches with black majority congregations.⁷

Of course, more churches does not necessarily mean more churchgoers. Growth in attendance at one church may be the result of transfer growth –

in 2015, 26% of Baptist churches grew; in 2016, attendance increased at 11% of Anglican churches

movement from one church to another with no net gain of attendees overall. However, Brierley reports attendance in London has similarly increased, finding churchgoing among individuals up by 16% from 620,000 in 2005 to 721,000 in 2012.⁸

London is almost certainly exceptional in its rate of church planting and growth. Other studies, however, do suggest growth is taking place in other centres as well, such as York and the larger area of the North East.⁹

An interesting trend in all these studies is that growth is mainly outside the historic denominations long-established in the UK. Although there is evidence of growth in Orthodox churches, growing churches are typically likely to be Independent or Pentecostal, and often have high proportions of black and minority ethnic (BAME) attendees within their congregations. In one study of church growth in the North East, for example, researchers estimated 84 out of the 125 new churches identified were largely BAME or had significant BAME presence within the church, particularly notable when only 7–8% of the population in that region come from non-white ethnic groups.¹⁰

Within London, Peter Brierley clearly outlines the strong growth of Black Majority Churches, reporting two thirds of the increase of churches in London in general has been due to the growth of Black Pentecostal churches.¹¹ One church particularly notable for its successful and intentional church planting programme is the Nigerian founded Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), which has had remarkable growth since it was first established in the UK in 1988.¹²

Growth is more limited within the historic denominations but it is not entirely absent. It is difficult to discern what influences church growth here, but it does not seem to be particularly associated with any one worship style or churchmanship. Rather, as David Voas describes, 'growth is coming at the extremes' of both ends of the liturgical scale. What seems most significant

NOTES

1. NatCen, 'British Social Attitudes: Record number of Brits with no religion.' Visit www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/september/british-social-attitudes-record-number-of-brits-with-no-religion/

2. British Social Attitudes survey. Analysis by Jane Parkin for Bible Society.

3. Church of England, *Statistics for Mission 2016*, p. 3.

4. N Spencer, *Doing Good* (London: Theos, 2016), p. 21

5. D Goodhew, 'Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to the Present Day,' in *Church Growth in Britain* (D Goodhew ed.; Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 7.

6. P Brierley, *Capital Growth* (Tonbridge: ADBC Publishers, 2013), p. 19.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 33

8. *Ibid.*, p. 53

9. A-P Cooper and D Goodhew, 'Resacralising secular space: new churches in a northern city, 1980–2012', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32.3 (2017), p. 499; D Goodhew and R Barward-Symmonds, *New Churches in the North East* (Centre for Church Growth, 2015), p. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

11. Brierley, *Capital Growth*, p. 33.

12. The RCCG now has churches in over half of Britain's cities, with membership now of approximately 85,000 individuals R Burgess, 'African Pentecostal Growth: The Redeemed Christian Church of God in Britain,' in *Church Growth in Britain*, p. 130.

NOTES

13. David Voas, 'Intentionality, Numerical Growth and the Rural Church', *Rural Theology* 15.1 (2017), pp. 3–4.

14. For a more complete summary of fresh expression fresh expressions see Church Army's Research Unit, *An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992–2012* (Church Growth Research Programme, 2013), p. 10. See also the article in this edition of *Transmission*.

15. G Lings, 'A History of Fresh Expressions and Church Planting in the Church of England', in *Church Growth in Britain*, p. 175.

16. Church Army, *An analysis of fresh expressions*, p. 30.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

19. L Barley, 'Stirrings in Barchester: Cathedrals and Church Growth', in *Church Growth in Britain*, pp. 82–83.

20. Church of England, *Cathedral Statistics 2016*, p. 23.

21. Barley, 'Stirrings in Barchester', p. 83; Church of England, *Cathedral Statistics 2016*, p. 23.

22. On the strengths and limitations of cathedral statistics see Canon J Holmes and B Kautzer, *Cathedrals, Greater Churches and the Growth of the Church* (Church Growth Research Programme, 2013), pp. 16–21.

is desire to grow, coupled with a willingness to reflect and change.¹³

Similar thoughts were shared at our recent Bible Society workshop on church growth. Here, those who joined us in discussion reflected that a willingness to take risks and accept the possibility of failure was crucial if churches were to grow. The participants reflected many good opportunities for development are missed by a risk averse mindset. Other factors considered to be significant, similarly reflected within wider research, is that it is crucial

there are pockets of growth of Christianity in the UK which give cause for hope

there is strong investment in future leaders and that churches make full use of the diverse talents present within the congregation.

The participants also noted the remarkable success of Fresh Expressions a well-documented growth area within the Anglican Church (e.g. initiatives like Messy Church and Café Church).¹⁴ George Lings estimates there may well be over 1,000 fresh expressions in Britain, but as of yet there are no clear figures to corroborate this.¹⁵ What does seem apparent is church planting in the form of fresh expressions does seem to have had considerable success. Research in ten Anglican dioceses indicates growth from planting fresh expressions has increased fourfold since 2004, and suggest this may be interpreted as the Church of England starting four to five fresh expressions every week.¹⁶

Not all of these churches have remained open, but the majority (62%) either continue to grow numerically or maintain the numbers; 19% did grow but have shrunk, while a further 10% have dissolved.¹⁷ The question is what happened to those who were once part of these groups – did they move to another expression of church?

Fresh expressions are particularly vulnerable to questions of whether their growth is a result of transfer or success in attracting people new to active Christianity. Again, there is no comprehensive data concerning the background of people who attend fresh expressions on a large scale, but what research there is suggests these expressions of church do succeed in attracting a mix of people. Church Army, for example, finds in rough proportion 25% of those who attend are Christian, 35% are de-churched and 40% non-churched, although note this will vary depending on the nature of the fresh expression itself.¹⁸

Growing congregations

A final area of growth worth noting is in that of attendance at worship within regular services in Church of England cathedrals. This growth has

been evident since the late twentieth century and is intriguing because it takes place outside of the trends described above. Growth began around the mid-1990s, prior to which attendance had been in decline alongside local parish church levels.¹⁹ By the turn of the millennium, adult Sunday attendance had reached 16,200 individuals, a figure which with some fluctuation has stayed reasonably consistent; the 2016 attendance rate being estimated at 16,300 adults and 2,400 children.²⁰

Yet, the most dramatic growth has been in those attending mid-week services. In 2000, 4,900 adults attended mid-week services; in 2016, this had risen almost threefold to 14,000. Notably the gains are in adult attendance; child attendance has remained reasonably static at around 4000.²¹

While statistics of cathedral growth can only be taken as indicative patterns, rather than unassailable fact, the intriguing patterns of growth raise questions of who is attending cathedral worship and why.²² The nature of high congregation churn makes this difficult to discern but some evidence suggests that those attending are likely to be de-churched, rather than unchurched. Correspondingly, attendees tend to be older, raising questions over the long-term growth trends for cathedrals as much as parish churches.

New dimensions of growth

We have seen that in Britain there has been a shift in religious identity over the past decades. The majority of the population are no longer likely to call themselves Christian as a default identity, a trend which is even stronger among young people. Those who retain participatory faith are increasingly in a minority position, and as such, growing and deepening confidence in faith may be as necessary as increasing church attendance.

However, the growing literature on church growth indicates that despite overall net decline, there are pockets of lively and significant growth in both attendance and church planting. The research we have on both church growth and decline demonstrates the Church in Britain is changing shape, and undoubtedly will continue to do so as it adapts to the unfolding challenges yet to come. Pockets of growth may not change the overall picture of decline facing Christianity in the UK, but they do give cause for hope, as well as opportunities for learning and reflection. To make full use of the opportunities, however, we must also be open to seeing change and growth happening beyond our normal horizons.