

# Quarter of churches no longer hold Sunday service every week

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For the first time in the Church of England's history, more than a quarter of churches no longer hold a service every Sunday, hampering efforts to entice worshippers back after the pandemic.

In-person attendance at Church of England services is still more than 20 per cent below where it was before

the Covid outbreak, but that is because of a "limited supply of church services rather than a lack of demand from worshippers", a report has shown.

Exhausted priests, tired volunteers and financial struggles have led churches to cut back on the services they offer compared with 2019, when about 19 per cent did not offer a service every Sunday. By October 2022, that had risen to 26 per cent.

Attendance figures collected in

October were due to be published in full in the autumn or winter of this year, but statisticians in the Diocese of Oxford asked 1,139 churches in five dioceses — about 7 per cent of the total — to return their figures early. The church said the sample was "sufficiently large" to give a good idea of the national picture. Of the 1,139 churches covered in the study, 58 per cent were holding fewer services per month in 2022 compared with 2019.

Church of England law was changed

in 2019 to remove the legal requirement for churches to host a service every Sunday. In some areas, a single priest could be in charge of up to 20 churches, making it impossible to hold a Sunday service in all of them.

Speculating on the reasons behind the fall in services, the report noted: "Personal exhaustion, reduced volunteer energy, the added online dimension, damaged church finances and disrupted church communities can

make it hard to rebuild and develop every aspect of church life."

The report's authors added that some churches were still making services available online. Adding in the number of those logging-in virtually takes attendance in 2022 up to 89 per cent of 2019 levels.

"Churches that stayed online and have not reduced their service numbers have fully regained 2019 attendance levels," the report stated.