



Figuring it out: evangelistic responses to recent statistics

by *Stephen Cottrell*

Recent research has indicated a decline in numbers attending church. The media seem to enjoy the churches' predicament and the response of church leaders is too often inadequate, writes Stephen Cottrell. So how might these statistics be interpreted and what should our response be?

When I first became a parish priest I inherited a Wednesday morning Eucharist that was usually attended by about ten people. They were mostly retired people who also came to church on Sunday. To be honest, I didn't give the service much attention: it was good that these people wanted to come to church in the week, but I saw it as a purely pastoral provision for those who, either through loneliness or devotion, wanted to make an extra commitment.

After about a year I noticed that the regular Wednesday morning congregation had grown to about fifteen and three of those who were attending never came on Sunday. I visited them in order to try and persuade them to come to church on Sunday. It was not that I wanted to stop the Wednesday morning growth, it's just that Sunday was proper church! These people, however, had very good reasons for not coming on Sunday. In each case, conflicting family or work commitments prevented church on Sunday from being a realistic option. One person travelled each Sunday to visit family who needed her support and care. Another worked on Sunday. And another found tension with her husband and children about

what happened on Sunday too difficult to face. So here were three Christian people who had effectively been disenfranchised by a church that only worshipped on Sunday but who had found a home in a Wednesday morning congregation.

As another year went past – and the congregation grew to about twenty – I found that two of the new people attending were new Christians seeking initiation into the faith. They had been evangelised by their friends who came on Wednesday, and obviously it was this service, not Sunday, that they entered into.

It was at this point that the penny dropped. While I was fighting a rearguard action to keep Sunday special, the Holy Spirit had danced on ahead of me and was blessing Wednesday. Here, without my properly realising it, was a church plant on a Wednesday morning that not only provided a place for a new worshipping community to develop, but also had within it people who felt so comfortable and nourished by Wednesday morning church that they were quietly getting on with evangelising their networks and bringing people to faith.

Having at last caught up with what God was doing, I put

some extra resources into Wednesday. This was a parish with a daily Eucharist, and I always preached: now I put a bit more effort and thought into the preaching. We started singing and providing refreshments after the service. And once a month we started going back to the vicarage after the service for a kind of house group to provide a place of nurture for this little Christian community.

When I moved on from the parish a few years later it was not unusual to have thirty or more people at this service, about ten of whom never came on Sunday and a good many of whom were new Christians. It was hardly revival, but modest, steady and sustainable growth that would not have happened if it were not for that midweek service.

Dr Peter Brierley of the Christian Research Association has recently published the disturbing conclusions of the latest English Church Attendance survey in a book entitled *The Tide is Running Out*.¹ The media have pounced upon these depressing figures with glee, and the undignified response of the Church has either been implausible spin, or a burying of mitres in the sand.

Rather, we need to engage with the reality of what is being

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reflected back to us in these figures. There is a lot of bad news:

- Since 1979 the percentage of the population attending church each week in England has dropped from 12% to 7.5%.
- Most alarming of all, there is a drastic decline in the numbers of children attending church. We are losing approximately a thousand a week!

This means we are becoming an older church and points to further drastic decline as the present generation of those over 65, who make for a large proportion of our worshippers, begin to die and are not replaced by the generations behind them.

We need to be honest about this situation, and look for fresh and innovative ways to respond.

There are signs of hope in the report. Many people attend church regularly, but not every Sunday. This means the actual figure of those involved in the life of the Church will always be higher than the average figure. In the diocese of Wakefield, where I live, I conducted a piece of research into patterns of attendance.³ In one deanery we kept a register at every church for eight weeks. We found that very few people actually came each week. Because of the varying commitments of work and leisure which make up contemporary life, many committed Christians are only coming to church two or three times a month. Peter Brierley also points to these phenomena, reckoning a further 2.7% of people attend church once or twice a month, and another 6% less frequently. This does not mean the decline is not really happening, but it does urge caution in assuming average figures can ever tell more than a very partial story.

The harder question is how are we able to go with the flow of these changing patterns of attendance?

Peter Brierley also points to 0.9% of the population attending worship services during the week, and a further 2.4% attending mid-week church activities, such as Alpha or Emmaus groups, youth groups and the like, but not coming to church on Sunday.

In Wakefield, in this one deanery, we found just over 50 people who worshipped regularly but never came on Sunday. It gave us the sound bite “We have found a missing congregation!” We also discovered that in every church where they had midweek worship there was always at least one person who came in the week but not on Sunday.

Clifford Longley, writing in *The Tablet* has described this phenomenon as “re-negotiated commitment”. We seem to be moving fairly rapidly into a time where people are still very much a part of the Church but express this commitment in a growing variety of ways. As we have already noted, this is partly a consequence of changing patterns of work and leisure. It is also an expression of two other trends shaping our culture. First, the tendency towards believing without belonging – and this has affected many organisations and institutions. People in Britain do not really believe any less than they used to (in fact among young people interest in spirituality is on the increase in a way unknown since the 1960s); it is just that it is seen as an increasingly private matter which does not require public expression, let alone action.

Secondly, people increasingly tend to approach church as consumers browsing around to see what the church can offer. They want the church to “fit”. So at what time, where, and when the service takes place will have a large influence on how often they attend.

The conclusions from all this are fairly obvious. But we may not like them. Some will say that we should not pander to this creeping consumerism, and clearly there are very real dangers in seeking to become a church that is split a hundred different ways in order to meet the needs of highly individualised niche markets. But if we look at a fairly standard and traditional Anglican model of church we already discover such a template. It is still common in the Church of England to find a parish with three distinct services on a Sunday – an 8 o’clock service, parish communion later that

morning and evensong, serving three quite distinct congregations in three quite distinct styles of worship. What has nearly always been missing from this model (and this is the legitimate objection of those who would oppose greater diversity) is the coming together of these congregations so that the unity of the church can be visibly expressed and experienced. After all, the gospel is supposed to draw us together across our divides, not minister to us in our isolation and prejudice.

In other words, we need to develop models of church which have both the celebration and the cell. And we need to express the cellular life of the body in a greater variety of ways so as to suit the needs of different groups of people. I call these “new expressions of Christian community”, and they may come to life in people’s homes, in the workplace, during lunchtimes, in the evenings, centred around worship and prayer, or as a further development of catechumenal models of enquiry and initiation like Alpha and Emmaus.

There is not a blueprint for what this might look like, but there are plenty of examples to be looked at up and down the country. In Todmorden, a smallish community in the Calder Valley of West Yorkshire, for instance, they have for several years held a family eucharist after school on Monday afternoon. This service regularly attracts forty or fifty people who rarely attend church on Sunday. In Crawley a similar service takes place in the school itself once a month. I have come across an Emmaus group meeting in a pub. In Coventry Christians meet for prayer and Bible study in the workplace one lunchtime a week. I have already related my own experience of mid-week worship and growth. And we also need the celebrations. But even these will not always be best scheduled for Sunday morning.

The good news in all these statistics is that changing patterns of church attendance mean that maybe the Church is not as small as we think. The bad news is that we are still in decline and our influence among the young has shrunk drastically.

There are many other ways we need to engage with and respond to these figures. But the Church is indebted to the prophetic cry that issues forth from Peter Brierley's figures. Only good research can challenge us in this way, and we need more of it. Meanwhile, we need urgently to become a Church with a more varied pattern, setting free the energies of clergy and laity to pioneer some new ways of doing church. ■

Notes

¹ Dr Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, Christian Research Association, 2000.

² See Stephen Cottrell, *Better than Average – Understanding the Changing Patterns of Church Attendance*, in *Ministry Today, The Journal of the Richard Baxter Institute for Ministry, Issue 18, February 2000*, for a fuller analysis of this research.