

The Trend and State of the Church in the U.K.

We will begin our time together by looking at the actual statistics that show both the historical and the current trends of the Church in the UK, before coming back and putting some flesh on the bones of our statistics by looking at two case studies, Leicester and Tiptree.

We all know that over the last 50 years, Christianity has become increasingly marginalised in this country, but according to the last published National Census in 2001, 71.6% of the population still described themselves as Christians although 66% had no connection to any Church.

The latest and most up-to-date research, showing the current state of religion in the UK, is the British Social Attitudes Survey, an annual mini-census. In its latest which covers 2011/2012, it looks closely at whether we are losing faith as a nation. Its headlines figures show that,

- 50% of Britons in 2010 said that they did not belong to any particular religion (19% more than in 1983), peaking at 64% for the 18-24s with a low of 28% among the over-65s.
- 20% were Anglicans (half the 40% recorded in 1983), 9% Catholics, 15% other Christians, and 6% non-Christians. (Muslims, Sikhs etc.)
- No evidence was found of people becoming more religious as they grew older; indeed, across several BSA surveys each generation was less likely than its predecessor to be born into religious families, with the lack of religiosity tending to remain with individuals as they aged.
- Persons brought up as non-Christians were more likely (87%) to have retained their religion to the present than cradle Catholics (62%) or Anglicans (49%), with those reared without religion being least likely to change their 'affiliation' (94%).

We will now examine the largest Christian denomination, The Church of England and how it affects her financial position. As we have seen between 1983 and 2010 the Church of England shrunk from 40% of the population to 20%.

According to an article published in The Economist in 2003, between 1990 and 2001 the Church of England lost 18% of its Sunday parishioners, 17% of its clergy but no bishops, and 1% of its buildings. The Church Commissioners' £3.5 billion endowment fund continues to shrink, and during 2002 70% of its gross income went on paying pensions alone. What this means is that as the Church continues to lose more of its membership, its financial situation gets worse and worse, with a top heavy organization and less and less income paying more and more pensioners. Surely this is a recipe for absolute disaster.

Next we will look at the Christian Research Group's fourth English Church Census (2004).

- 37500 churches were invited to take part, and about half did. Some stark truths emerge of Church attendance between 1998 and 2005:
- During that time, half a million people stopped going to church on Sunday.
- 6.3% of the population go to church on an average Sunday, compared to 7.5% in 1998.
- 29% of churchgoers are 65 or over, compared with 16% of the population.
- Sunday churchgoing is declining at 2.3% per year, slightly slower than the 1990s rate of 2.7% per year.
- Daily Telegraph's religious affairs correspondent, Jonathan Petre, says "While 1,000 new people are joining a church each week, 2,500 are leaving". Daily Telegraph Sept 21 2006
- "The Roman Catholics have recorded the largest drop, it has halved over the past sixteen years".
- The drop in the 20-29 age group was 29%.

- Nearly all Church 'growth' is due to immigrants and multi cultural churches.

In a large poll, published in 2006, by The Christian Research English Church Census, when year 9 and 10 teenagers in Cornwall were asked, only 19% said they 'had a religious faith' whilst only 22% said they believed in God. A wider Mori poll commissioned for the British Library found that nearly half of teenagers in Britain are atheists.

Drawing all these statistics together this is what the map of Britain looks like. Except London and two other home counties, every county in England has declined by more than 10% in Sunday Church attendance between 1989-1998.

This is what the former Archbishop George Carey said at the WCC Conference in Zimbabwe on the 14th of December, 1998: "The Church is bleeding to death." The report of Dr Peter Brierley, Executive Director of Christian Research, hit the headlines of The Independent: "The Church will be dead in 40 years time".

Apart from the damage that has been done to the Church by atheism and secularism in our postmodern society, the Church is also facing a growing but significant threat from other religions. This is a 2009 article that was published in the Times.

The Muslim population in Britain has grown by more than 500,000 to 2.4 million in just four years. The Muslim population multiplied 10 times faster than the rest of society, the research by the Office for National Statistics reveals. In the same period the number of Christians in the country fell by more than 2 million.

We will now look at one village and one city as we attempt to put flesh on the bones of the bare statistics we have looked at. First we will look at the Essex village of Tiptree. Tiptree has been described as 'the largest village in England'.

It has a serious Christian heritage in that there was a revival in the late 19th century when about 4/5ths of the village was affected. In 1885 A.C.Wilkin opened his jam factory, providing his workers with free houses if they attended at least one weekly Church service. The evidence of this Christian influence can still be seen today in the fact that there are no public houses (pubs) along the high street; they are all confined to the outskirts of the village. At that time the population of Tiptree was about 1000 people, it has now grown to at least 13,000 people.

The minister of St Luke's is currently also the minister of two other Churches but this will increase over the next three years so that she will have responsibility for 10 Churches. The URC has no minister at present. This means that only 1.3% of the population attends Church each Sunday.

Next we will look at Leicester. This East Midlands city, with a population of 294,000, is now regarded as the most multi-faith and multi-ethnic city outside London, with 36 per cent of residents from ethnic minorities, according to the 2001 census. However it has a glorious Christian heritage.

On a recent Amnos College trip, these are some of the things we saw. In this old converted Church building we visited the Jain Centre. It is the first consecrated Jain temple in the western world. It was full of idols and was an incredible shock to our western eyes. Leicester now has many mosques, we only visited one. We then visited a Sikh Temple. Here we see a Sikh temple in a converted Church. This is a brand new Hindu Temple. The temple was officially opened the day after we visited and had cost £4million which had been raised by the local community. It was hand-crafted in India, and brought to the UK by boat before being assembled, brick by brick, on site.

In this beautiful, listed Church with her cross still intact on the roof, is a Hindu radio station broadcasting 24 hours a day. Finally and very sadly we couldn't but notice that directly opposite the temple on the other side of the road, is a modern Church, now closed and up for sale.