

# EDITORIAL – Hopes dashed on ‘Back to Church Sunday’

**Paul Beasley-Murray**

In common with many other churches, we decided to support this year’s ‘Back to Church’ Sunday. We ordered the T-shirts and the flyers, and from as early as May began to prepare the church for this nation-wide initiative. In the three Sundays running up to 28 September, I promoted it in the church notices and brought it into my sermons. I featured the Sunday in the monthly newsletter which is sent out to all church members, as well as in a church publication we distribute in the neighbourhood.

It so happened that ‘Back to Church Sunday’ fell on the day we had already chosen for our Harvest Thanksgiving Services. Far from causing difficulties, this I thought was serendipitous - I reasoned, this would give people yet another good reason for wanting to return to church. Furthermore, it seemed to me that those who came back to church would be impressed that, by our harvest project featuring countries in South East Asia whose harvests had failed, our concern for others would perhaps be an attraction.

So, with great anticipation, I planned our harvest services with a particular focus on those who for one reason or another had given up on church, but on this day were prepared to give church another ‘try’. To my utter amazement nobody in this category came to church. True we had visitors that day, but there was nothing new in that, for we are in the fortunate position that every Sunday we have people visiting us for the first time. Some are just passing through, some are church shopping, some might even be giving church ‘a try’ - but on that Sunday not one person ‘came back’ to church. To make the Sunday even more depressing, a good number of our regulars were away, making the most of the Indian summer.

Yet, according to the headline in my denominational paper the following week: “Back to Church Sunday sees thousands return”. In the following article I read of how one church in Tyneside reported up to 60 newcomers that day. This apparently was no exception: “Success stories poured in, as churches testified how personal invitations could lead to unprecedented church growth”.

So what went wrong in my church? Was it because we ditched the T-shirts and the flyers on the grounds that they were too 'naff'? I don't think so. More to the point was that less than two months ago we expended a good deal of effort and energy in a mega 'Christian Festival' - maybe another evangelistic push at this stage was too soon. Perhaps too there was the fact we were promoting a host of other bridge-building activities (e.g. a quiz night and an international evening) as well as our next Alpha course. Or was it that many of my people just did not feel comfortable with the emphasis on 'back to church', when so many of their friends had never been to church in the first place? I don't know.

All I know is that we were not the only church in the land whose hopes were dashed. At the parish church my mother attends, despite the vicar's efforts, numbers were down that day too!

## WHAT TYPE OF CHURCH IS YOURS?

### Paul Beasley-Murray and John O'Keith.

I recently read *Size Transitions in Congregations* (Alban, Virginia 2001), edited by Beth Ann Gaede. Many of the essays are based on the work of Arlin Rothauge, a professor of congregational studies at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary.<sup>232</sup> I have not been able to get hold of his booklet, but from what I have gained from the essay by veteran American church consultant, Roy Oswald,<sup>233</sup> Rothauge's analysis of church size is truly insightful. In this article I will summarise these insights and apply them to the British scene.

**The cell or family-size church-** also called the patriarchal or matriarchal church, has up to 50 active members.

*"This small church.... functions like a family, with appropriate parental figures. The patriarchs and matriarchs control the church's leadership needs. What family-size churches want from clergy is pastoral care, period. For clergy to assume that they are*

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<sup>232</sup> Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing up a congregation for new member ministry* (Seabury Press, NY, undated).

<sup>233</sup> 'How to minister effectively in family, pastoral, program and corporate sized churches', 31-46, in *Sizing up a congregation*.