Church Attendance in October 2022

Post-Covid-19 Trends, Patterns and Possibilities

Dr Bev Botting, Dr Ken Eames, and the Ven. Bob Jackson

Four key questions for the Church

1. How far has church attendance recovered after Covid-19?
2. What are the patterns and variations in the recovery?
3. Why has a full recovery not yet happened?
4. How can further attendance growth be encouraged?

How much do attendance numbers matter?

It is sometimes said that the mission of the Christian church is not to attract crowds to worship events but to make disciples and serve the Kingdom. But how do we know if we are fulfilling our mission effectively? Counting attendance is an important indicator of the numerical size of the Body of Christ. It helps monitor our success in holding and making disciples. It shows us where we are making and losing ground. It challenges and informs us about how we should go about our mission. And most of us would agree that encouraging the worship of the Living God is integral to that mission. Church attendance numbers do not tell us everything, but they do tell us quite a lot.

Introduction

For this report, which builds on a similar survey of Easter attendance, we compared the October 2022 attendance statistics of a large sample of churches with October 2019.

Between these dates we lived through the closure of all church buildings in March 2020, the rise of online services, the various periods of restrictions to church services (numbers, masks, music, communion reception), the lifting of restrictions and then a period of ongoing Covid-19 and continuing worry for some about meeting together. What has happened to church attendance over these three tumultuous years?

The five dioceses of Canterbury, Chester, Guildford, Oxford and Leeds each asked their churches to record their October attendance numbers promptly on the Statistics for Mission database. The questions asked and the definitions used are those of the normal annual 'Statistics for Mission' survey, covering the whole Church of England. For more details see the methodology in the 2021 Statistics for Mission report. After the deadline of 13 November 2022, we quality-checked the data, querying unusual figures. We were unable to include in this analysis churches lacking a 2019 return, those whose return included different churches in 2019 and 2022, and those where attendance was given as zero in one year when we knew this was unlikely.

This left us with full data for both 2019 and 2022 on 1139 churches, 50% of the dioceses' total churches, and 7.5% of all the churches in the C of E. We believe the five dioceses are representative of the spread of the Church of England. We also checked some results with a sixth diocese that collects its own statistics promptly anyway (Manchester), which seemed in line with our five. Although there were some interesting contrasts between them, the picture is broadly similar in each one.

We believe our results give a reasonable indication of the answers to the four questions on page 2 within a time frame where the results and implications are still highly current and relevant.

This summary report is made available to all to help inform church life and actions in every diocese. We are very grateful for the churches who supplied October count data and for the leadership teams in each of the five dioceses for their vision and goodwill in enabling this important study to be undertaken and the results to be freely shared. Special thanks to the Diocese of Oxford for hosting this report on its website for the benefit of all.

The pages that follow begin with objective reporting of statistical findings, which are hard to argue against. Later in the report, however, we draw conclusions and make recommendations that we believe are logical and valid, but you may have other valid observations in your own context.

Dr Bev Botting – Data Analyst, Diocese of Oxford, & freelance statistician, bev.botting@lineone.net
Dr Ken Eames – Senior Statistical Researcher, Church of England
Venerable Bob Jackson – Church Growth Consultant, venerablebob@gmail.com

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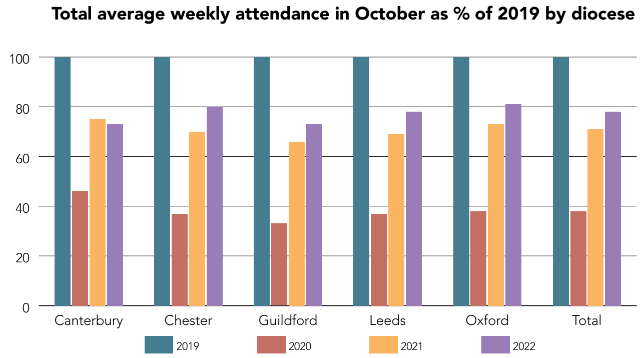
An outdoor Parish Eucharist service in the Winslow Benefice, 2021. Photo © Emma Thompson | Diocese of Oxford

1. How far has church attendance recovered after Covid-19?

Onsite

Across our five dioceses, total onsite weekly attendance in October 2022 varied between 73% and 81% of 2019, with an average of 78%. This compared with 38% in 2020 and 71% in 2021. So onsite attendance has continued to increase in 2021-22, but at a slower rate than in 2020-21.

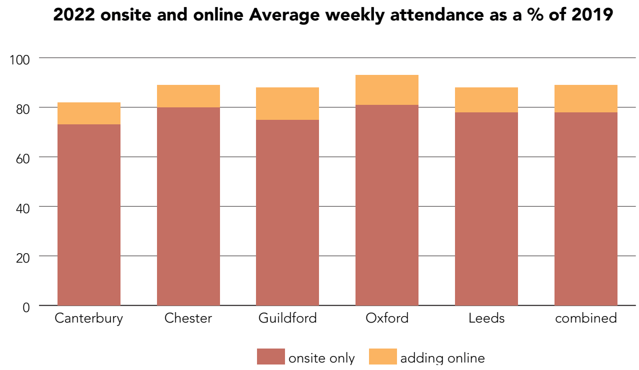


Church at home - mainly online

At its peak in the 2020 lockdowns, online attendance at services looked considerably greater than 2019 onsite levels (see Everybody Welcome to the Future) – though our online attendance estimates, mainly based on Facebook and YouTube views, are rudimentary and very approximate estimates.

For October 2021 and 2022 churches were asked to make their own estimate of their Church at Home (CAH) attendance, most of which by 2022 was online on YouTube. Generally, these estimates appear to us to be modest and reasonably consistent between 2021 and 2022. As churches opened-up again onsite the number of churches offering CAH has fallen, but it still added significantly to October 2022 attendance estimates.

We estimate, from the numbers supplied by the churches, that online attendance at parish churches increased total average weekly attendance in 2022 up from 78% of 2019 to 89%. The total varied across the dioceses between 82% and 93%.



The extra CAH attendance estimated by churches in 2022 was around half that in 2021 because only about half the churches offering CAH in 2021 still did so in 2022. The online addition to onsite attendance in 2021 raised the total from 71% of 2019's average weekly attendance to around 93%. Although onsite attendance rose in 2022 it looks as though total onsite plus estimated online attendance may therefore have fallen slightly.

In addition to parish churches, large numbers of people are accessing services online at some cathedrals, plus at a handful of other churches with a national reach, such as Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB).

We estimate that at least 5000, possibly 7000, people were accessing a service at Canterbury Cathedral each week in October 2022 and there were several thousand also at HTB. Adding maybe 12-15 major online churches and cathedrals together could add another 2 to 5% to national Church of England attendance, putting it just over the 90% mark when compared with 2019.

2. What are the patterns and variations in the recovery?

In 2022 total attendance was divided between the various categories from the Statistics for Mission form in the following proportions:

	% of whole
Adults Sunday	74
Adults Sunday FxC	2
Adults weekday	9
Adults weekday FxC	1
Children Sunday	11
Children Sunday FxC	1
Children weekday	1
Children weekday FxC	1
	100

The dominance of Sundays is not as extreme as it might appear because people should only be counted once. Those who attended on a weekday or at a fresh expression of church (FxC) as well as on Sunday are allocated to traditional Sunday church only.

Adults and children

Child attendance recovery has been comparatively weak, reaching 71% of the 2019 level compared with 79% for adults. This in turn suggests that attendance has recovered less well among younger adults, who tend to be the ones accompanying children.

It may be that family life moved on during lockdown, children grew out of their previous churchgoing phase and families found other activities for Sundays.

Our figures also show, however, that fewer services were offered in 2022 than in 2019. Lack of provision inevitably means lack of attendance.

The range of recovery across the dioceses varied more for children than for adults – dioceses varied between 62% and 77% of 2019 child numbers but the variation was only 76% to 82% for adults. There was wide variety between individual churches. Such variability looks indicative of patchy provision rather than a general fall away of interest from families.

Traditional and fresh expressions

Attendance in 2022 at a FxC was also comparatively weak, reaching 67% of 2019's level compared with 79% for traditional church. There were 78% of 2019's adults but only 50% of the children.

Attendance of children particularly fell on weekdays, down to 34% of 2019's level. For every 100 churches reporting a FxC in 2019 there were 81 in 2022, and these were often not the same churches.

In one diocese, half of 2019's fresh expressions churches no longer had a FxC in 2022, but a similar number had started one they did not have before. The most likely FxC to have ceased was a child-friendly expression such as Messy Church on weekdays.

Statistically, about two thirds of the attendance fall is associated with there being fewer FxCs operating and about one third associated with a reduction in average attendance at a FxC service from 30 to 27. This looks due to the newly-started FxCs being smaller than the 2019 average.

It is possible that some churches have re-badged what were the FxC as mainstream services because they have become familiar and established. One future analysis might be to identify possible candidates from the database and ask if this is something that is really happening.

Sundays and weekdays

Attendance on weekdays in 2022 was 76% of the 2019 level, slightly lower than the 79% on Sundays. The child and FxC numbers were the weakest and there was considerable variation between the dioceses, varying between 56% and 93% of the 2019 level.

This variation is partly caused by significant falls in the number of weekday services in some areas, especially FxC and those aimed at children or families.

Photo: Madeleine Hayden

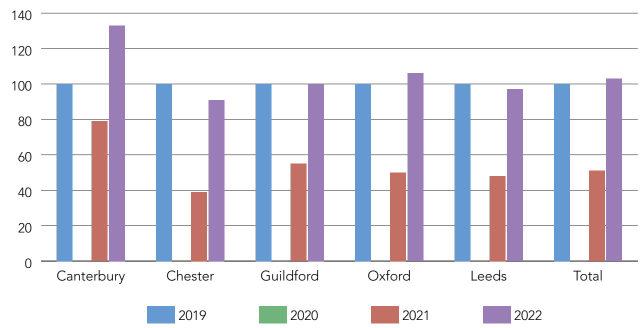
School services

Attendance at school services does not count in the 'average weekly attendance' (AWA) of churches and we have not studied the numbers in any detail. But we did count them. All age attendance at school services in 2022 in all five dioceses combined was 103% of 2019.

The recovery since the total absence of services in 2020 has been full and rapid in every diocese. The children may have no choice in attending these services, but the pandemic seems not to have dented the demand for services from the schools.

The result shows that it is possible to get back to 2019 churchgoing levels and that churches are still reaching large numbers of children (and often their parents) through their school links.

All age average weekly attendance at schools services 2019-2022 as a % of 2019



Individual churches

There has been much greater variation in attendance at individual churches than we would normally expect in a three-year period. This is easiest to see in the larger churches that do not normally experience massive percentage shifts in attendance in such a short time-period.

Many churches have only recovered to under half their previous onsite attendance while a much smaller number have doubled or more. This may be due to some individual circumstances – for example we found that larger churches that had a vacancy as well as grappling with Covid-19 have shrunk more than the average.

Some church communities were more wary for longer at meeting in large numbers than were others. But our analysis shows that this variation is systematically associated with how many of their previous services churches restarted when freedom from restrictions fully returned.

We have no centrally collected data to prove this, but a series of anecdotes and conversations suggests that many churches have had a more rapid than usual turnover of congregation even if overall numbers are similar. Churches have lost – and gained – more individuals than usual.

3. Why has a full recovery not yet happened?

Patchy provision not declining demand

There is an argument that an ageing church attracting too few children and young adults to replenish itself in an increasingly secular world will inevitably decline. Covid-19 has compressed ten years of 'inevitable' decline into three. Such a view can be strangely comforting as well as paralysing as it absolves church leaders of responsibility – the future is already written, there is little we can do, and decline is not our fault.

The evidence we have found in the attendance data presented in this report tells us this argument is wrong. In the following pages of this report we show a strong correlation between reduced provision of online and onsite services and reduced attendance. This does not prove the direction of causation as streaming and services could have been cut back in response to lack of interest. However, much of the fall in the number of services is likely to have happened at the resumption of services – there was too little time between that and October 2022 for so many re-started services to then have been scrapped owing to lack of attendance.

Churches now meeting on fewer Sundays do not have fewer people attending when there is a service than in 2019, rather the average has gone down with the number of services. Churches still online are attracting almost as many online attendees as they were in 2021 – so it seems likely that churches stopping online would have kept at least some online participants if they had kept going. The most stretched service-takers with multi-church benefices have reduced services the most . Our conversations also suggest that churches have not normally fine-tuned their supply of services according to changing demand. They have simply had trouble re-instating the previous number of services in a challenging period.

So, we have concluded that numbers are lower than in 2019 not because the demand for church is in inevitable decline but because of difficulties with the supply of both onsite and online church services. Churches that stayed online and have not reduced their service numbers have fully regained 2019 attendance levels. It is only where churches have retrenched that their attendance is reduced.

If attendance is sensitive to the state and supply of church life and worship, then the future of attendance trends lies in the churches' own hands. Developing the number and relevance of services leads to church growth. This is a far more optimistic and potential-filled finding than the assumption of helplessness in the face of inevitable decline.

However, we do not wish this finding to add guilt and pressure to overstretched clergy. We are definitely not trying to persuade clergy to work even harder! On the contrary, in the final section of this report we urge dioceses to find new models of leadership that take pressure off the stipendiary clergy by giving them more realistic job descriptions in the context of a developing 'mixed economy' model of church leadership.

Attendance was declining anyway.

The Church of England's average weekly attendance (AWA) fell by 7% in the three years October 2016-19. If that trend was to continue, then we would only expect to recover to 93% of 2019 in October 2022 and around 91% in October 2023.

However, the times have not been normal. Evidence given in the report 'Everybody Welcome to Online' suggests that online attendance for a while exceeded the previous onsite attendance. Now churches can offer both onsite and online together. The pandemic affected everyone, and some people may be more spiritually open and searching than they were as evidenced by the most recent 'Talking Jesus' survey, section 3.

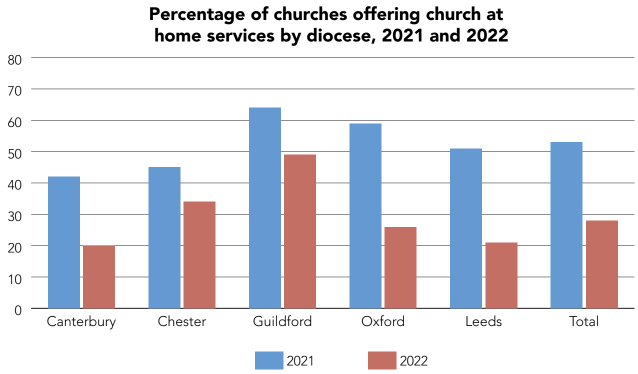
We should aspire to more than just returning to a declining trend. Many churches have already fully recovered their 2019 attendance and we make no apology for making that our benchmark by which to judge recovery.

In October 2021 when attendance was on average at 71% of the 2019 level, the membership measure called 'Worshipping Community' was 87% of 2019. If these figures are reliable then much of the attendance decline was caused not by fewer churchgoers but by them each coming less often. Similarly, some of the attendance recovery since October 2021 may have been due to people coming to church more often than immediately after church buildings reopened, and there may be a little way for this to continue into 2023. Worshipping Community is now probably the key indicator to examine to help us understand the state of our congregations trying to recover from Covid-19 lockdowns.

Retrenchment online

The percentage of churches offering Church at Home (CAH) fell from 53% in October 2021 to 28% in 2022. Almost all CAH offerings now appear to be services streamed online, usually using YouTube. There is significant variety between dioceses in both the proportion of churches offering services online and the rate of fall in that proportion:

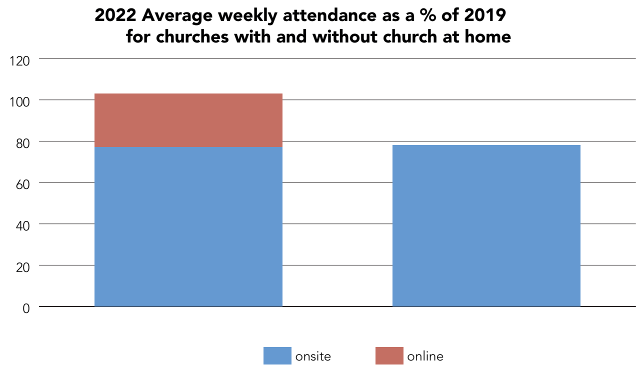
In total the estimates of online attendance add 14% to



the numbers counted onsite. However, for the 28% of churches still with CAH, their online element increases total attendance up to 103% of 2019. It is striking that CAH attendance is still so strong for churches offering it even when all Covid-19 restrictions are fading into history.

Moreover, the 2022 onsite attendance of churches retaining CAH was 77% of 2019 compared with the average of 78%. But as they were mainly larger churches (which have had a weaker recovery than the average) it looks like the online churches have recovered onsite perhaps slightly better than similar churches not online.

Some churches have stopped their online offering either because they thought there was no future in it or to try to encourage their people back into the building. It could in principle be argued that churches staying online are different from those who have stopped online, but we can find no systematic



way in which they are different. It looks as though similar churches have come to different decisions about retaining their online offering. So, we think that stopping online access to worship may often have been a mistake.

Remaining online attenders (an estimated average of 28 people per church online) may well be in groups very hard to bring into the building – the elderly and housebound, the Covid-19-shielding, those not available on Sunday mornings (most YouTube and Facebook views are now subsequent rather than as live), church members who are ill or otherwise occupied that day, those who live too far away, and those looking for a church to join.

If a church stopping online has successfully handed over its online attenders to a neighbouring church still online, then there has been no net drop in attendance. However, successful transfers are quite hard to achieve as experience over the years suggests that many appear to cease churchgoing altogether when 'their' service is closed. Once, when people were wondering about starting churchgoing or trying a new church, they would look at notice boards. Then they started looking at websites. Now they may look at online services. Some churches report that the main route into onsite worship is now people attending online for a while before having the confidence to come in person (see Everybody Welcome to the Future). Churches not online may find it increasingly hard to attract newcomers.

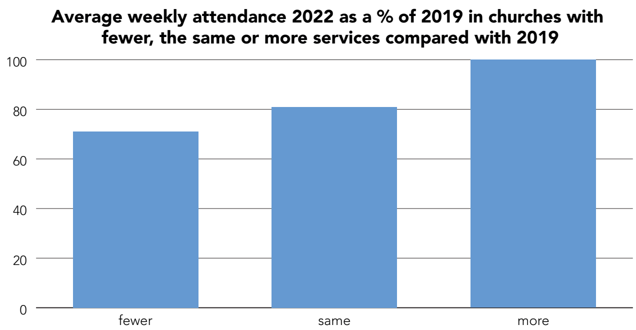
We now live in a hybrid onsite and online world in many aspects of life, including church. The conclusion is inescapable – attendance has failed to recover to 2019 levels in part because too many churches have abandoned their online dimension.

Retrenchment onsite

In October 2022 we found that the churches offered 83% of the number of services that were running in October 2019. The dioceses varied between providing 76% and 86%. With total onsite attendance at 78% of 2019 it seems that the average congregation in 2022 was only slightly smaller than in 2019 – most of the 22% attendance fall is associated with a 17% drop in the number of services.

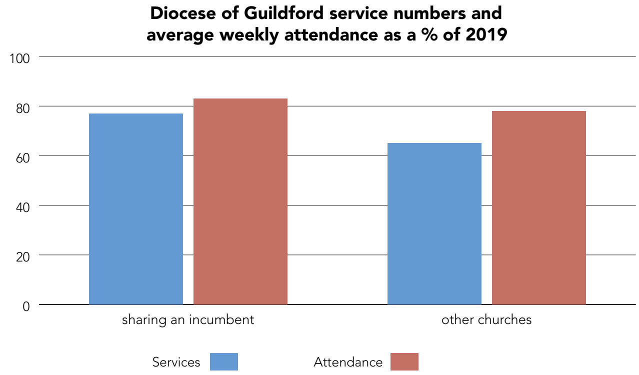
This is shown by the attendance recovery being much stronger in churches with the same or more services than in 2019. The 58% of churches with fewer services had regained only 71% of their 2019 attendance; the 25% of churches with the same number of services regained 81%, and the 17% with more services regained exactly 100%.

We found evidence that the reduction of service numbers and in turn of attendance has been greater in multi-church incumbencies where the pressure of taking large numbers of services tends to be greatest. We suspect that behind the statistics of retrenchment lies a problem of overstretched clergy emerging exhausted from the Covid-19 years being unable to re-instate all the old and innovate the needed new things all at once.



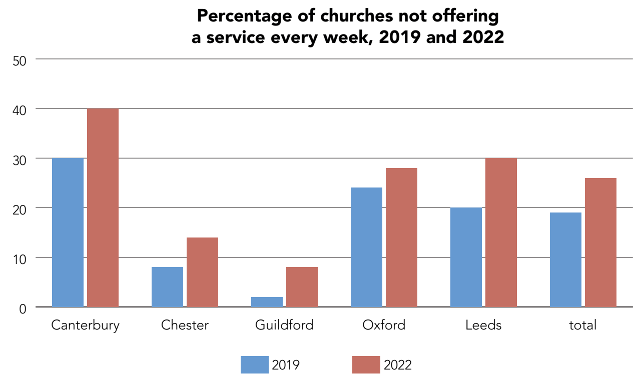
We have already observed that the loss of attendance at FxCs, especially of children, was strongly associated with the reduction in the number of FxCs.

It is clear from this that future growth will need new congregations to be planted. Much of this will need to be led by people other than stipendiary incumbents, but the evidence is that they are every bit as likely to grow a new congregation as are the stipendiary clergy. See the sections on lay-lay leaders in '<u>The Day of Small Things</u>', George Lings Church Army 2016.



More churches not offering a service every Sunday.

Another aspect of retrenchment we have uncovered is the increase in the proportion of churches not offering a service every Sunday. Between 2019 and 2022 this rose from 19% to 26%, with significant variety between dioceses. The more rural the diocese and the higher the proportion of small churches, the higher the proportion that stopped one or more Sunday services a month, but the differences seem greater than this, suggesting that different dioceses have responded post-Covid-19 in different ways.



In addition to the churches not holding at least one service weekly on a Sunday, other churches also reduced the number of Sundays a month in which they hold a service from three or two to two or one. In one diocese, a total of 17% of all churches reduced the number of Sundays they were open.

Average weekly attendance in 2022 at churches that had cut at least one Sunday out was about 60% of 2019. The largest cuts in Sunday numbers (e.g., weekly to monthly) had the largest falls in average attendance. This is only to be expected as the average weekly attendance measure simply divides total attendance over four weeks by four. Most of these churches were in the smallest size group where the average church that did not cut the number of Sundays was back above 2019 attendance levels.

Larger churches struggling to regain attendance

Our sample of churches used in this analysis contains slightly more large churches and fewer small churches than the average for the five dioceses, which themselves are slightly more skewed to the larger churches than the C of E average. Over a quarter of our churches, for example, are in the largest fifth of C of E churches.

Although we have many hundreds of small churches in our sample, the smallest fifth of churches, where attendance in 2022 had recovered to more than 2019, is still under-represented in our sample – and this is the 20% of churches where attendance in 2022 was greater than 2019.

So, it is possible that our sample slightly underestimates the extent of national attendance recovery. We will only know whether this is the case when the full 2022 Statistics for Mission numbers are officially released.

Part of the resilience of small churches is explained by a statistical phenomenon known as 'regression to the mean' – a few churches with unusually small attendance in 2019 as the vicar was ill or the church was closed for building work will have recovered to normal in 2022. But we think the impact of this is modest.

Small congregations where everybody knows everybody else in a single community have been more resilient to the Covid-19 shock than the large churches with eclectic congregations where the events and programme of the church play a larger role in binding people together. Also, some people may still be more wary of coming into a crowded church than one they know will be nearly empty.

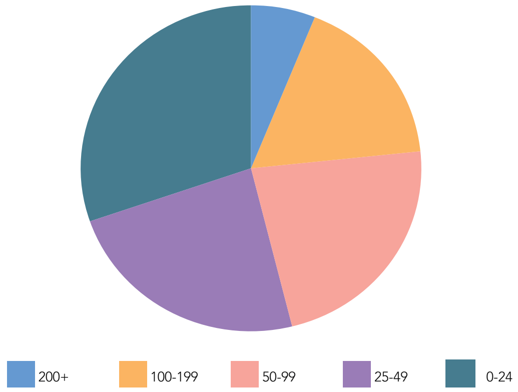
Average attendance at the 30% of churches with under 25 people a week in 2019 fully recovered by 2022 despite some of them shrinking by dropping some Sundays.

In general, the larger the church the weaker the attendance recovery. The pie chart shows that more than half the churches in the sample had fewer than 50 people attending in 2019 and the bar chart shows that the main attendance loss is in the churches with 50 or more attending in 2019.

It looks like the weaker ties in the larger congregations and the greater difficulty of re-assembling a larger group of people has been a contributing factor to the failure, so far, to return to 2019 onsite attendance levels.

The weak recovery in larger churches is probably also associated with them often having a higher proportion

Average weekly attendance in 2022 as a % of 2019, by size group of church in 2019



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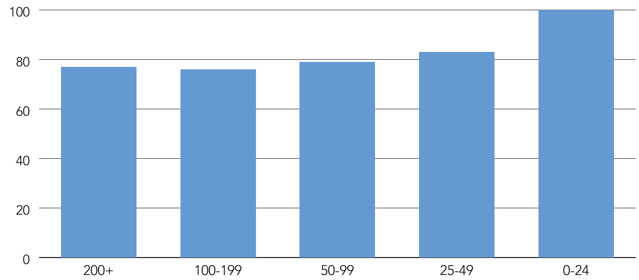

of children and families; the groups that have been hardest to recover. There is some compensation in that the larger churches are more likely to have an online congregation to add to the onsite numbers used here. This weaker recovery is not inevitable – a small number of large churches had significantly bigger onsite congregations in 2022 than in 2019.

Continuing Covid-19

Covid-19 will continue to be with us, albeit changing in how easy it is to catch and its severity. According to the ONS, 3% of the population had Covid-19 at any one time in October 2022.

Levels of sickness, the need to isolate, and fear of catching illness in a church crowd were lower in 2022 than in 2021, but obviously greater than in 2019. Maybe short-notice cancellations due to illness caused part of the reduction in service numbers in October 2022. If Covid-19 continues to diminish as a threat and ceases to determine human behaviour, then we may expect a further modest natural recovery of attendance in October 2023.

But recovery in 2021-22 was much slower than in 2020-21, and further reductions in service numbers online may offset increases onsite. So, we only see modest scope for further natural recovery. The rest will need to come from specific, focussed action designed to encourage and enable church attendance.

Photo: Ed Nix

Parish Share

One of our dioceses has a Share system based on October attendance and in 2022 it held a series of roadshows to publicise it. We wonder if this could explain why attendance recovery (or numbers reported) stalled in this diocese whereas it continued in the others.

Maybe some churches became more careful about their reported numbers in view of the Share implications, and maybe others tried not to attract crowds in October because they might not be able to afford the consequences. We don't know how much impact this had, but we do believe that dioceses genuinely prioritising attendance growth will look to avoid systems that are perceived to penalise parishes financially. Alternative systems are available, including cost-based and voluntary contributions-based.

Leadership limitations

We were able to compare 37 larger churches in the Diocese of Guildford that had an assistant ministry staff member with a child, youth or families remit with 28 similar churches without such a staff member. The churches with the assistant staff member had recovered to 78% of their 2019 attendance but those without only managed 64%. As discussed on Page 9, we also found that multi-church incumbencies seemed to have a weaker recovery than others.

Leadership issues frequently cropped up in conversations as a limiting factor. It is easy to see how an incumbent of a large group of churches is tempted to cut service numbers to enable them to cope, or a vicar struggling with lingering Covid-19 effects while re-opening onsite and seeing that new initiatives may be needed does not reinstate everything, or a church wrestling on several fronts may decide the uphill struggle to create quality online content is a step too far.

If leadership capacity is indeed a major underlying cause of attendance not fully recovering to 2019 levels, persevering with the existing leadership model is unlikely to turn things round. In some dioceses the added financial problems of first the lockdown era and now the smaller congregations may well generate another cycle of cuts to stipendiary posts leading to further cuts in provision and attendance, leading to yet further cuts in posts, etc. But affordable solutions to this are available – for example by widening the pool of people entrusted with church leadership – as discussed further on Page 14.

4. How can further attendance growth be encouraged?

1. Invite and welcome.

With attendance down on 2019, plus congregational turnover, there have never been so many recent churchgoers to invite back. Every PCC should be able to make a list of people who have dropped away since 2019 inviting them back to events, services and fellowship. The events of the last three years have awakened some new spiritual needs and questions, as shown by the latest 'Talking Jesus' survey. Invitations to enquirers courses and church services will bear fruit if the interested can be identified. The statistics suggest that community churches with strong relations with their congregations have recovered better than programme churches where shared activities form the main bond. Developing welcome and integration to enable people to find a group of friends rather than just an activity to do, will help churches grow (see 'Everybody Welcome' CHP). The technical experience and expertise churches have had to develop for their online operations should have improved their ability to use social media as part of their invitation and welcome initiative.

2. Plant new services and congregations

Just as attendance decline follows on from fewer services, so growth comes from planting new ones. In some churches the reduction in service numbers will have created capacity to start something new. Planting a new congregation in a parish church is best done by a team and should not be reliant on an overstretched incumbent's non-existent spare time. Planting should not be about recreating the past but about reaching new groups of people open to church in a post-Covid-19 world. One option is a new online-only congregation. For most churches the likely priority will be families, children, and young people.

3. Make church and services available every week.

Average attendance fell in rough proportion to the reduction in the number of weeks when a service was provided, because not everyone arranges the rest of their lives around the Sunday when their church is open. If someone attends twice a month when they have a weekly service, they will probably attend once a month when they have a fortnightly service. Moreover, the first time someone arrives at a locked church may be the last time they try. It is especially difficult for newcomers to find and join a congregation that does not meet every week. Meeting on fewer Sundays can be a journey to further decline and eventual closure.

Turning round the slippery slope of ever fewer Sundays with a service will be a priority in many churches seeking new growth and life. This will often require reforming the leadership arrangements to avoid impossible demands on just a few people. At the most recent count there were 15,600 churches in the C of E and 25,300 active clergy and Readers, 1.62 per church. This figure has risen in recent years mainly because of the increase in self-supporting and active retired clergy numbers.

More churches might be kept operational more often if those other than stipendiary clergy were entrusted with leading churches themselves. Some dioceses have concluded that a good way of doing this is with the introduction of 'Focal Ministers', each leading just one church and so with the time and incentive to innovate rather than retrench.

Where Focal Ministers have taken on smaller churches, attendance has almost always risen (see 'Leading one Church at a time' Grove Book Leadership 34). This can be done by informal local arrangement without waiting for the sort of diocesan system described in action 7 below.

4. Focus on children and families.

Numbers of children and families in church services and FxCs have fallen more than older adults mainly because provision has reduced, perhaps because some previous volunteers are still Covid-19-cautious or got into new habits or are feeling their age. It is also possible that demand has fallen as established families got out of the habit of coming to church.

However, our analysis shows that numbers still look responsive to both continued and new provision. In many churches the starting point will be their school


Photo: Steven Buckley

links. These look as strong as ever – attendance at school services is the only category so far where attendance is greater than in 2019.

5. Don't abandon online – develop it

Churches still online can resolve to make it permanent, and churches not now online can re-start it, only in a more appropriate way for the long term. The online dimension should often be part of a hybrid service where online members contribute as well as observe and where most of them are known and integrated into the church community.

There are many sources of expertise and advice available for online church. A good start is the Church of England's website – churchofengland.org/resources/step-step-guide-online-and-onsite-services

Actions 1 to 5 are primarily for churches, aided and encouraged by dioceses

Actions 6 to 8, below, are mainly direct actions by dioceses

We have shown that declining attendance is not inevitable because decline is principally in those churches that so far have had problems with supplying appropriate traditional, online or fresh expressions of church. We know that recovering church attendance levels is essential to everything the church wishes to do and be. If congregations diminish and die, all the good we do dies with them. The Covid-19 period has made focussing on attendance recovery even more urgent as we struggle to rebuild. We believe that recovering attendance back at least to 2019 levels should be a top priority in every diocese.

6. Organise a recovery project for larger churches.

A larger churches process involves bringing teams from similar large churches together to discuss causes and remedies of weak attendance recovery, and to learn from each other and from facilitators.

Such processes have proved effective in helping turn round attendance decline in large churches in the past (see Hope for the Church, CHP 2002). They should be especially effective when the issue is as clear cut as it is today. Perhaps a three-year process of accompaniment, conferences and monitoring initiatives is about the right timescale.

The Diocese of Oxford has two recovery resources available. Emerging from coronavirus is a tool for parish and benefice leadership teams designed to aid local reflection, to discern prayerfully, and to plan

Photo: Steven Buckley

strategically the shape of the mission of the Church. For those wanting to explore further, the Parish Planning Tool is available to churches outside the diocese at cost price.

7. Address leadership capacity

Some dioceses (notably, the Diocese of Sheffield) are changing their leadership model by introducing Focal Ministers to lead large numbers of their churches. The evidence collected so far suggests that most churches grow numerically when a Focal Minister takes over from a multi-church incumbency model. These are usually local people, many of whom may already be Readers or ordained but others are simply suitable. The Focal Ministers are trained, supported and authorised by the diocese. Each focuses on just one church and is the focal point of that community, leading it from the inside. One immediate win from this change is that the service times and patterns can now be fixed to suit the mission of the parish rather than the restrictions of the preaching rota. Another is that the stipendiary clergy are freed to focus on fewer churches and so have a more manageable, fruitful and fulfilling ministry themselves. Focal Ministers are usually unpaid, so this is a church growth move that does not cost dioceses money.

We suspect that the number of services in churches with Focal Ministers have not been cut and we are currently trying to establish this statistically. This is another reason why we expect Focal Minister churches to have improved attendance outcomes.

Other ways of releasing more leadership to remove the constraints include appointing two half-time clergy to one church each, rather than one full timer for two, and increasing assistant ministry staff posts. The Diocese of Chester is currently appointing two half-time clergy to one church each in a number of benefices.

In general, the biggest potential is to unlock the barriers to church leadership for people who are not stipendiary clergy. Our conversations have suggested that where this is tried there seems no lack of suitable new leaders.

8. Communicate and debate the findings in this report.

All dioceses are free to circulate this report (or the summary of it) round their synods, clergy and churches for discussion and as input into parish Mission Action Plans.

The ability of this initiative to work out the implications of Statistics for Mission returns promptly also means that dioceses can use prompt returns themselves to research whatever aspect of attendance and membership they wish to investigate. It is a huge advantage to be able to plan current priorities based on up-to-date information.

“These are the days of Elijah”

A biblical reflection

(with thanks to Canon Dr George Lings for the original idea)

When Covid-19 struck and the church buildings were closed, it was our finest hour. We went online and more people accessed our online services than came to the buildings previously. Similarly, in the immediate crisis and battle, Elijah was magnificent. The outward circumstances suggested he would die. But he overcame the odds and defeated the prophets of Baal. However, instead of building on his success, his nerve seemed to go, perhaps he was exhausted, and he fled before Jezebel, depressed and ready to die, hiding under a bush. In our case, perhaps in the aftermath of the great Covid-19 battle, when we have got through it battle-scarred, we don’t have the energy and imagination to build on it and grow the number of the Lord’s people around us. Like Elijah, some of us are exhausted, depressed and in retreat.

But at that low point, the Lord fed Elijah with strengthening food and gave him restful sleep. As his depression lifted, the Lord appeared to him in a form the broken prophet could cope with – a still small voice. Then the Lord reported to Elijah the result of his exercise to count the number of his people, which was far more than Elijah had realised – 7,000.

This was the turning point. He instructed Elijah how to ensure victory over the Baals and which new leaders to appoint and enlist in the operation. He connected Elijah with all the people who were still His and grew their number again until they dominated the land.

Perhaps the church is now just beyond Elijah’s low point, recovering just enough to hear God’s still small voice pointing the way to the future.

We hope that there is something of God’s still small voice in this report. It attempts more than to measure the extent of the recovery of church attendance after Covid-19. It also tries to show how to capitalise on our victory over Covid-19, to harness its legacy rather than be dragged down by it, so that the Lord’s people may be enlisted for what is to come and grow in number again.

Towards the end of 2022, over one thousand churches sent in their October 2022 Statistics for Mission returns.

In this landmark report, Bev Botting, Ken Eames, and Bob Jackson identify signs of hope and life for the Church following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our thanks to the dioceses of Canterbury, Chester, Guildford, Oxford and Leeds.

This report is available to download as a PDF from **oxford.anglican.org/insight**