

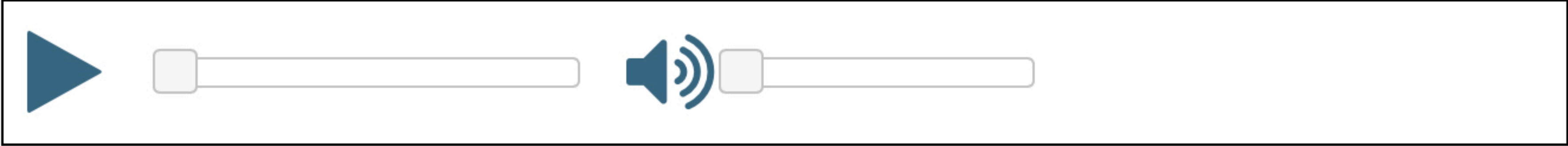
Cutting services is a key cause of decline in attendance, report suggests



by MADELEINE DAVIES
03 APRIL 2023



Palm Sunday service in St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, streamed on the Church of England YouTube channel



THE decline in [church attendance](#) of almost one quarter between 2019 and 2022 may be the result of reduced supply rather than lower demand. A new report suggests that too many churches abandoned their [online offering](#) and cut the number of services available.

[Church Attendance in October 2022: Post-Covid-19 trends, patterns and possibilities](#) draws on data from five dioceses, and concludes that there is a “strong correlation” between reduced provision and reduced attendance. “Numbers are lower than in 2019 not because the demand for church is in inevitable decline but because of difficulties with the supply of both onsite and online church services,” it says.

“Churches that stayed online and have not reduced their service numbers have fully regained 2019 attendance levels. It is only where churches have retrenched that their attendance is reduced.”

This should be a cause for optimism, the report argues: “If attendance is sensitive to the state and supply of church life and worship, then the future of attendance trends lies in the churches’ own hands. Developing the number and relevance of services leads to [church growth](#).” New [models of leadership](#) that “take pressure off the stipendiary clergy” may be key to recovering 2019 levels of attendance, it says.

The report, hosted by the [diocese of Oxford](#), draws on data from [Canterbury](#), [Chester](#), [Guildford](#), [Oxford](#), and [Leeds](#). It compares attendance statistics in October 2022 with those reported in October 2019. In total, full data was collected for 1139 churches: 50 per cent of the total. The authors are Dr Bev Botting, a data analyst in the diocese of Oxford; Dr Ken Eames, a senior statistical researcher for the Church of England; and the Ven. Bob Jackson, a church-growth consultant.

On average, weekly attendance in 2022 was 22 per cent lower than in 2019. Although Covid restrictions were over, churches offered fewer services: 83 per cent of the number running in 2019. The authors write that, “it seems that the average congregation in 2022 was only slightly smaller than in 2019 — most of the 22 per cent attendance fall is associated with a 17 per cent drop in the number of services.”

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The 58 per cent of churches with fewer services had regained only 71 per cent of their 2019 attendance, while the 25 per cent of churches that kept the same number of services regained 81 per cent. The 17 per cent that increased the number of services regained exactly 100 per cent.

The data also showed that churches meeting on fewer Sundays did not have

fewer people attending when there was a service than in 2019: “rather the average has gone down with the number of services”. The proportion of churches not offering a service every Sunday has increased from 19 per cent to 26 per cent.

The report also looks at online attendance, the numbers logging on estimated by churches. The researchers estimate that online attendance increased total average weekly attendance from 78 per cent of the 2019 figure to 89 per cent. This extra attendance was about half that reported in 2021, because the number of churches offering “Church at Home” (CAH) — generally a service on YouTube — fell from 53 per cent of the total to 28 per cent.

For this 28 per cent, their online element increased their total attendance to 103 per cent of their 2019 figure. There is “no systematic way” in which churches that stayed online and those that stopped are different, the authors say. “It looks as though similar churches have come to different decisions about retaining their online offering. So, we think that stopping online access to worship may often have

been a mistake.”

A church offering online services had 28 online attenders on average. The report notes that these “may well be in groups very hard to bring into the building — the elderly and housebound, the [Covid-19-shielding](#), those not available on Sunday mornings, church members who are ill or otherwise occupied that day, those who live too far away, and those looking for a church to join”. It warns: “Churches not online may find it increasingly hard to attract newcomers. We now live in a hybrid onsite and online world in many aspects of life, including church.”

The period in question came after a time of decline. The Church of England’s average weekly attendance fell by seven per cent in the three years from October 2016 to 2019, and the report acknowledges “an argument that an ageing Church attracting too few children and young adults to replenish itself in an increasingly secular world will inevitably decline. Covid-19 has compressed ten years of ‘inevitable’ decline into three.” But the authors reject this analysis, and argue that “many churches have already fully recovered their 2019 attendance and we make no apology for making that our benchmark by which to judge recovery.”



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The data collected does not prove causation, the authors acknowledge, as “streaming and services could have been cut back in response to lack of interest. However, much of the fall in the number of services is likely to have happened at the resumption of services — there was too little time between that and October 2022 for so many restarted services to then have been scrapped owing to lack of attendance.”

Given that churches still online were attracting almost as many people online as they were in 2021, “it seems likely that churches stopping online would have kept at least some online participants if they had kept going.”

Among the findings of the report was evidence that the reduction of service numbers, and, in turn, of attendance, had been greater in “multi-church incumbencies where the pressure of taking large numbers of services tends to be greatest”. The authors write: “We suspect that behind the statistics of retrenchment lies a problem of [overstretched clergy](#) emerging exhausted from the Covid-19 years being unable to re-instate all the old and innovate the needed new things all at once.”

[Leadership issues](#) “frequently cropped up in conversations as a limiting factor”, they write. “It is easy to see how an incumbent of a large group of churches is tempted to cut service numbers to enable them to cope, or a vicar struggling with

lingering Covid-19 effects while re-opening onsite and seeing that new initiatives may be needed does not reinstate everything, or a church wrestling on several fronts may decide the uphill struggle to create quality online content is a step too far.”

The authors write that they do not wish to “add guilt and pressure to overstretched clergy. We are definitely not trying to persuade clergy to work even harder!” They also observe that, in some dioceses, the financial problems created by the pandemic and smaller congregations “may well generate another cycle of cuts to stipendiary posts leading to further cuts in provision and attendance, leading to yet further cuts in posts”.

A solution, they suggest, is for dioceses to “find new models of leadership that take pressure off the stipendiary clergy by giving them more realistic job descriptions in the context of a developing ‘mixed economy’ model of church leadership”. It refers to the example of Sheffield diocese, which is using a “focal minister” model ([Features, 10 September 2021](#)). Another suggested option, currently being trialled in Chester, is “appointing two half-time clergy to one church each, rather than one full-timer for two, and increasing assistant ministry staff posts”.

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The report concludes with a number of recommendations. Observing that “there have never been so many recent churchgoers to invite back”, the authors urge churches to get in touch with those who have “dropped away”. They also recommend starting new services (“just as attendance decline follows on from fewer services, so growth comes from planting new ones”), and suggest that, for most

churches, the likely priority will be [families, children, and young people](#).

Child attendance has been slower to recover than that of adults — 71 per cent of 2019 levels compared with 79 per cent — and the authors surmise that “this in turn suggests that attendance has recovered less well among younger adults, who tend to be the ones accompanying children. It may be that family life moved on during lockdown, children grew out of their previous churchgoing phase, and families found other activities for Sundays.”

Attendance at [Fresh Expressions](#) (FxC) reached 67 per cent of the 2019 level, and just 50 per cent for children. The most likely FxC to have ceased was a “child-friendly expression”, such as Messy Church on weekdays. Statistically, about two-thirds of the attendance fall was associated with there being fewer FxCs operating, and about one third associated with a reduction in average attendance at an FxC service, from 30 to 27.

All-age attendance at [school services](#) in 2022, in all five dioceses combined, was 103 per cent of 2019.

The research builds on an earlier study of Easter attendance, which found that smaller churches had recovered better than larger ones since the outbreak of the pandemic ([News, 1 July 2022](#)). The authors write: “Small congregations where everybody knows everybody else in a single community have been more resilient to the Covid-19 shock than the large churches with eclectic congregations where the events and programme of the church play a larger role in binding people together. Also, some people may still be more wary of coming into a crowded church than one they know will be nearly empty.”

The report concludes: “If congregations diminish and die, all the good we do dies with them. The Covid-19 period has made focusing on attendance recovery even more urgent as we struggle to rebuild. We believe that recovering attendance back at least to 2019 levels should be a top priority in every diocese.”

FOCAL MINISTRY, one of the solutions offered in the report, has been the subject of research by one of its authors, the Ven. Bob Jackson, a former Archdeacon of Walsall, and currently a church-growth consultant. In a booklet published by Grove in 2018, *Leading One Church at a Time: From multi-church ministers to focal ministers*, he argues that such ministers are having “a dramatic effect on the fortunes of churches”.



OTHER STORIES

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Among the examples he looks at is the diocese of St Davids in the Church in Wales, where he was commissioned to find and support local people to become unpaid Focal Ministers of one church each. Some were already ordained, some were Readers, and some had “no pre-existing ecclesial status”. Of the 29 churches given Focal Ministers, adult average weekly attendance had fallen by 21 per cent between 2010 and 2014. They received their Focal Minister in either 2015 or early 2016, and by 2016 average attendance had already recovered by 17 per cent. Attendance rose in 22 of the 29, while it continued to fall in the churches still in multi-church incumbencies.

Archdeacon Jackson also looked at 51 churches led by Focal Ministers in the Church of England, and found that attendance grew in 42 of them, with average growth of just under 40 per cent. All had previously been in “conventional multi-church benefices”, and most had had falling attendance.

Most were small rural churches, and he acknowledges that “we do not yet have sufficient statistical information on long-term trends”. But, he argues, “We should look at focal ministry not as a lower-cost way of limping on and making do as the supply of stipendiaries and money shrinks but as part of a better church-growth strategy.”

Among his case-studies is a village church, part of a large benefice, which had been meeting just twice a month. It experienced a tenfold growth in its congregation after a Focal Minister restarted a weekly service. One of the benefits, he notes, is that a long vacancy — the biggest occasion of attendance decline — can be avoided. Another is that they enable stipendiary clergy to have “a more fulfilling and effective ministry”.