

THE ENGLISH CHURCH CENSUS

CHARLES MYNORS, FRTPI, ARICS, Barrister

Those members of the Ecclesiastical Law Society who attended the residential conference at Cardiff last year may recall that one of the archdeacons present raised a potentially very significant question, and one that was not particularly satisfactorily dealt with. The gist of it was this. What is the Church to do, and in particular what are the appointed authorities of the Diocese to do, when a large, thriving congregation plants daughter churches outside the parish, carries out alterations to church buildings without faculties, and generally conducts its affairs in a thoroughly un-Anglican manner?

More generally, what is the correct course of action for the church establishment when there is a conflict between the structures of the church (in both senses of that phrase) and the perceived will of the people in the parish? Such a conflict can be particularly acute where, as sometimes occurs, the parishioners are supported by their PCC and their priest, and where 'the authorities' are perceived as being in opposition to the will of God – and when in any event the congregation concerned is flourishing and attracting newcomers.

In some situations of this kind, the rules and organisational structures of the Church may preserve both priest and people from their own misguided enthusiasms. They may provide a mechanism for the introduction of the ideas of others outside the parish; and they will almost certainly allow time for reflection. In many cases, however, they will stifle initiative, and lead to delay and bureaucracy that can kill off enthusiasm for worthwhile new initiatives. For the ordinary man or woman in the pew, who is not overly concerned with the niceties of synods and chancellors, one reaction is to go to a church in one of the newer denominations, where such things matter less. Another is to stop going to church at all.

And from outside the church, the dead hand of history, of old buildings, and of denominational organisations – in all the older denominations – appears as merely one more nail in the coffin of an outmoded, increasingly irrelevant organisation that has no weight of authority, and thus no claim to any allegiance in a modern society.

1. THE NEED FOR A CENSUS

Is such pessimism well founded? In the face of such views, is there an exodus from the older denominations to the newer ones? Is the church as a whole shrinking? More importantly, which parts of the church are shrinking fastest, and which (if any) are growing – and why? What is the likely pattern of church attendance in the future? Are there any pointers to those who exercise leadership and authority? Above all, where is there most life within the church – and, again, why?

It is possible to ignore these and other similar questions, and merely to carry on as we always have done. Alternatively, we can rely on anecdotal evidence or our own experience. It must be more satisfactory, however, to have some concrete evidence as to what is actually going on – even if only to back up our own preconceptions.

It was with such considerations in mind that a census was carried out on one Sunday in October 1989, throughout England, to discover what really was happening in the churches. The aim was to discover not just who was generally in favour of religion, nor even who was a member of a church; but how many people were actually worshipping in a church on that particular day. The Census was based on sending survey forms to every known congregation – all 38,607 of them, of all denominations and none (it was subsequently estimated that perhaps 800 predominantly smaller, rural congregations may have been left out). Some 27,600 forms were returned – a statistically respectable 70%, and the results from those crossed up with appropriate arithmetical techniques.

The new Archbishop of Canterbury opens his foreword to the reports of the Census by saying that ‘without any question the survey undertaken by MARC Europe is the most thorough and comprehensive ever done of English church-going. It is therefore a significant sociological ‘map’ of the Christian presence which still continues to make an important contribution to the life of our nation.’

The principal findings of the Census are summarised in ‘*Christian England*’, a paperback written by Peter Brierley. For those who want more detail – and there is an awful lot of it – there is a more substantial work, *Prospects for the Nineties*, price £85, setting out in tabular form the full results; this is also available as a series of eleven booklets, each of which is priced at £10, one for each region and one containing the figures for England as a whole. ‘*Christian England*’ can be obtained in Christian booksellers, price £10.99; the others can be obtained by post from the publishers, MARC Europe (Vision Building, 4 Footscray Road, Iltham, London SE9 2TZ).

2. OVERALL RESULTS

The good news is that on an ordinary Sunday in 1989 some 3,706,900 adults, that is 9.5% of the adult population, were attending church. The bad news of course is that 90.5% were not. Further, over the previous fifteen years (that is, since 1975) an average of 28,000 adults and 19,000 children stopped attending each year. Even so, the rate of decline seems to be slowing down; the 1985-1989 figures represent two people per thousand churchgoers who no longer attend – as Brierley puts it, ‘that is hardly a rapid decline: the church is not going to roll over and die.’

Over that same 15-year period, Anglicans represented a steady 31% of adults attending church; although the actual numbers dropped from 1,302,000 in 1975 to 1,143,900 in 1989. A similar pattern is evident in the Roman Catholic church; mass attenders dropped from 1,576,000 to 1,304,000. The free churches however increased from 1,209,000 up to 1,249,000 – a 3% increase. And within that last figure, there is the remarkable growth of the house church movement, where adult churchgoers rose from 44,000 in 1979 to 108,500 in 1989.

Numbers of children are particularly significant – they are after all, or at any rate should be, tomorrow’s church. The results here are not too discouraging. The actual number of children attending church declined significantly between 1975 and 1989; but this was largely due to the child population generally declining in that period. The proportion of the child population attending church thus remained more or less static at 14% throughout the period. The one ominous sign is that 14% of children attend church, but only 9.5% of adults. That suggests a worrying loss in the teens and early adult years.

‘*Christian England*’ also contains a large number of maps, for those who prefer their information in visual rather than numerical form. From one of these, for example, it is possible to see clearly in which parts of the country lie the strengths and weaknesses of the Church of England. Thus in the rural areas,

Anglicans constitute well over twice the percentage of the population that they do in inner urban areas. Will the Church Urban Fund help here?

As well as analysis by demonination, attendance is also analysed by churchmanship. Here, each church was assigned to one of nine broad groups – broad; mainstream evangelical; ‘catholic’; liberal; low church; charismatic evangelical; broad evangelical; anglo-catholic; and others. Anglicans in particular are widely spread across most of these. Comparative figures here are only available for the period from 1985 to 1989; but it is probably significant that, even during that very short period, the numbers of churchgoers (of all denominations) describing themselves as charismatic evangelicals increased by 7% – much the largest increase. In the Church of England, on the other hand, the only groups to grow were the mainstream evangelicals (up 15%) and the broad evangelicals and the ‘catholics’ (each up 2%).

3. FORECASTS

Perhaps the most interesting of the chapters in *‘Christian’ England* is the last, looking forward to the end of the century on the basis of a careful extrapolation of existing trends.

The overall forecast is encouraging. Although on actuarial projections some 458,000 churchgoers are likely to die between 1989 and 2000, the net fall in the overall number of adult churchgoers is projected to be only 259,000 (or 7% of those attending in 1989). In other words, these figures, which seem depressing, actually contain an *increase* of 199,000 (458,000 less 259,000) – that is, a growth of around 5%. Because of the abnormally high proportion of older churchgoers, however, it will be a number of years yet before the number of those joining each year exceeds the number of existing members dying.

Further, that overall figure of a 7% decline between 1989 and 2000 conceals some major changes as between the denominations. Roman Catholics are predicted to fall 15%, and Anglicans 11%, whereas the free churches may rise by 5%. And within that last figure, the pentecostals may rise by 25% and the independents (including the house churches) by as much as 36%. If that were to happen, the independents would then for the first time be the third largest denominational group (after the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans), overtaking the Methodists.

As for the numbers of churches, the Church of England lost 550 between 1979 and 1989, and are predicted to lose a further 800 by 2000. Those figures are net (the difference between losses and gains), however, and new churches continue to be opened. Indeed, in 1989 – for the first time this century – the Church of England opened more new churches than it closed redundant ones.

Aside from the figures, though, what are likely to be the characteristics of the church by the end of the century? Brierley highlights two. Firstly, *Christianity is becoming a more active religion*. ‘Nominal Christianity is losing ground, and church membership is gaining ground, even if church attendance has been decreasing and will continue to do so. If you are going to be a Christian you will need to express it in some more positive form of life style. The issue is becoming more specific, more black and white; the grey is slowly receding.’ Secondly, *Christianity is becoming a more closed religion*. ‘The variety of viewpoints within Christianity could slowly decrease. In the Church of England, which of all churches stands for so many things, it is only the catholic and the evangelical groups which are growing. Whatever else is true about these two groups, they both stand for something.’

In other words, if this analysis is right, the borderlines between Christian and non-christian, and between those at either extreme of the churchmanship spectrum and those in the middle, will be more sharply delineated. Some will welcome that – as a cutting out of those whose beliefs are woolly, and who are uncommitted or not sufficiently committed. Others will be appalled.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article is not the place for detailed conclusions. The Census does however provide a lot of statistical material that is not only interesting but should also be very useful to those who have responsibility for church leadership, government, structures and organisations, as they consider the way forward.

Questions which should be pondered perhaps include some of the following. Why is denominational loyalty weaker than it was? Does it matter? What is the reason for the shift from the older to the newer denominations? Is it merely an absence of authority? Is it the freer styles of worship? The growth of the house churches was at least initially to some extent by transfer from other denominations (including the Church of England); but it is now largely the result of attracting those without any church background at all.

Is the lack of structures in some of the newer denominations a positive feature, which should be copied in the older ones; should there be a lessening in the number of synods, rural deaneries, eldership committees, and so forth? Will experience, or greater maturity, show the need for them? House churches initially met in houses; then they took over redundant churches and halls; now they are often using converted cinemas. What happens when they start becoming committed to a large number of buildings (new or converted) of their own? Do these developments point to a greater need for working together between the denominations? Will there be greater scope for ecumenism? Or will there always be a rising up of new, independent denominations?

Should there be changes within anglicanism? Should we copy the features of others, to emulate their success? Or should we offer something distinctive? Is diversity itself a strength? If there is growing polarisation within the Church of England – as does seem to be reflected in, for example, synod debates – does that have any influence on who should be appointed to leadership positions? Even if we do not wish to copy others, can we learn lessons from them? Alternatively, can we provide any insights that may be helpful to others? Is the faculty system, for example, better or worse than the equivalent authorisation processes in other denominations? It is the charismatic evangelicals alone who are expected to grow in the next decade, and to grow substantially – yet why is the Church of England almost the only denomination where their numbers have recently been falling?

Overall, the results of the Census should encourage us in planning for the future. But there is much food for thought and reflection. One thing is clear – God is working through a wide variety of very different instruments; as is evidenced by the life that is to be found in many unexpected parts of the church. It is after all the Spirit who gives life; the flesh counts for nothing (see John 6 v 63); and the Spirit moves where he wills – even in the Church of England!