

Quarter of Cornish churches fail to offer a Sunday service

‘Brutal cuts’ to the number of priests in the Truro diocese is leading to a decline in normal church life, campaign group says

By Gabriella Swerling, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS EDITOR *and* Ben Butcher, DATA JOURNALIST

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More than a quarter of churches in Cornwall are failing to offer a Sunday service, analysis by The Telegraph has revealed.

Across 287 churches in the county, 78 had no forms of Sunday worship advertised on the last weekend of September – a total of 27 per cent.

Of those that did, just 114 advertised that Communion was being offered, considered by many Christians to be the most important sacrament.

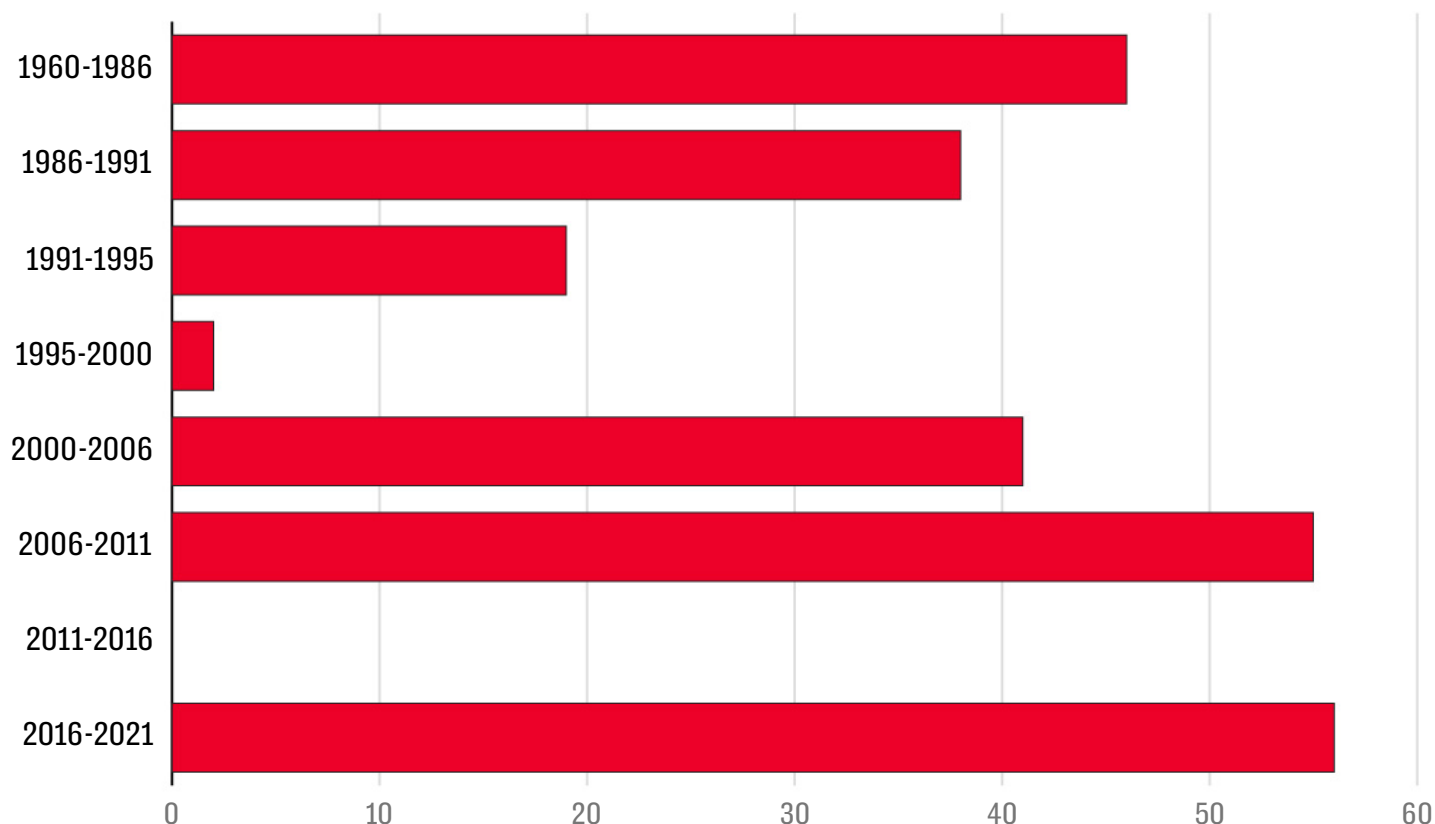
Responding to the data, the Rev Marcus Walker, chairman of the campaign group, Save The Parish, said: “It can come as no shock to anybody that if you reduce the number of priests, you reduce the number of services; if you reduce the number of services you reduce the number of people going to church.

“The Church of England has hundreds of millions of pounds to throw at pet causes. Now is the time to put that money back where it was supposed to be spent: parish ministry.”

The analysis looked at the weekly, advertised schedules of churches either on A Church Near You, the Church of England’s official roster of all churches, as well as on individual diocese’s websites. Furthermore, at 23 out of the total 287 churches in Cornwall, no evidence of any service was found throughout the whole of September this year.

Church parishes are declining at their fastest rate on record

Average annual closures or mergers of parishes



The figures come after earlier this month an investigation by this newspaper revealed that parishes are closing at a record rate, with almost 300 disappearing in the past five years. The Telegraph also published details of a bombshell dossier accusing bishops and senior clergy of “putting a gun to people’s heads” to drive through controversial plans to cut costs, merge parishes and cut vicars in Cornwall.

The claims also come against the backdrop of declining congregation numbers, leaving many clergy afraid to speak out for fear of losing their jobs.

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Save The Parish Cornwall, a local branch of the national campaigning body, compiled a dossier detailing concerns of clergy and congregants regarding the Church of England’s reorganisation scheme in the diocese of Truro, called “On the Way”, which aims to merge parishes.

Campaigners claim that the scheme is “forcing dozens of parishes together into giant benefices and starving them of regular priests” and that although their dossier relates specifically to the diocese of Truro, it reveals “a pattern of change that is spreading nationwide” and acts as a “blueprint” for what is to come across the nation.

Churches have not had to hold weekly Sunday services since 2019, after the General Synod, the Church of England’s legislative body, scrapped the obligations which had been in place since the 17th century.

Vicars in rural areas, who have been increasingly responsible for serving multiple congregations across a number of churches due to declines in the number of clergy, had been struggling to meet the regular Sunday obligations in every church prior to the canon law change.

‘Huge distress, despair and division’

Responding to The Telegraph’s latest analysis, a Save The Parish Cornwall representative said that in one diocese, just two priests, a curate and an unpaid retired cleric were now responsible for 23 churches, and one of those priests does not work on Sundays.

They added that bishops have pursued “brutal cuts” in the number of priests and wasted millions of pounds of church money on “reorganised parishes and benefices into ever-bigger groups, with the inevitable results that The Telegraph has discovered”.

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“This is a direct and depressingly predictable result of the diocese of Truro’s catastrophic mishandling of church life in Cornwall over several years.

“There’s simply nowhere near enough priests to conduct normal church life – Sunday services axed, pastoral care of churchgoers disappeared, fewer opportunities to hear the Sunday morning church bells ring, less and less chance for Cornwall’s committed christians to receive proper communion... It is causing huge distress, despair and division among the church-going faithful of Cornwall.”

A spokesman from the Diocese of Truro, which covers Cornwall as well as a small part of Devon, disputed the latest findings.

They called the figures “inaccurate and unreliable”, but declined to supply any of their

own figures in response.

A spokesman from the Church of England said that “worship is central to the Church of England’s ministry”.

“In rural and sparsely populated areas, a multi-church parish can rotate services between churches where it is impractical to hold weekly services in every church. This is nothing new and reflects demographic changes over centuries as people have moved from rural areas to cities.”

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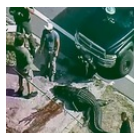
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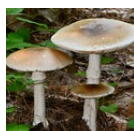
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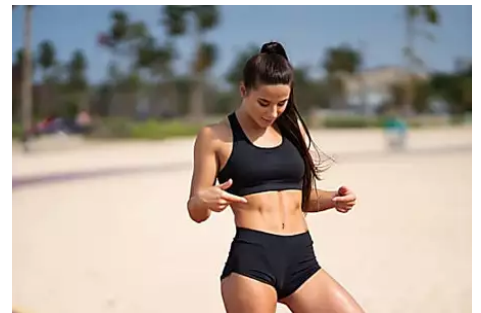
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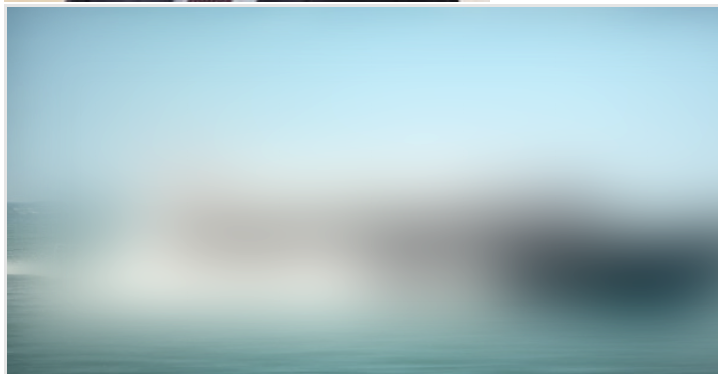
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