**COMPARING CHURCH ATTENDANCE IN OCTOBER 2022 WITH 2019**

**A REPORT FOR THE DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY**

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**SUMMARY**

1. ***Attendance recovery from covid lockdown seems to have stalled at about three quarters of the 2019 level.***
2. ***Recovery has been weaker among children, on weekdays and, especially, at fresh expressions than it has been among adults at traditional Sunday services. But attendance at school services is now higher than in 2019.***
3. ***The smallest churches are the only size group to have got back to the 2019 attendance level.***
4. ***Fewer churches offered services online than at Easter but their contribution to attendance numbers is still significant. Total attendance at churches with an online presence is higher than it was in October 2019.***
5. ***The Cathedral and some other churches with a national profile continue to attract large numbers of online attenders. If these are included, then attendance at services in the diocese is clearly higher than in 2019.***
6. ***Churches that have maintained or increased the number of services they offer have recovered their 2019 attendance levels. But the majority of churches have reduced the number of their services and 40% now do not have a service every week. These churches are a long way off their 2019 average attendance levels.***
7. ***It looks as though recovery is especially weak in churches with a vacancy.***
8. ***The Parish Share roadshow may have impacted attendance returns and even the real-world totals***
9. ***It is possible that leadership energy debilitated by recent experience lies behind the inability to return to previous service and attendance levels.***
10. ***But significant new attendance growth in the coming year is still entirely possible, as proved by those churches that have grown their attendance since 2019. Among other things, new growth may need churches to plant new congregations and the diocese to encourage new ways of organising parish share and providing church leadership.***

**BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT**

Our attempt to create an initial post-covid snapshot of church attendance at Easter 2022 compared with the last pre-covid year of 2019 was hampered by a covid resurgence (6% of the population had covid on Easter Sunday) and limited by having only a single Sunday’s data. Although the Easter analysis was still useful, this report is more firmly based as the sample size is higher, attendances are an average of four weeks, and subdivisions are possible. Only 3% of the population had covid at any one time in October (ONS survey), though even that proportion is bound to have reduced church attendance a little. One Sunday in October, Bob led a service at a village church which had just had a lovely harvest supper except that it was a super-spreader event and the Sunday congregation was halved.

The report is a mix of objective statistical analysis and some deductions, advice and recommendations that seem to flow from the analysis.

There has been no full ‘return to normal’ in society as a whole. Some behaviours have changed permanently – for example more people now work and shop from home. Online meetings and interactions are less frequent now than in lockdown but still a lot more common than beforehand. And a European war, high inflation, falling living standards and an energy crisis provide a new context for church life.

So, what is happening to church attendance in the Diocese of Canterbury in these tumultuous times and what lessons can be learned for the future?

**RESPONSE RATE**

For this study we have used data on 179 churches (56% of the 317 churches in the diocese) compared with data from 127 churches used in the study at Easter. The total number of churches responding to the request for October 2022 data was greater than this, but some data could not be included in this study as either they had not responded in 2019 (so we could not compare their figures) or a church had included figures for another church in one of the years but not the other. Finally, we excluded data from a few churches that had reported no attendance in either 2019 or 2022 but, knowing the churches, we believe it was unlikely they had no attendance during October. So, the overall response rate in October 2022 was 75% even though we have only used the 56% when measuring attendance. This is a magnificent achievement in such a tight time scale. Those involved in organising this, together with the parishes involved, are to be congratulated. This result also shows the practicality of collecting and analysing any ‘Statistics for Mission’ data in a short time-period in the future.

We have a high response rate and we cannot see any biased pattern in the churches not responding, so we are pretty confident that our sample speaks for the whole diocese. But, of course, when the full figures are published during 2023 they may well be slightly different.

**HOW MUCH DO ATTENDANCE AVERAGES MATTER?**

The mission of the Christian church is not so much to attract crowds to worship events as to make disciples and serve the Kingdom. But how do we know if we are fulfilling our mission effectively? Counting attendance is an important pointer, an indicator of the numerical size of the Body of Christ. It helps monitor our success in holding and making disciples. It can show where we are making and where we are losing ground. It can inform and challenge churches and dioceses about how we go about our mission in the future. Church attendance numbers do not tell us everything, but they can tell us quite a lot.

**HAS ATTENDANCE RECOVERY BEEN CONTINUING THROUGH 2022?**

**No – the recovery seems to have stalled.** Combining published ‘Statistics for Mission’ data with our estimates for Easter and October 2022 gives the following onsite all-age all-week attendance estimates expressed as a percentage of their 2019 counterpart.

Easter 2020 0% - churches closed

October 2020 46%

Easter 2021 43%

October 2021 75%

Easter 2022 79%

October 2022 73%

Recovery in our sample of churches varied hugely by the day and type of service and between adults and children, recovery in fresh expressions being especially weak:

Average attendance in October

2019 2022 22 as % of 19

Adult Sunday 6898 5422 79

Adult Weekday 918 600 65

Adult Sunday fxC 321 113 35

Adult Weekday fxC 283 143 51

Child Sunday 907 677 75

Child Weekday 42 29 69

Child Sunday fxC 122 39 32

Child Weekday fxC 199 39 20

Total 9690 7052 73

In each of the other dioceses whose October 2022 attendance we are monitoring there has been a significant recovery of attendance since October 2021. The stalling in 2022, after such a strong recovery in 2021, is specific to Canterbury, so we must look for specific reasons and remedies as well as general ones.

As well as there being a significant overall drop in attendance, the weighting between traditional services and fxC also changed markedly:

Note that the weekday and fresh expressions numbers do not include people who also attended Sunday church, only those who are extra to the standard Sunday congregation.

The apparent drop from Easter is explained by the weaker recovery on weekdays and the fact that many churches in October did not have a service every week, whereas they almost all had one on Easter Sunday. Allowing for those two factors means that the recovery in October was at a very similar level to Easter.

**HOW DO THE DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF TOTAL ATTENDANCE COMPARE?**

**ADULTS ON SUNDAY**

**The recovery has been strongest among adults attending standard church services on a Sunday**. As these are also the services most likely to be live-streamed, the overall difference is even more marked than these figures would suggest. Maybe these congregations were the easiest to re-assemble and to re-start leading. Perhaps churches prioritised their biggest services containing most of their core and PCC members.

But, even here, attendance was 21% lower than pre pandemic. This is associated with a similar fall in the number of Sunday services being offered (see page 8). So, it is not that there were fewer people at each service – rather the average number of adults at a Sunday service was the same as it was in 2019. The statistical reason why the total is down is because there were fewer services.

Our previous report showed that the recovery on Easter Sunday 2022 varied a lot by church size – the smaller the church, on average, the stronger the recovery. However, this is much less marked in October. The only size group with a significantly different trend in adult Sunday attendance from the others is the smallest, and even that is boosted by one church with an exceptional increase:

Average Adult Sunday attendance in October 2022 as a percentage of 2019

Churches grouped by adult Sunday attendance in 2019

0 to 19 101%

20 to 49 79%

50 to 99 75%

100+ 77%

(To be clear this means, for example, that churches averaging up to 19 adults on a Sunday in October 2019 added together had 1% higher attendance in 2022)

The reason for the weakening of the size-link seems to be the reduction in the number of services. Every church had a service on Easter Sunday, but the smaller churches now tend not to meet every week. In fact, 40% of the churches in our sample no longer have a service every week. The C of E’s ‘average Sunday or weekly attendance figures are the average over all four weeks, including weeks where the number is zero.

Adult attendance has recovered much less strongly on weekdays and in fresh expressions of church. This means that overall adult attendance is 75% of the level of 2019.

**CHILDREN**

**Child attendance has suffered more than adult attendance**. Child attendance in 2022 was only 62% of 2019. Child attendance at standard services was 74% but at fresh expressions of church was only 24%. There is clearly an even bigger rebuilding job to face among children than there is among adults.

This larger drop in child numbers also suggests that much of the drop in adult attendance will have involved their parents and carers, who are also younger than the average age of Anglicans. So, the average age of the adults will probably be significantly higher in 2022 than it was in 2019.

As with adults, this failure to recover attendance numbers is associated with similar falls in the number of services. About three quarters of the fresh expressions of Church in 2019 that included children appear not to have re-started after lockdown.

All this suggests that recovery of ministry among children and families should be a major priority in the diocese, and that resuming or starting child or family-friendly worship events would be integral to this.

**WEEKDAY SERVICES**

**The attendance drop was greater on weekdays than Sundays**. Sunday congregations in October 2022 mustered 76% of the people of 2019 but weekday congregations only 57%. The biggest losses were in services containing children. Some churches reduced the number of weeks they had a service and there were 20% fewer churches with a weekday service in 2022 than in 2019. The total number of weekday services was 30% lower than in 2019. Yet, as the drop in attendance was even greater than that, it was also the case that average attendance at remaining weekday service also went down.

Before lockdown the trend in weekday attendance had been better than on Sundays. The major reversal on weekdays is explained in considerable part by the failure to reinstate so many services after lockdown or to start new ones. Perhaps also the availability of Sunday services to view on any day of the week from any church in the world has reduced the perceived need for weekday worship onsite. For many churches more than half the YT views now occur after the Sunday in question.

**FRESH EXPRESSIONS**

**The fresh expressions movement has suffered a massive set-back from covid**. All-age weekly attendance at standard church services in 2022 was 77% of 2019, at fresh expressions of church it was 36%. So, one of the few growth points in the pre covid church has suffered disproportionately. Child attendance fell more than adult attendance – the number of children at fxCs in 2022 was 24% of 2019 while adults were 42% of 2019. This suggests that the most hard-hit were family-friendly expressions such as Messy Church.

Although a majority of 2019’s fresh expressions appear not to have re-started, around ten new churches reported a (usually monthly) service in 2022 with the net result that the number of fresh expressions in 2022 was about half that in 2019.

As well as there being fewer fresh expressions, they also met less often than in 2019:

Sunday Fresh Expressions of Church with adult attendance:

Weeks meeting 2019 2022

1 18 11

2 3 0

3 1 0

4 6 3

Total number 28 14

Average weeks per month 1.9 1.6

Churches may have found their fresh expression congregations harder to keep contact with over lockdowns and either failed to re-assemble them after lockdown or did not even try. The most vulnerable plants in a drought are the newest ones with the shallowest roots. But this wipe out of fresh expressions was not inevitable. Some survived with similar numbers. In some other dioceses numbers at fresh expressions have not had a weaker recovery than traditional services. The fact that many fresh expressions fell victim to the covid lockdowns does not mean that starting a new generation of fresh expressions will not work in the future. Recovering the strength of fresh expressions along with attendance of children would seem to be the urgent top priority for the future.

Attendance at Fresh Expressions of Church have not fallen so far in the other dioceses we are monitoring, so is there something specific about the approach in Canterbury?

According to a 2013 survey by the Church Army, 47% of all fresh expressions of Church in the Diocese of Canterbury met in secular buildings. Possibly, it has been more complicated to take on these bookings or leases again post lockdown. Maybe this has contributed to the number that never resumed.

**SCHOOL SERVICES**

We felt it was a step too far to cover school services in any detail but average weekly all age attendance at school services in our 179 churches was one third higher in 2022 than it was in 2019. By and large, of course, the children have no option but to go, but at least this shows it is possible to reach and surpass pre covid attendance levels in one category of churchgoing. There is less confidence that the sample represents the whole diocese with school services than with ordinary church services as attendance is very lumpy – 400 one week, zero the next etc. The 2022 total is grossed up from the 179 churches, so the final outturn may be a little different.

**ONLINE ATTENDANCE**

**Fewer churches offered online in October 2022 but view numbers are still substantial.** The estimated percentage offering ‘Church at Home’ (almost always meaning online services) has fallen from 42% in October 2021 to 35% at Easter 2022 to 20% in October 2022. At Easter 2022, we estimated (mainly based on the church’s own figures) that online attendance added 16% to total onsite attendance, and 35% to the attendance of those churches with an online presence. Churches with a CAH offering tend to be larger than the average – the 20% of churches with CAH in October 2022 covered about 32% of the diocesan total onsite attendance.

Using the estimates made by the churches on their ‘Statistics for Mission’ forms, in October the average addition to the attendance at that church from the online service in 2022 was 39%. So, our best estimate adds 12% to onsite all age weekly attendance in October.

Easter October

% of churches with CAH 35 20

% of attendance added to each CAH church 35 39

% added to total diocesan attendance 16 12

Including the CAH estimates at Easter increased our estimate of total attendance from 80% of 2019 to 91%. On the same basis for October, our estimate rises from 73% to 82% of 2019 attendance.

Total estimated Sunday attendance at the 20% of churches still with a CAH element was around 6% higher than onsite Sunday attendance in 2019. There is little reason to doubt that more churches could increase their total attendance above 2019 if they had an online element to add to their onsite numbers.

However, these estimates come with a big health warning – they rely on the churches having a reasonable handle on how many people are following their online services as opposed to just glancing at them, and on consistency between estimates made at different points in time. The October 2022 online numbers would have been significantly lower if we had omitted just one large church with a big online presence. They may be indicative, but they are certainly not precise. The implication for the future, though, is crystal clear. Online is here to stay and churches not online will find it harder to grow.

Some churches thought that ceasing to stream services would bring the reluctant back into the building. The Easter data suggested this did not work, and the October figures reinforce that. Onsite adult Sunday attendance at the 20% of churches still offering CAH was about the same percentage of 2019 as their equivalent churches without CAH. The online extras appear to be genuinely extras to the total, not alternatives to onsite attendance.

This is not surprising – it looks, from Bob’s more general enquiries, as though most of the people accessing services online now are in categories very hard to attract onsite – the elderly and housebound, the covid-shy, those not available on Sunday mornings (most views now are subsequent not as live), church members who are ill or otherwise engaged that day, those who live too far away, and people looking for a church to belong to.

It seems that the public checking websites as a way of checking out churches has been partly replaced by checking online services. For some people, online attendance is their route into onsite attendance. In the same way that in the past churches without a church notice board or a church website would find it particularly hard to attract newcomers, so will churches without YouTube services. In the long term it is likely that churches with an online presence will be able to grow onsite attendance better than those without it. We think that a new move to increase the proportion of churches offering online has the potential to kick start a further round of attendance recovery.

**CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL**

**The cathedral continues to have the largest online presence of any church in the country.** The most extraordinary element of Easter attendance was the 50,000 YouTube views of Canterbury Cathedral Easter services. On almost any method of converting views to estimates of the number of people following the services (rather than just glancing at it) the number dwarfed total onsite attendance in the diocese. Add in online attendance at the Cathedral and total attendance clearly exceeded 2019.

Average view numbers in October were, naturally, lower than Easter at about 13,000 a week. This reduction is more due to the special nature of Easter than a general tailing away. The Advent Carol Service on 27th November, for example, had 24,000 views and Christmas will presumably be higher.

Nobody really knows exactly how to convert view numbers to people estimates, and the ratio will vary between churches and services. The method I (Bob) have evolved is based on a close look at several churches and seems to be accepted by many as quite sensible. But I claim no more for it than that! I assume that 40% of the views are long enough to count as genuine (half the length of the service). This is much higher than Facebook where 5-10% may be a better estimate. On average it looks like 1.5 people watch each view, so the number of people is around 60% of the number of views. 60% of 13,000 is 7800. However, some of these people will view more than one of the services a week so let’s say 5000 is a reasonable estimate of people. If we chose to add in this estimate to the diocesan total, then it would be significantly higher than 2019.

Of course, these 5000 people will be living all around the world. We do not know what proportion come from the diocese itself. However, as 40% of the churches of the diocese now do not have a service every week, it may be that a significant number have turned to the Cathedral online at least some weeks. It would be interesting to find out how many residents of the diocese now follow cathedral services online.

The Cathedral’s online reach is the clearest of signals that the church world has changed permanently after covid and that churches need to adapt. Their high production values, with multiple cameras, their emphasis on the visual and the numinous, and their high-quality music may not be wholly replicable in parish churches, but they do point the way to some elements likely to draw YouTube viewers into becoming online worshippers.

**OTHER CHURCHES WITH A REGIONAL OR NATIONAL REACH**

**They are still there.** In the report on Easter attendance, we presented a list of 15 other churches and cathedrals around the country that we noticed had attracted at least a thousand views. These all continued online through October, headed by Holy Trinity Brompton with an average 8300 views, just under two thirds of the view numbers of Canterbury Cathedral. It is clear from the likes and chats of these churches that their online members tend to come from every diocese in the country. In total, without Canterbury Cathedral, they add around 2% to average all age weekly attendance in the Church of England.

So, adding in the Cathedral and other online churches with a national reach to the parish church online numbers probably increases the estimated total accessing worship either onsite or online above the onsite total for 2019. This is the other side of the attendance coin from the rather gloomy picture of onsite reversals in the parishes.

**ONLINE QUALITY**

Whether talking about parish churches, the cathedral or the other online giants, it should not be assumed that chalking up a view of the service means job done. Churches need to be clear about their aims online, and where possible, to connect with their online members and draw them into the rest of the body of Christ. All should be aiming at good practice for presenting online worship and for developing hybrid or blended congregations and pastoral care. Churches need to network, share expertise, and draw on diocesan help in order to develop their ministry and evangelism online.

**WHY HAS THE PARISH CHURCH RECOVERY STALLED?**

1. **RETRENCHMENT**

The churches in October 2022 offered only three quarters of the number of services they had in 2019. There were 21% fewer Sunday services, 30% fewer weekday services and 39% fewer fresh expressions.

Total number of services in the four-week period:

2019 2022 change 22 as % of 19

Sunday services 1241 986 -255 79%

Weekday services 635 446 -189 70%

Total 1878 1432 -446 76%

The Fresh expressions services within these totals fell from 104 to 63.

Many benefices seem to have taken the opportunity of the prolonged hiatus to re-think their services, but the majority seem simply to have cut some out. The evidence in the returns is that there have been few new services, congregation plants or fresh expressions. Only 13 churches in our sample had more services than in 2019. 35 of the 48 churches with a fresh expression including children in 2019 no longer had one in 2022 while only 11 churches had started something new. Churches that cut the number of weeks they held a service, or cut the number of services on an average Sunday, have had a much weaker recovery than churches that held the same number of services, or more in 2022.

Adult Sunday attendance in 2022 as a percentage of 2019

Churches 22 as % of 19

Services on fewer weeks 39 57

Same weeks, fewer services 66 77

Same weeks & services 61 87

More weeks or services 13 116

**40% of the churches in our sample now don’t have a service every Sunday.** 22% of our sample of churches had reduced the number of Sundays on which they held a service compared with 2019. Their 2022 average Sunday adult attendance was 57% of 2019. The most common moves were going down from four weeks to three and from four weeks to two.

The bigger the reduction in the number of weeks the bigger the reduction in average attendance because the gap weeks all count zero. Churches that saw a drop of under 50% in service-weeks saw average attendance fall by 37%. Those with a drop of 50%+ saw average attendance fall 51%. On average the 39 churches experienced a 39% drop in the number of Sundays on which they held a service and a 43% drop in their average attendance.

This equivalence is no surprise because people tend not to adjust their habits in response to lower service frequency. Most churchgoers attend if they do not have anything else going on that Sunday. If people with a weekly service tend to come once a fortnight, those with a fortnightly service come once a month and those with a monthly service once every two months. That is why when the churches cut their weeks the average congregation size when there is a service remains about the same. In fact, if anything, it goes down a little as people are no longer sure which Sunday the service happens and may give up the first time they turn up to find the door locked. Very often a cut to the number of weeks is just one step down towards closure. It is especially hard for a congregation that does not meet weekly to attract and hold newcomers.

It was not just tiny churches that cut their weeks – this group included churches with average adult Sunday attendance in 2019 of 30,33,36,40,41,50 & 69.

**Other churches are running with fewer services each week.** Sixty-nine churches, while being open the same number of Sundays (usually all four), reduced the number of services in their monthly pattern. On average these are much bigger churches so although their attendance loss on 2019 was only 23%, it is this group that accounts for 68% of the whole attendance loss compared with 2019. Some of these churches only dropped one service a month, but a preliminary look at the 2019 data suggests this was often the monthly all age, family or Messy Church service that was not resumed, so the impact was considerable.

There were only 70% of the number of weekday services in 2022 and it is no surprise that average attendance was also down more than on Sundays. All age attendance on weekdays was 57% of 2019 from 70% of the services so the cut in the number of services was accompanied by a modest fall in the average attendance of the surviving services.

And fresh expression services were 39% down on 2019, with a 64% drop in attendance. The bigger the drop in the number of services in a category, the bigger the drop in total average attendance.

**Churches that have not reduced their services have fully recovered their 2019 congregations.** In contrast, the 64 churches that retained their total number of services only experienced a 13% drop in attendance and those 13 churches that added to their service total saw a 16% rise. Overall, these 77 churches had attendance almost the same as in 2019 – the drop is confined to those churches that cut the number of their services.

**The link between the number of services and average attendance is crystal clear.**

**There has been retrenchment online as well as onsite.** The number of churches offering CAH appears to have halved in the year October 2021 to 2022. Yet those remaining online may still be adding enough people to their attendance to increase their total above 2019. If more churches had remained or gone online instead of fewer then total attendance would have continued to recover towards 2019 levels.

1. **VACANCIES**

We gather that there were 15.2 full time equivalent vacancies in the diocese in October 2022 out of a full complement of 97.4. Some were long-term. We would normally expect attendance to fall by an average of around 20-25% in long vacancies and mostly not to recover when a new incumbent arrives (see eg Bob’s Booklet, “Growing through a vacancy” (CPAS). It is likely, therefore, that this high level of long (over 6 months) vacancies will have contributed to the stalling of overall attendance recovery. We have data for only half of the 38 churches we have identified so this is not a big enough sample size to be confident of but 2022 adult Sunday attendance in the 19 churches with data both years was in total 70% of 2019. This compares with the diocesan average of 79%. However, 10 of the 19 were in the lowest size category and these nearly held their own. Tiny churches in large groupings are less susceptible to losing their vicar as they hardly saw them anyway. The remaining 9 medium sized churches had 62% of their 2019 attendance, suggesting that vacancy was indeed a significant factor.

It would be useful both for this exercise and to inform vacancy policy more generally to find data on all recent vacancy churches so as to generate a bigger sample size and check this finding.

1. **PARISH SHARE**

During 2022 the diocese went round with a Deanery Roadshow focussing on parish share and how it was calculated – with average Sunday attendance of adults in October as a major factor. It is entirely possible that this was still on the minds of those who sent in their returns this year so that they may have been more conservative in the way they arrived at their numbers. It could be that the less than honest underestimating their attendance to reduce the proportion of diocesan share they paid, had a side effect - the total looks as though it has gone down. But advertising that the share is based on attendance in only four weeks in October at a time of financial tightness is also likely to have had a real-world impact that month. Some churches, for example, may have felt they could not afford the financial consequences of advertising a harvest service or re-starting a fresh expression.

If the diocese wishes to prioritise bringing people back into the churches, it probably has to find a share system that is less hostile to their numerical growth.

1. **DATA ISSUES**

Churches occasionally mistakenly record school service attendance in the ordinary weekday service column. The team at Church House have been very diligent this year in correcting these and allocating them properly to the schools column. It is possible that one or two misallocated school services slipped through this net in 2020 as the 2019 numbers were being counted. If so, this would have exaggerated normal weekday church service attendance and undercounted schools attendance. The weak recovery of weekday church attendance and the large rise in school service attendance in 2022 compared with 2019 are two of our most striking statistical findings. So, it is possible that some of this is the result of a data wobble in 2019.

**ATTENDANCE AND MEMBERSHIP**

Membership of the worshipping community did not fall as far in the lockdown period as did attendance in the buildings. The Church of England estimates that its worshipping community fell by only 13% from 2019 to 2021 compared with a 29% fall in October attendance. The continued high levels of covid and other illnesses in the autumn of 2022, combined with many churches meeting on fewer Sundays and a continued diffidence among some to risk meeting together probably means that the size of the worshipping community is much nearer the 2019 level than is average attendance. It will be interesting in the new year to check the 2022 worshipping community figures against 2019. We would expect the child membership to be down significantly, but adult membership by not so much.

**WHAT LIES BEHIND THESE FACTORS?**

We think it is likely that many churches and clergy emerged from the pandemic weakened and exhausted. They have only re-started what is within their capacity and they deserve sympathy and understanding rather than criticism. Bob has been unable to do a systematic survey, but his sense is that the multi-church benefices have done the most retrenchment as exhausted clergy struggle to resuscitate several churches all at once. It would be very helpful properly to find out which types of church have retrenched the most, and why. If the diocese could identify the size or type of group each church is part of it would be straightforward to compare the recovery levels in each category. It would be equally helpful to ask those churches that have not retrenched and whose attendance has grown how they have managed it (see Appendix).

There is a chicken and egg issue here – did the churches cut out services following post-covid lack of demand or did the fewer services help generate the drop in average attendance? The evidence suggests that the main direction of causation is that fewer services lead to lower attendance. The suspicion is that retrenchment has more to do with pressure on service-takers than with planned restructuring to harness attendance more efficiently. But a proper enquiry into this is indicated.

We presume that diocesan financial problems lie behind the emphasis on the Share and the extent of vacancies. The problem is that leaving parishes without leadership and taking extra money from those that have grown numerically both tend to reduce future congregations and so worsen the situation in the long term. Diocese get locked into a cycle of decline by their own response to the original shock. The way out is to prioritise the growth of the churches in relation to Share and vacancies for otherwise Share income will never recover. The strength of the focal minister option to grow the churches is that it also saves on stipends – so that is a doubly effective solution.

**HOW CAN ATTENDANCE BE GROWN AGAIN FROM THIS POSITION?**

Is it inevitable that an ageing church with less energy, fewer habitual churchgoers because they have lost the habit and fewer children because they are no longer catered for, will continue to decline? Has covid simply compressed ten years of inevitable decline into three?

Such a view can be strangely comforting as it absolves church leaders of responsibility – creating a view that there is little we can do, and decline is not our fault.

**The statistical evidence says the opposite – numbers grow when appropriate provision is made and shrink when it is withdrawn.** This is true in relation to the number of weeks a month that churches are open, to the number of services offered, to the availability of child-friendly services, fresh expressions and online services, and to making appropriate leadership provision.

It may be that the retrenchment associated with the stalling of attendance recovery has actually created the room needed for new services and expressions of church to be planted. Many of us possibly needed a quieter period to recover our vision and energy after a bruising few years (see “These are the days of Elijah” below). We needed to prune the least fruitful elements of the old in order to create the ground for the new. Now is the time for the new to be planned and birthed. So, the recipe for future attendance growth in many churches is: ***Plant a new congregation and do online well.***

Alongside that it is also a good time to hold a ‘back to church invitation Sunday’, the congregation especially inviting those who have not yet resumed. And as it also looks like the nexus of recent events has opened up some people to spiritual enquiry, it is also a fruitful time for enquirers courses like Alpha. So, we have: ***Plant a new congregation, do online well, invite the interested, re-invite the lapsed and share the faith with seekers.***

This is hardly an original list, but it seems to fit the moment well.

**LEADERSHIP AND ENERGY**

Yet there is still the underlying problem of the ever-increasing demands on the slowly shrinking number of stipendiary clergy who have born the heat of the covid day and on whom it may be unfair to place further burdens and expectations. Even more than before, we need to release the energy of a wider group of leaders, to create more realistic job descriptions for the clergy and to embed leadership within local church communities rather than positioning it outside them in the form of multi church incumbents. At the same time, diocesan financial problems in some dioceses may require less paid leadership and more unpaid.

Churches led from the inside by ‘focal ministers’ who each have only one church to lead are far less likely to cut their number of services than the leadership of a church grouping struggling to drive round too many events. The focal ministry model also avoids the long vacancy problem of the incumbency model as new leaders emerge locally as the existing ones come towards retirement. Vacancies can be replaced with handover periods. The evidence is piling up that embedded focal leadership, usually unpaid and part or spare time, added to the more strategic ministry of the stipendiaries, is a better model for growing the churches today (see eg Bob’s Grove Book, “Leading one church at a time”). Some dioceses are now introducing focal ministers at scale and pace. I (Bob) am very happy to discuss this key development at greater depth.

Without waiting for a diocesan initiative, it is open to team ministries and multi-church incumbencies to make informal focal minister arrangements should they wish.

It may be that the diocese could build a list of churches that are already, in effect, being led by someone acting as a focal minister and then compare their attendance trends and other indicators with churches that share a stipendiary incumbent. This would then inform future decision-making. So, we may add to the above list: ***change the leadership model to bring in fresh energy, share the loads, bring service frequencies back up towards weekly, and enable clergy and churches to flourish afresh***

**“These are the days of Elijah”**

**A biblical reflection**

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

When Covid struck and the church buildings were closed, it was our finest hour. We went online and twice as many people accessed our online services as 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 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. It also tries to show how to capitalise on our victory over covid, 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.