

meaning was in danger of being lost. The Christian metanarrative and the experience of the worshipping community were able to be brought together. There was a movement from feeling to meaning. The celebration of the liturgy enables such a meeting of narrative and experience. It constitutes a relationship between human identity and theological disclosure.¹⁷⁰ It defines the shape of the community and helps to locate individual meaning and identity within the ecclesial community and the broad sweep of theological tradition. It makes sense of the value commitment of the individual in relation to the ecclesial community, and the ecclesial community's relationship to its wider, surrounding cultural context. The celebration of the liturgy is the place where humanity is taken up into the life of the triune God:

What matters most is that there is the encompassing knowledge that, from the cradle to the grave, the pastoral responsibility to humankind, breathtaking, simple and impossible, is to enfold them within the humanity of Christ by enclosing them within his cross and resurrection, and thus to prepare them in life for death and in death for life.¹⁷¹

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BETTER THAN AVERAGE - UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Stephen Cottrell

Recent media interest in the church in the UK has focussed on the apparent continuing decline in church attendance indicated by the research from the National Church Survey. However, changing

¹⁷⁰ See Elaine L Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, London, Cassell, 1996, p.116.

¹⁷¹ Neville Clark, *Pastoral Care in Context*, Kevin Mayhew, 1992, p.108.

patterns of church attendance make Stephen Cottrell wonder whether this is the whole story.

Here is the problem. In St Statistician's there are 30 people in church each Sunday. In their returns to the diocese¹⁷² these numbers are added together: 30 people in church four Sundays running - total attendance 120; divided by the four Sundays of the survey makes 30 people. So 30 people attend this church. Simple isn't it?

But what is depressing is that ten years ago 40 people attended St Statistician's. So that is a decline of 25%. Another grim example of Christianity's inexorable fall.

However, the Vicar of St Statistician's is puzzled. Yes, one or two members of the congregation have died or moved away, but also there have been a number of adult confirmations. She looks in the register - yes, 14 in the last decade - most of whom are still attending church regularly. She stops and thinks - attends church regularly? What does that phrase actually mean in a rapidly changing culture where many people now see Sundays as shopping day, where many people work on Sunday, and where many people (or, at least their children) have complicated leisure activities to be ferried to, attended and picked up from?

She decides to conduct her own piece of simple research. If her hunch is right - that more people are attending church, but less frequently - that will still look like decline if all you measure is an average figure. But what is the actual figure of people attending? She takes a simple register at her Sunday service and discovers that the number of people coming to church is actually 48. But because of work and leisure commitments (not to mention the different ways people express their Christian faith), there is a varied pattern of attendance:

- 12 people come every week
- 12 people come three times a month
- 12 people come twice a month
- 12 people come once a month

¹⁷² Each May and October, all Church of England parishes are required to fill in a return of the numbers of those attending each Sunday.

The table below shows how this still adds up to an average figure of 30, but also how it disguises an actual figure of 48.

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	
12	12	12	12	12 people coming each week
9	9	9	9	12 people coming three times out of four
6	6	6	6	12 people coming twice out of four
3	3	3	3	12 people coming once out of four
30 people in church	48 people attending at least once per month			

Now, she still isn't able to tell whether this is growth on the situation ten years ago. There is no survey with which she can compare her findings (and surely it has always been the case that some people come to church every week, and some less often). However, she is convinced that because of the way our society has changed, and because nowadays Sunday feels more like how Saturday used to be, it is more likely that even committed Christian people would be mentally re-negotiating their own understanding of how that commitment is expressed. She is aware that even members of her PCC are among those who are not coming every week. And their reasons are good ones. It is not just that they fancy a Sunday off. Worthy of further research she also notes that one or two of the people who work some Sundays, come to church in the week to make up for this. And there is one person who comes to the Wednesday communion every week, but never on a Sunday.

The Wakefield research

In the diocese of Wakefield in Yorkshire we had a plethora of anecdotal evidence to support the kind of claims illustrated by the mathematically simple example of St Statistician's. What we didn't have was any detailed research. We began by looking at one parish and were sufficiently surprised and intrigued by the findings to go on to conduct, with great co-operation from the clergy and laity involved, a thorough piece of research.

In the Almondbury deanery in Huddersfield we took a register at every public act of worship (weekdays as well as Sundays) for eight consecutive weeks. We chose this deanery because it included rural, suburban and inner-city parishes, and because the 17 churches in the deanery covered between them most shades of churchmanship.

The survey took place between 19 October and 7 December 1997, these dates being chosen because they were post-Harvest and pre-Christmas, thus trying to avoid those Sundays where you might expect a large number of one-off attenders in most churches. With the exception of the weekday statistics, which I will return to later, we did not find any extra people coming to church, but we were able to tell the story behind the usual, published average figure. It is a fascinating story, showing a pattern of attendance much more varied than we had imagined.

Counting each person only once, each week 9,703 people came to church during the eight-week survey, an average of 1,213 each week. Or to put it another way (divide this figure by the 17 churches), an average Sunday congregation in each church of 71. This is the sort of figure you would get from the average attendance figures put together officially by the Church of England. However, these figures actually represent 3,432 individual people - the total number of individuals on the registers. Their actual *pattern* of attendance was as follows:

144 (4.2%) people came every Sunday, i.e. eight Sundays out of eight

219 (6.4%) came seven Sundays out of eight

245 (7.1%) came six Sundays out of eight

272 (7.9%) came five Sundays out of eight

249 (7.3%) came four Sundays out of eight

269 (7.8%) came three Sundays out of eight

258 (7.5%) came two Sundays out of eight

1776 (51.8%) came one Sunday out of eight

We then put these people into four categories of attendance.

The 608 (17.7%) people who came on six, seven or eight Sundays we called *the core*.

The 521 (15.2%) people who came on four or five Sundays (i.e. at least twice a month) we called *the mobile core*.

The 527 (15.3%) people who came on two or three Sundays (i.e. at least once a month) we called *the worshipping fringe*. The 1776 (51.8%) people who only came once we called *one-off attenders*.

Then to get some idea of the actual (rather than the average) number of people regularly attending church we took off the 1,776 one-off attenders (because we had no way of knowing whether their visit was just for that Sunday or whether they came more regularly) and added together the core, mobile core and worshipping fringe. This made 1,656 people whom we know had come to church on Sunday at least twice during our eight-week survey. This is a 37% increase on the average Sunday figure of 1,213. It shows us that there is an actual worshipping community of 97 people for each of the 17 churches, as opposed to an average weekly attendance of 71. But as our figures do not include the one-off attenders (they are included in the average figure because this method of calculation simply adds up all the people who attend and divides them by the weeks of the survey) they are not only more accurate, but less manufactured.

It is also worth making note of the surprises in the survey. Only 144 people coming every week; 1,776 people coming once. In other words the core attendance is much smaller than we realised, and the fringe much bigger. This has implications both for the way we order worship to take account of one-off attenders, and of how we establish patterns of services to enable those who cannot (or will not!) come every Sunday to have other opportunities to worship.

Perhaps the most significant discovery of the research was that we found 51 people who came to church regularly (i.e. they came more than once in the survey) *but never on a Sunday*. These 51 people just about constitute a missing congregation - committed Christian people who for one reason or another cannot come on Sunday.

Not all churches have regular weekday services. In our survey we found that wherever a church had a regular weekday service they were always getting one or two people attending who either never came on Sunday or had not come the previous Sunday, thus leading us to believe they had opted for this service to compensate.

The national picture: some conclusions

Newspapers and television have recently enjoyed poring over batches of statistics which again show graphs going in the wrong

direction and describe what appears to be a fairly continuous decline. The figures from Almondbury deanery do not disprove that scenario, but they do suggest there is another story that not only needs to be told, but which actually depicts a church where there is, after all, a good deal of health and growth.

There are more people coming to church than we realise. Because the fringe is bigger and the core smaller than we realised an average figure will always considerably underestimate the actual size of church attendance. On our estimates (and similar surveys in Canterbury, Ripon and Bristol have come up with similar results), about 40% more attend church regularly than the published figures say. Of course we cannot know whether this is growth or decline until we have repeated the exercise.

People's patterns of attendance are more varied than we realise, and this has implications for many aspects of pastoral and evangelistic ministry.

Some people never come on Sunday. What does this say to a church that still concentrates most of its efforts on Sunday morning? We urgently need to be encouraging churches to establish new expressions of Christian community and worship outside of Sunday morning.

We need to do more research. What is the church? The average picture does not tell us. The electoral roll doesn't either. All those who measure church statistics must take into account these changing patterns of attendance. Otherwise we are not only shooting ourselves in the foot when it comes to the publicity these figures receive, but failing to see that God is blessing His church in a great variety of ways. We need to learn both from our changing culture, and from these changing developments in church attendance.

I suggest that if someone is coming to church regularly once a month, though it doesn't matter which day, then they are a part of the worshipping community, These are the people we should be counting when we publish statistics saying how many people are part of the church. And this is a modest figure, less manufactured than the average figure that counts everybody who happens to be there that Sunday even if they never come again. Neither does it include all those who are involved in the life of the church through Alpha or Emmaus groups and who, some would argue, should also

be counted in. This is just those who come to church at least once a month. More people than we realise. Better than average.

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YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE - THE REAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHRISTIAN GIVING

Alun Brookfield

All attempts to write about Christian stewardship are doomed to superficiality, because, if we define stewardship as "The response which the Church and men and women are called to make to God for all that he has given to us and done for us, above all in Jesus Christ", ¹⁷³ then all of Christian discipleship has a stewardship element within it. The very first command given to Adam and Eve was about stewardship of the earth (Gen 1.28). Virtually every other command, teaching, law and precept in Scripture has a stewardship aspect to it - stewardship of the community, of relationships, of the earth, of the poor, of money, of produce, of the temple and of the church - to name but a few.

Inevitably then, one has to be selective about which aspects of stewardship one writes. And if one then talks about money, as I intend to, the reader may be forgiven for rolling his eyes, leaning back in the armchair and falling asleep.

But I do beg you, dear reader, to press on, for the reality is that we need the people in our churches to grasp the importance of stewardship of our financial resources because nothing in the kingdom of God on earth happens without a financial cost. People, buildings, equipment, time, care, charity, refreshments, heating,

¹⁷³ *Stewardship in the 1980s*, 1980, British Council of Churches.