

A welcome turn: our attendance data 2024

A huge **thank you** once more to all whose efforts in submitting October 2024 data mean that we have been able to analyse our core attendance many months earlier than would otherwise have been possible. Now we can make comparisons based on the 179 churches which made these early returns in 2023 and 2024.

Some good news

There has been a further *all-age average weekly attendance* decline of -1%, not good news in itself. However, behind this has been significant growth of **14%** among children and therefore their families (as children hardly ever come to church alone these days). This means that the Church of England in this diocese has become a bit younger too.

We can also tell from the quite volatile ups and downs in children's attendance that young families are *more responsive than we might have assumed* to the provision of worship suitable to them. A significant part of this growth is through new services aimed at this group, i.e. fresh expressions and the like. As the Report's authors put it, the issue is therefore not with the demand, but (in this instance) with our capacity to supply what children and families need. Alongside this is evidence (also identified in 2022 and 2023) that in Canterbury we struggle to offer regular *weekly* worship of all kinds – the other big 'supply' issue. You'll find more on these matters in the Report itself.

What can we do?

If we can navigate our own first responses to the idea that more frequent services and more suitable worship can help (*we're busy enough as it is...but who is there to help...what difference will it make?*) then we can be a little more curious and discerning locally. For example might we focus on:

Having a go in adapting present worship or creating new worship which 'works' for children young people and families. The evidence suggests that if we can find the right context, time and a regular pattern, they will come.

Taking an interest in Focal Ministry developments, where one person is identified as the go-to person for a local church wherever possible, especially in multi-church contexts. (Also known as 'leading one church at a time'.) A diocesan pilot starts after Easter. Could this be fruitful where we are?

Thinking about how we resource ministry with children, young people and families. Is there a part of our context where we sense more of a focus could make a real difference?

If you'd like to muse further on any of this do contact me sconeys@diocant.org on the research and the Focal Ministry pilot, or Jen jtobin@diocant.org on children, young people and families.



Steve Coney, Mission and Growth Adviser

AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE IN OCTOBER 2024

A REPORT FOR THE DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY

Dr Bev Botting (Data Analyst Diocese of Oxford)

Ven Bob Jackson (Church Growth Consultant, writer of this report)

BACKGROUND TO THIS YEAR'S REPORT

In 2022 and 2023 we asked churches in the Diocese to send in promptly their October attendance returns and as a result we were able to produce a report on trends and patterns by the New Year. We have repeated the exercise for 2024 based on 179 churches (59%) that made a return in both 2023 and 2024. These data have been checked for quality and corrections made where necessary. Thanks are due to all the churches that filled in their entries so promptly – there were responses from more than 179 churches, but some did not have a corresponding return for 2023.

This report contains a mix of straightforward statistical reporting and the author's conclusions about the implications of what has been measured. These two categories are not always easily separable but, for the sake of clarity, the implications are rendered in italics.

HOW ACCURATE WERE OUR ESTIMATES FOR 2023?

The final, official, AWA statistics for October 2023 were published by the C of E in November 2024. We would not expect them to be exactly the same as our estimates for two main reasons. The first is that we were able to use only a 58% sample of the churches, whereas the addition of later entries enabled the C of E estimate to be based on a 69% sample. The second is that the C of E published estimates are all rounded to the nearest 100. With the smaller totals, for example child AWA, this means that the possible range of % change is quite large. A change from, say, 1000 to 900 could represent anything from 1049-851 to 951-949.

Our estimate of adult AWA was that it stayed the same between 2022 and 2023 whereas the published, rounded, figures suggest a growth of 2%. The rounding means that the actual growth could be anywhere from 0% to 4%. Our estimate of child AWA was that it went down by 17% from 2022 to 2023

whereas the published, rounded, estimate was -8%, with a range of 0% to -16%. So, in both cases our estimate was at the bottom end of the published range, so the outturn might have been slightly better than the data available to us in December 2023 suggested. However, we will never know the exact actual AWA change because we still lack data on 31% of the churches. The higher the response rate can be raised, the more certainty we can have about the outcomes.

CANTERBURY AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Attendance decline has long been faster in Canterbury than the of C of E average. Between 2014 and 2019 AWA declined in Canterbury Diocese at 3.4%pa compared with 2.5%pa in the Church of England as a whole.

The AWA trend in Canterbury continued below that of the Church of England as a whole in 2022 and 2023. In 2022 AWA in Canterbury fell 5% but in the C of E as a whole it rose 8%. In 2023 AWA in Canterbury rose 1.8% according to the official statistics, compared with a growth of 4.6% in the C of E as a whole. In October 2023 AWA in Canterbury was 68% of 2019 compared with 80% for the C of E. This was one of the weakest recoveries of any diocese.

The recovery of child AWA has been especially weak. In 2023 child AWA in Canterbury was 50% of 2019, compared with 77% in the C of E as a whole. So, the average age of church attenders had risen as their total number fell.

THE AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE TREND IN 2024

The sharpest question, therefore, is whether or not there is any evidence in the 2024 AWA statistics to suggest a turnaround in the diocese towards a new growth trend. We suspect that 2022 was the last year for post-lockdown adjustment so that the 2023-24 comparison is the first one not aided by post-covid recovery. Would the previous decline trend re-assert itself?

Adult AWA in the 179 churches for which we have data for both 2023 and 2024 was:

	2023	2024	change	% change
Sunday	6056	6070	+14	+0.2%
Weekday	843	742	-101	-12.0%

Total	6899	6812	-87	-1.3%
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Although Sunday attendance was steady, the large % drop in weekday attendance meant an overall reduction of 1% in adult AWA in 2024. It is worth noting that the weekday total refers to extra attendance – people attending on a Sunday as well as a weekday are counted only once as Sunday attenders. Weekday attendance can go down not just through fewer people attending but also through people transferring to Sunday or going on Sundays as well as weekdays.

Although -1% is less than the 2014-2019 trend of -3.4%pa it is not the turnaround we were looking for.

There was, however, a strong and clear recovery of child AWA:

	2023	2024	change	% change
Sunday	716	780	+64	+8.9%
Weekday	86	131	+45	+52.3%
Total	802	911	+109	+13.6%

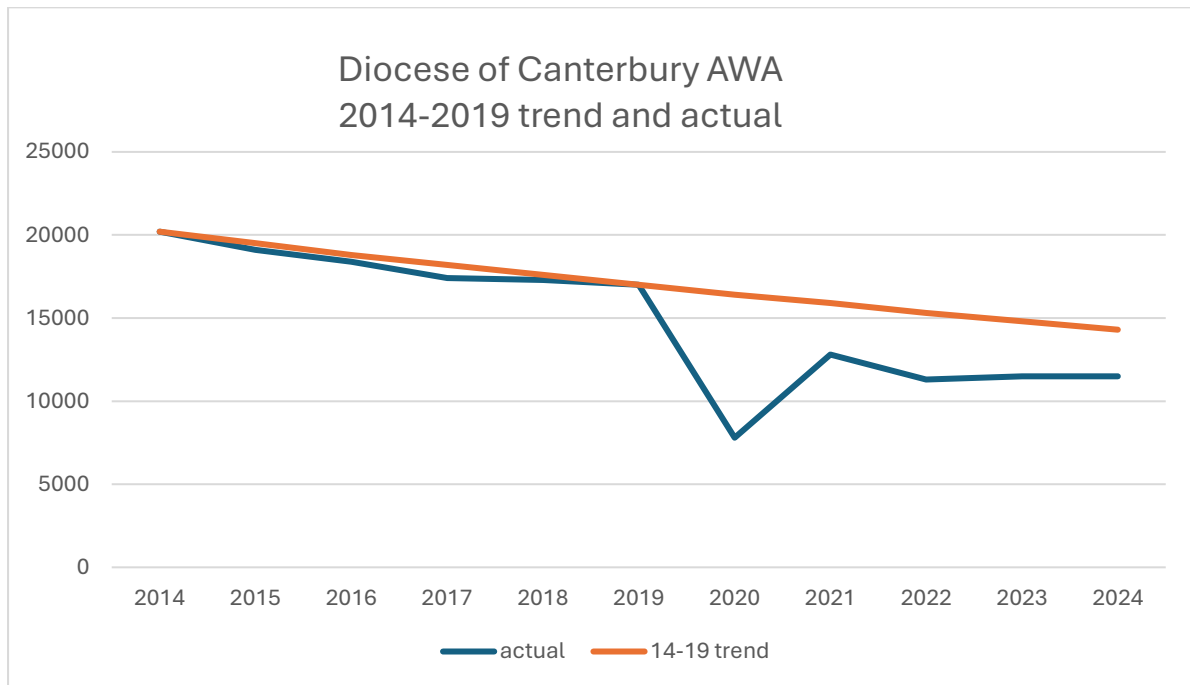
Child AWA in 2024 was still only 57% of that of 2019 but this represents a very significant recovery on 2023. It largely recovers the AWA loss in 2022, which leads to the possibility that this was a statistical outlier. Child AWA in 2023 may simply be back on trend. Or, of course, it may herald a new era of growth.

The rise in child AWA balanced out the fall in adult AWA so the total remained the same, but the composition changed, and the average age went down because children (and the parents accompanying them) formed a higher proportion of the total in 2024 than in 2023. Children were 10.4% of the AWA total in 2023 and 11.8% in 2024.

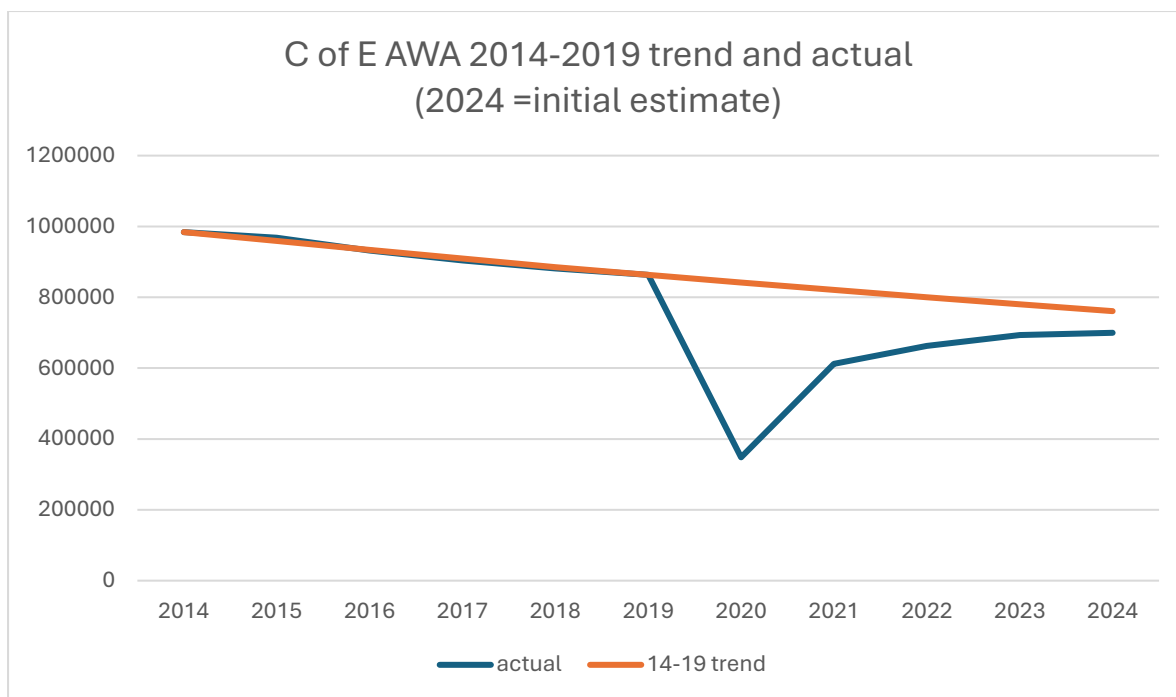
In view of the contrast between adult and child AWA in 2024, we will report on them separately to help us understand what has been happening.

The graph below shows all age AWA against the trend line projected from 2019, which is our best estimate at what would have happened if covid had

not occurred and things had carried on as they had been in the period 2014-2019:



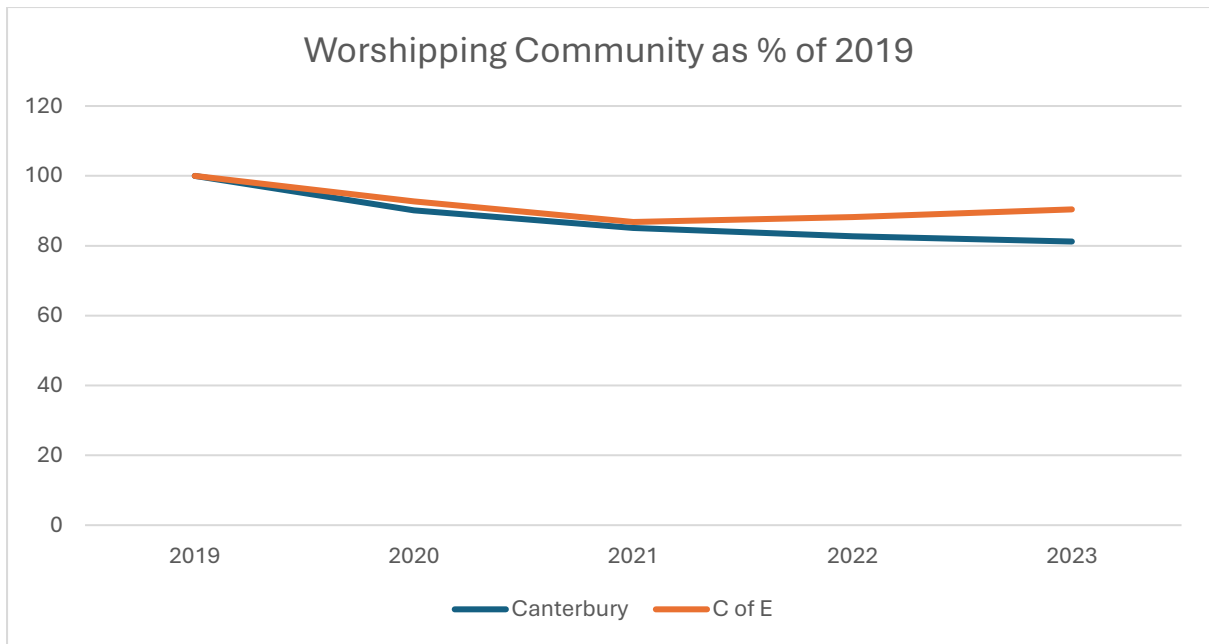
After a strong recovery in 2021, Adult AWA in Canterbury fell in 2022 and almost flatlined in 2023 and 2024. In contrast, the C of E nationally continued its AWA growth in 2022 and 2023. The first very tentative indications are that there may have been a further very small increase in 2024:



OTHER INDICATORS

These are not yet available for 2024 in sufficient numbers. 84 churches out of the 179 had already entered their ER numbers and the total was 3.8% less than in 2023. 46 churches had (rather prematurely) entered their Usual Sunday Attendance numbers. The total adult and child uSa of these 46 was the same in 2024 as in 2023. But it will be March before other indicators can be assessed properly, once most churches have completed their returns in full.

It is worth noting, however, that the size of the worshipping community (WC) has not shrunk as much as AWA but the contrast with the C of E is similar. From 2014 to 2019 the WC of the Diocese of Canterbury fell 11.6% compared with 2.6% for the C of E. The graph below contrasts the movement in WC in Canterbury and the C of E from 2019 to 2023:



It will be important to check what has happened to the WC total in 2024 when the data has been entered.

CHILD AWA

The 14% increase in child AWA in 2024 in our sample of 179 churches (802 to 911) was widespread. It was not due to one or two churches with large groups and big increases. The AWA in the six largest churches was 233 in 2023 and 236 in 2024. The table below shows that there were fewer churches in 2024 without any child attendance, but most of those starting to have some child attendance still had tiny numbers (usually averaging less than 1).

Child AWA	Number of churches	
	2023	2024
0	58	43
Under 1	22	32
1 to 3.75	44	45
4 to 9.75	28	31
10 plus	27	28
Total	179	179

However, the overall increase is not primarily the result of small gains in most places. Instead, the child AWA numbers tend to be extremely volatile. The net gain was mainly because there were more churches with large increases than there were churches with large decreases:

27 churches with min 10 AWA in 2023:

2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024
62	46	16	16	12	2
54	45	15	6	12	26
35	14	13	13	12	10
35	24	13	17	11	8
24	23	13	7	11	2
23	18	13	14	11	3
17	19	12	46	10	25
17	39	12	7		
17	30	12	1		
16	21	12	15		

Eight of these churches dropped out of the 10+ category in 2024 but were replaced by nine others:

2023	2024
8	13
8	12
7	10
7	11
4	17
3	11
2	12
0	30

It is possible to calculate the maximum AWA that continued from 2023 to 2024 by checking the change in each church. If AWA has grown in a church, then, in theory, all the children generating the 2023 AWA may have kept attending in 2024. (In practice it is likely that some had stopped and been replaced by others). If AWA has fallen or disappeared, then the maximum survival is given by the 2024 total. The maximum child AWA survival from 2023 to 2024 was 612 out of 802. As a rule of thumb, children on average attend about one week in two (many of their services are monthly fresh expressions or family services). That suggests a total of around 1600 children in 2023 and 1800 in 2024. So, we can estimate that a minimum of around 400 out of 1600 children (one quarter) in 2023 no longer attended in 2024 (unless, of course, they had changed church). On the other hand, a minimum of around 600 children (one third) started attending in 2024.

These estimates are minima because we also expect that within a church's individual total there will be some degree of turnover.

This dual finding that a lot of children attend church for only a short time but that many new children are attending church for the first time confirms a finding from our analysis of New Worshipping Communities in the northern province ('New in the North' <https://faithinthenorth.org/new-in-the-north/>). Here we found that many of the children were attending FxCs and NWCs which had very high rates of creation but also very high rates of cessation. Around a quarter of FxC in the north appeared to close in a single year but they were replaced by new FxC in other churches. It is likely that something similar is helping generate the volatility in child AWA in Canterbury.

Very few children now attend churches without their parents or other carers accompanying them. The large numbers of children coming into and out of churchgoing therefore also indicates similar numbers of parents and carers.

There are some clear implications of these findings:

- 1. Families are responsive to appropriate church provision. It is possible to achieve large increases in the attendance of families within a*

single year not just in a single church but across a diocese. It is likely that the church growth fruits of investing resources into family, child and young person attendance are greater than for any other demographic.

- 2. For various reasons, including the short lives of many FxC and congregations aimed at families, child attendance is fragile and many children do not attend church for very long. The gains in some churches are being offset by losses in others, and many gains are only temporary.*
- 3. Diocesan support for churches to start and, crucially, sustain new initiatives has the potential to help grow churches both larger and younger. This would be a strong candidate, for example, for any future bids for funding from SMMIB. Our research for Guildford Diocese has shown that churches with assistant ministry staff in this area have been recovering from covid faster and more consistently than similar churches without such staff. And our research for the northern province has helped obtain SMMIB funding for posts accompanying, training and guiding parish churches in setting up and sustaining NWCs for families, children and young people.*

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

The statistical evidence from C of E Statistics for Mission (SfM) since 2019 suggests that the 'demand' for church services is more elastic (ie more responsive) than it was before covid, war in Europe, the cost-of-living crisis and the advance of global warming. It looks like the population at large is somewhat more spiritually searching and willing to give appropriate church a try. The main restriction on church attendance is now the supply side. The C of E is providing only about 80% of the church services it did in 2019, the Diocese of Canterbury only about 70%. And it is churches with supply problems that have been shrinking. These include maintaining the number of services, having one every week, vacancy issues, being able to offer services suited to families, keeping FxC going, and maintaining an online dimension. Churches that have kept or expanded their service pattern,

started a NWC, hold a service every week, have an incumbent in place, offer church to families, and remain online, tend to have grown a lot.

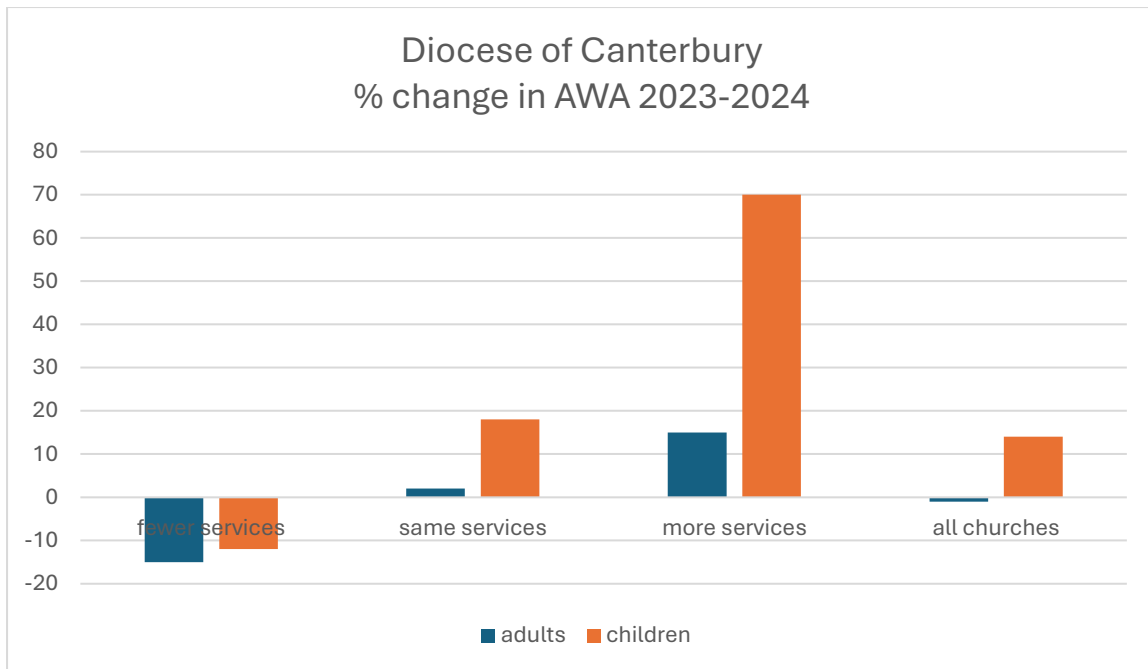
The sections below show that these findings from various dioceses up to 2023 are confirmed by the 2024 AWA data for Canterbury.

NUMBER OF SERVICES

In 2023 the number of church services was slightly below 70% of the number in 2019. This compares with a national average of around 80% and helps explain the exceptional fall in attendance in Canterbury. In 2024 the average number of services per week in the 179 churches in our sample was 298 -an increase of 1% on 2023. This helps explain why there was no further fall in AWA in 2024, though a more substantial increase in services is probably required before AWA can start rising significantly.

The graph below shows that the 50 churches with more services in 2024 had a collective increase in their adult AWA of 15% and their child AWA of 70%. The 59 churches with fewer services in 2024 had a collective fall of 15% in adult AWA and 12% in child AWA. It is the major AWA falls in these churches that kept the 2024 total from rising. Even the churches with the same services in 2024 had a 2% increase in adult AWA and an 18% increase in child AWA.

Particularly striking is the increase in child AWA in churches with more services in 2024 -confirming the conclusion in the section above that much of the overall growth in child AWA came from NWCs aimed at families and young people. It also confirms the finding that demand for church services among families is currently especially responsive to new provision.



NUMBER OF WEEKS

Out of last year’s sample of 177 churches, 42 (24%) did not offer a service every week in 2022 and 47 in 2023. Five churches went back up to one service a week but ten slipped down below it. In our (slightly different) sample of 179 churches this year, 46 did not offer a service every week in 2023 and 48 (27%) in 2024. Seven churches went back up to at least one service a week and nine went down to less than one a week. The total number seems to be creeping up each year. The problem for AWA is not only that the weeks without a service reduce the average over the four weeks but also that the AWA trend in churches not meeting every week is worse than in those meeting at least once a week. In 2024 in Canterbury, the difference was so great it was the difference between dying and flourishing.

Adult AWA at the 48 churches not meeting every week fell from 495 to 369, a drop of 25%. Adult AWA at 27 small churches with an AWA under 20 in 2023 but meeting every week went up from 375 to 469, an increase of 20%. It may be that not all of this enormous difference in trend is due to meeting frequency. Perhaps churches that are not strong enough to meet weekly are weak in other ways as well. But there is still a clear message – small

churches meeting weekly grew strongly, similar churches meeting less than weekly shrank fast.

Very few children attend these small churches, especially those not meeting every week. Child AWA in the 48 churches not meeting weekly went down from 36 to 30 in 2024, and in the 27 churches meeting weekly it went up from 34 to 36.

This general finding has been repeated each year in Canterbury as well as in other dioceses. Small churches not meeting every week are quite likely to be on the route to full closure. Small churches meeting weekly are quite likely to be growing well. Meeting weekly is one of the keys to the survival and growth of small churches, and the key to delivering weekly services lies with church leadership, in particular the Focal Ministry trial the diocese is about to embark on. There is also the implication that NWCs not meeting every week will also be vulnerable, and this is borne out by their high death rate.

CHURCH SIZE

Adult AWA group in 2023	no. churches	% change 23-24
Small -not every week	48	-25%
Under 20-every week	27	+20%
20 to 49	58	+2%
50 to 99	34	+3%
100 plus	12	-12%
Total	179	-1%

At the other end of the size distribution, the large churches, once again, were also shrinking. Adult AWA in the 48 churches not meeting every week went down a net 126 and in the 12 churches with 100+ in 2023 by a net 199. Moreover, child AWA fell by 19% in these 12 large churches, offsetting the growth elsewhere. *There have been some general reasons for larger churches recovering less well from lockdown, but this continued decline when there is net growth elsewhere deserves some particular attention. Perhaps some could be designated as resource churches with the help of SMMIB money and be tasked as families and youth hubs.*

FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH (FxC)

Each church is asked on the SfM form to say whether they operated any FxC in October 2024, but not all churches have filled that column in just yet. However, we did find 16 churches with a FxC both years and 8 more with a FxC new in 2024. These 24 churches totalled the same change in adult AWA as the diocesan average -about -1%. Many FxC are small, meet monthly and don't add much to adult AWA so, though disappointing, this is perhaps not surprising.

However, child AWA grew in the 16 churches with a continuing FxC from 100 in 2023 to 145 in 2024, and in the 8 churches with a new FxC from 29 in 2023 to 64 in 2024. So, it certainly looks as though many of these FxC are aimed at children and families and that they are succeeding in growing child attendance. Out of the net increase of 109 in our sample of 179 churches, 81 came from these 24 churches. When more have been identified this total might well rise.

ONLINE CHURCH

In most dioceses the churches still streaming online (usually through FB and YT) also have a better onsite attendance trend. This may be partly because people thinking about churchgoing now tend to look online first whereas they used to check out the websites. We don't yet have CAH data for 2024 as most churches will not have entered it yet, but we do have 2024 AWA data for 11 churches that streamed services online in October 2023. Their adult AWA rose 5% in 2024 and their child AWA 124% (34 to 76). *This is at least a hint that the parent generations are finding their way into churches through the online dimension. It will be important to check this more thoroughly once the full data is available in March.*

We reported last year that the number of YT views of Canterbury Cathedral services in late 2022 averaged around 13,000 across all services and in 2023 something over 16,000 with an average of 5400 for the two Sunday services and 2200 a day for choral evensong. View numbers for late 2024 averaged 8100 on Sundays and 2300 each weekday, making a total of over 21,000. As cathedral views are quite volatile depending on the exact

service on offer this does not prove that view numbers overall have risen, though it looks like they might have done. They certainly don't seem to be diminishing and would appear now to be a permanent feature. Our rough estimate of the likely number of people involved in an average week in November- December exc Christmas is around 12,500. To put this in perspective, this is more than the total all age AWA for the Diocese of Canterbury excluding the cathedral. Christmas Eve plus Christmas Day view numbers totalled 40,000 across four cathedral services.

The story of church attendance since the covid lockdown is not simply one of decline and partial recovery – including the cathedral livestreams makes total diocesan onsite plus online average weekly attendance clearly more than it was in 2019.

Although Canterbury Cathedral is unique, with a world-wide ministry, it is not the only church with online potential. Many people prefer their own parish church if it is available. And many other churches across the country have also built up strong online membership.

VACANCIES

In previous years (and in many other dioceses) we found that churches with an incumbent vacancy on average found their AWA went down faster than the average. This especially applies to the larger and medium sized churches. Small churches in multi-church benefices tend to run more independently of an incumbent they rarely see and so are less vulnerable to a long vacancy. Last year, the 11 churches we identified with an AWA in 2022 of over 50 saw their collective AWA go down 19% in 2023.

This year, out of 26 churches identified as being in vacancy in October 2024 with AWA numbers for both 2023 and 2024, only 6 had an AWA over 50. Moreover, their collective adult AWA stayed the same in 2024 and their child AWA rose strongly, despite being in vacancy. So, vacancy losses did not drag the total down in 2024 both because there were fewer large/medium church vacancies and because some of them actually grew their AWA in the vacancy.

Whether this is an outlier (a sample of only 6) or a result of better vacancy management, or use of the resource mentioned below, we cannot tell.

As always, churches can do their best to guard against the missional impact of a coming vacancy by using the ‘Growing through a vacancy’ materials provided by CPAS. The diocese can both encourage this and also maintain efforts to restrict the length of vacancies as much as it can.

DEMAND RESPONDS TO SUPPLY

Once again, we have discovered that churches able to maintain or increase their number of services, hold a service every week, be child or family-friendly, start or maintain a FxC, and stay online have grown strongly. Those unable or unwilling to do these things have shrunk significantly.

It is likely that any diocesan summary of our SfM findings going out to church leaders would focus on these issues.

DIOCESAN RESPONSES – LYCiG AND FOCAL MINISTERS

We are delighted, partly in response to last year’s report and the December 2023 conference, that the diocese is now encouraging churches to engage with LyCiG processes and is engaging with some multi-church incumbencies to set up networks of focal ministers.

As the LyCiG team and offer expands following its successful funding bid to SMMIB, this involvement can be seen as a process rather than simply a one-off event. It can already involve LyCiG-Local at parish level and ongoing support groups for leaders. Other dimensions are becoming available, such as leading family and youth ministry into growth. The first cohort of church leaders did a LyCiG course in the diocese in July 2024, too soon before October to expect any statistical progress. AWA in 2025 at this cohort, however, should be looked at closely.

One of the benefits of focal ministry should be to enable more churches to offer services every week. More generally, developing a new cadre of unpaid church leaders will expand the capacity of the parishes to supply the revitalised church life and services that will re-grow the churches. There are 69 churches in the nine benefices scheduled to start a FM trial in 2025, of which 39 are included in the sample of 179 with data in both 2023 and 2024 analysed in this report. 14 of the 39 did not meet every week in October 2024 and their adult AWA went down 20%, from an average of 10 per church to eight. The 25 that held a service at least once a week held their AWA steady at an average of 27.

DIOCESAN RESPONSES – CANDIDATES FOR FINANCIAL INVESTMENT

We are not familiar with current diocesan engagement with SMMIB, and we are aware that the evidence in this report is not the whole story. However, we thought it might be helpful to list church-growth initiatives that seem indicated by the SfM evidence in this report and which may benefit from such funding:

Funding For Parishes

Grants to assist the start-up and sustainability of FxC and other NWCs aimed at families, children and young people

Grants to help larger churches employ families, children and youth ministers, and develop as specialist hubs for them

Financial support to multi-church benefices to enable them to offer weekly worship in each of their churches. One avenue for doing this would be supporting the development of Focal Ministry

Grants to help churches set up good quality technical systems, social media and human engagement for streaming services online

Funding for diocesan support

The following list of potential posts and functions tends to mirror the four areas of parish funding above. A diocesan officer and a parish funding pot would come as a single package. Some may require a new post, but we realise that others may already have a post attached, and others may simply need existing job descriptions to be modified:

Post to support the start-up and sustainability of NWCs aimed at families, children and young people

Post for supporting both paid and unpaid parish ministries with families, children and young people

Post to develop and support Focal Ministers

Post to help churches offer weekly services again

Post for accompanying churches on their LyCiG journey, including conferences, L-Local, support groups and specialist inspiration & training

Post for helping churches develop their online dimension

We are aware that most of these post categories have already been the subject of successful funding bids elsewhere. The innovations would probably be the 'weekly services' and 'online' posts, but these have some of the strongest statistical evidence behind their concept.

Ven Bob Jackson January 7th 2025

