

Church prays for a miracle of its own

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Two years ago churches across the land stood empty on Easter Sunday, their doors locked by government decree. Even priests were banned from entering by order of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who delivered a sermon from his kitchen.

The Most Rev Justin Welby, who has entered his tenth year as the spiritual leader of the Church of England, was widely condemned for that decision and conceded that he had not “pushed hard enough” to keep churches open for individual prayer during the first lockdown and had “made a mistake” in locking priests out.

His apology has not quelled the lingering anger of some worshippers and clergy over the move, but all this was put aside last weekend for a moment of “joyous” celebration.

For thousands of Church of England parishes last Sunday, the biggest story on Easter was not Welby’s headline-making condemnation of the government’s new migration policy. It was the return of hope.

Not just the hope offered by the resurrection of Jesus in Christian teaching, but the hope that there is also still life in the Church of England as the pews filled for the first restriction-free Easter since 2019.

Priests across the country reported seeing familiar faces, including many older and more vulnerable parishioners, making a first foray back into congregational worship since the pandemic began.

“We were amazed and thrilled,” said the Very Rev Andrew Nunn, the Dean of Southwark. “It was back to the kinds of numbers we would have had pre-pandemic, the first time that has happened. Quite a few people said it was the first time they had dared to come back, for Easter.”

Many priests reported that their Sunday congregations even before Easter were up to 70 or 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, often with more watching online. The trend for streaming services on YouTube or Zoom began during the pandemic and is here to stay for those in care homes, the housebound and even those who wish to do something else with their Sunday mornings and watch the service on catch-up later that day.

Vicars hope that those worshippers who came back in person for Easter will now feel emboldened to return every Sunday. However, some may not have that choice.

Sir Tony Baldry, a former Conservative minister who ran the Church Buildings Council after quitting parliament in 2015, said there are likely to become a growing number of “festival churches” that only hold services on special occasions such as Easter and Christmas because they do not have enough worshippers or money to do so every week. Baldry, who now runs the Association of Festival Churches, said that instead of having to close their doors forever, these bastions of English heritage can be preserved, staying open



Many churches, such as Bath Abbey, which held a celebratory exhibition over Easter, enjoyed the return of congregations after two years of pandemic restrictions



The Rev Sally Bottomer said St Mary the Virgin in Drayton Beauchamp will from now only hold ‘festival services’; the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, below, was criticised for backing a ban on services in churches in the pandemic

as community hubs for local people between hosting occasional services. In Lincolnshire, in the church’s largest diocese, 174 out of 615 churches surveyed since the pandemic said they were likely to follow this model in future.

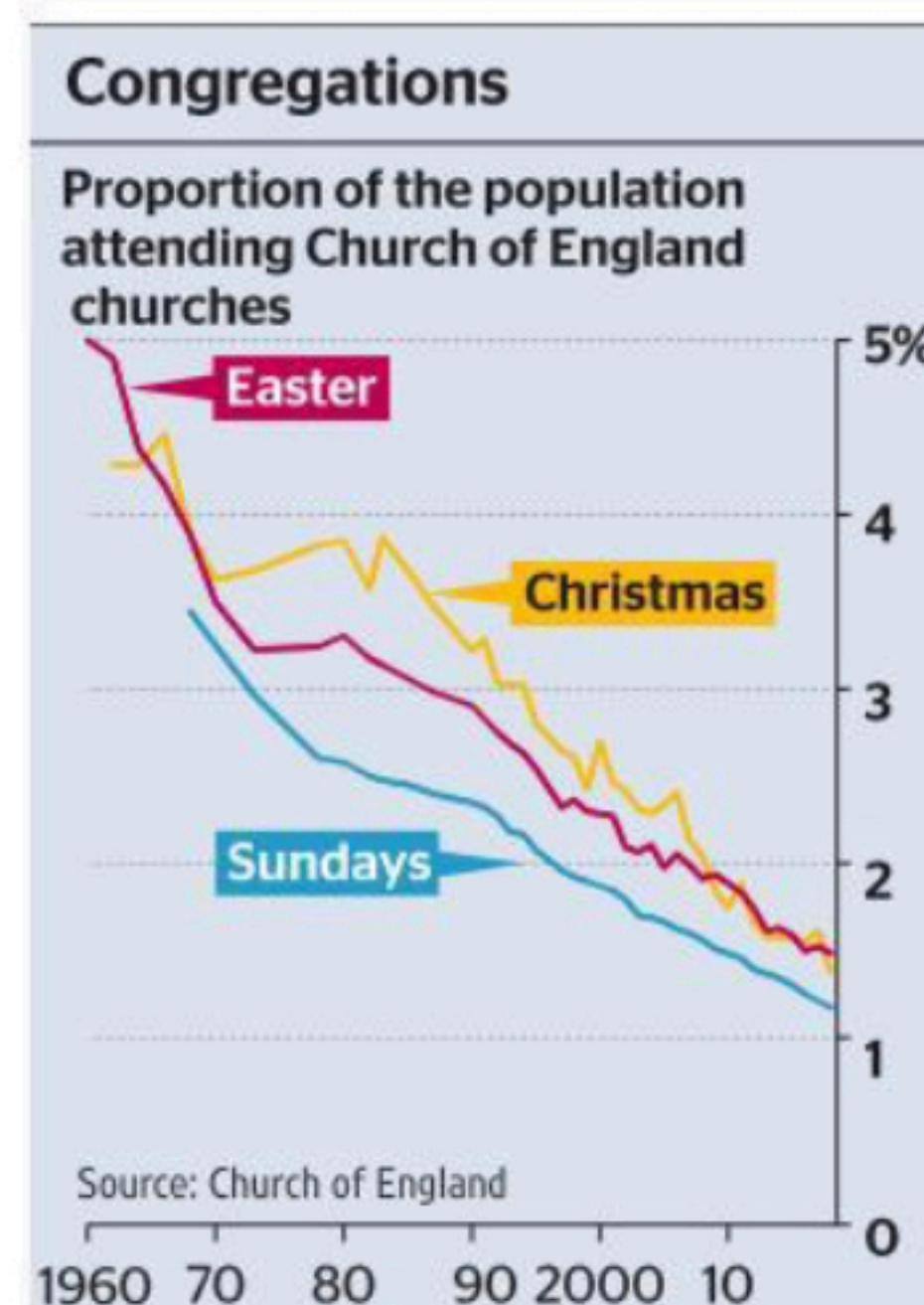
Welby conceded last autumn that 2022 would mark 70 years of unbroken year-on-year decline in church attendance. Despite more than £170 million of investment during his tenure in schemes designed to attract new, younger and more diverse worshippers, there has been no let-up in the slow but relentless decline that has left many parish churches with empty pews and empty bank balances, struggling to maintain their ancient buildings and remain open for worship.

The trend of decline is one

that far predates Welby’s enthronement in 2013. Church of England attendance peaked in 1906 by some measures and 1851 by others. In 1958, there were 2.88 million people listed as members of local churches. By 2019 this had fallen to 893,000. Out of the CoE’s 16,000 churches, 4,000 have Sunday congregations of fewer than 14 while 800 have fewer than seven.

Church leaders face a choice. Can these endangered parishes be saved? Is reading from the Book of Common Prayer in a pew in a medieval building on a Sunday morning really where they think the future of the church lies, is this what will draw in the young?

Some of Welby’s critics feel the church has slapped a “do not resuscitate” order on ancient parish churches in tiny hamlets with ageing congregations falling steadily towards zero, choosing to direct funds instead towards setting up more modern types of congregation in towns and cities where housing developments and student populations offer the prospect of at-



tracting a fresh flock of younger and more diverse worshippers, who do not necessarily even need a church building to call home.

Welby and his fellow archbishop in York, the Right Rev Stephen Cottrell, have insisted this is untrue and unfair. Cottrell said this week that their plans do not mean “abandoning the parish system or dismantling one way of being the church in favour of another”. Welby has expressed pride that parishes and their army of volunteers run more than 33,000 social action projects from foodbanks to night shelters nationwide, showing that church life is still thriving.

At St Mary’s, a listed medieval church in the tiny Buckinghamshire hamlet of Drayton Beauchamp, the congregation has fallen to six people, most in their seventies or eighties. Closure looked a certainty but last November it became the first “festival church” in the diocese of Oxford, committing to hold at least six services each year rather than one every Sunday.

“There was no way we could main-

tain the church,” said the Rev Sally Bottomer. A charity has been set up by local people to keep the church open, with plans to rent it out for film nights, cafe groups and maybe even a climbing wall, while still holding one service a month. “It’s really, really positive,” she said.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is not like an Anglican Pope nor is he even like a CEO. The role comes with great spiritual and moral authority but little direct managerial power over a network of 12,000 independent parishes and 42 independent dioceses. At 66, he could serve for four more years before reaching the retirement age for bishops of 70.

Baldry said: “I think Archbishop Justin has been archbishop through a challenging time for the Church of England.” He said Welby helped to drive through the divisive measure to allow women to become bishops in his first two years and had to face public inquiries and apologise over the “painful” extent of sex abuse that has emerged within the church. He has also faced rows over whether the church should bless same-sex relationships and has to manage his role as spiritual head of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

“Managing a large and important institution such as the Church of England at a time of declining income is always going to be challenging,” Baldry said.

Prof Diarmaid MacCulloch, an expert in church history at Oxford, said that in England we are “seeing that the last generation who automatically went to church is now dying” as western European societies grow more secular. He said it had not been an easy time for Welby, especially as his decisions over closing churches in the pandemic caused “a lot of heartache and anguish”. MacCulloch said: “One of the features of his ten years has been his ability to say ‘I got that wrong’ and he did that on this occasion.”

Confessions of a vicar, Magazine

