

C of E's steep decline: a historian's perspective

By Nigel Scotland

The Church of England has been an integral part of England's heritage since its founding in the sixteenth century. It has a rich heritage of liturgical worship and spirituality. Our established church does public worship exceedingly well with beauty and splendour. It also has a long tradition of pastoral care through its parish network. Yet notwithstanding these assets the church of our nation is losing numbers and losing them fast.

In 1969 the number of Easter communicants was 2,159,000. In 1991 it had plummeted to 1,481,000 and further declined 1,180,000 in 2019. The average Sunday attendance in 2016 was 921,700 dropping to 679,000 in 2019. It seems vital therefore that urgent attention is given to what is increasingly looking like a case of rigor mortis.

Overly hierarchical structures.

The Church of England's organisational structure is derived from the pre-Christian Roman Empire of province, diocese and parish. It is administered by a dominant top-down hierarchy reminiscent of a Victorian public school. It's an environment which militates against the liberal, egalitarian values of today's world.

Like all major hierarchical institutions the established church has a correspondingly greater inbuilt potential to foster and hide abuse.

An ineffectual parish system.

The parish system worked well through the middle-ages with the priest and two wardens as ipso facto officers responsible for organising 'the cure of souls', administering the poor law and charitable distributions. But by the mid-Victorian years the country had seen a huge rise in the population of towns and cities. Priests who for generations had ministered and cared for a mere 500 souls or less suddenly found within a generation that their parishes had mushroomed in numbers with thousands crammed into insanitary jerry-built terraced housing.

No longer was it possible even to begin to know, let alone care, for all who lived within the parish bounds. As early as 1855 the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury bemoaned, 'The parochial system ...in large towns it is a mere shadow and a name'.

Fast forward to the twentieth-first century and the situation is no easier. Urban incumbents areas are bowed down by the sheer weight of the numbers while rural clergy chase around as many as nine parishes.

There is a vital need for the Church of England to seriously promote new ways of doing church that operate without being tied to any parish structure. Each diocesan missionary could be supporting and working with half a dozen such initiatives. It is time every church warden was recognised as a lay minister who is able and trained to lead morning and evening prayer. This would mean there could always be worship in any parish on any Sunday in the absence of an ordained minister.

Where is the servant ministry?

The C of E adopted the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons which emerged during the rule of Emperor Constantine. It has served the church well but there is no compelling reason why the ways in which the office, role and dress of today's bishops, priests and deacons should be the same as yesterday's clergy. Twenty-first century clerics don't need to wear the equivalent of everyday dress in the Roman Empire for their 'Sunday preside'. There is also an obvious need for some dialling down on the issues of hierarchy and control as we reflect on the fact that Jesus treated his closest followers and co-workers as 'friends' and 'servants'.

Indeed he strongly urged his disciples 'not to be like the gentile rulers who lord it over their people', who 'take the chief places at the dinner table and sit in the big seats at the front of the church'. He warned against being called 'Father' and said that those who walk about in public places in long robes would 'be severely punished'(Luke 20:46-47).

The Old Testament people of God were called to be a servant people. Jesus calls his followers to be servants. That's not a role that appears at the forefront of Church of England mission strategies.

Where is the Christ-centred mission?

The biggest failing in the contemporary Church of England is a lack of enthusiasm for Jesus Christ, to know him and make him known. There is no obvious strong concern to uphold Jesus'



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teaching, on marriage and family life and to stand by the historic creeds and Articles of Religion. Instead the Church of England appears buried in the issues of carbon foot-print, eco- friendly parishes, immigration, LGBT, trans rights, gender dysphoria, homophobia and changing gender by self-identification to name but a few. On the latter issue it has to be said that a church which professes in Lambeth Resolution 1:10 that 'marriage should only be between a man and a woman' but whose senior clerics live with their same sex partners' speaks confusion.

Indeed the Church of England trumpet is giving an uncertain sound on many issues.

Failure to endorse traditional family values.

The Church and England has failed to endorse the teaching of Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament church on the home and family. This is the very bedrock on which any Christian society is built. Yes there are other expressions of marriage, family which we can acknowledge, respect and care about. But this doesn't mean the church has to be silent about the vital importance of the traditional family with a male father, a female mother and offspring.

The Church of England and its schools have failed to model and teach the importance of traditional home, family life and

relationships. It needs to learn from the sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritans who constantly taught that the home should be the church in miniature.

Ineffectual Sunday Worship.

Worship lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is the way the church expresses its devotion to Jesus Christ God and Saviour. Whatever worship parish churches hold on Sunday mornings is clearly not meeting the needs of people. The stark truth is it is causing even the faithful to drift away. The challenge is to create worship such that any person can walk in off the street and find a comfortable and relaxed environment in which to learn how to know Christ and live out his teaching.

In this context every local church needs to seriously consider whether it is wise to make Holy Communion their main Sunday worship. The Eucharist is a meal of bread and wine which enables the committed followers of Jesus to remember his sacrificial death through which they have received forgiveness of sins. It is by its very nature exclusive because it is to be received in faith which the uncommitted clearly do not have. It was intended by Jesus to be shared Passover-style in homes. Importantly the elders appointed by Paul, Timothy and Titus had no stated Eucharistic function.

Their consecrating role and the nature of the sacrament developed over time into an esoteric ritual. Holy Communion has been described as 'a road-blocker to those who are not Christians'. It is significant that only 34.8 per cent of those who attended Christmas services in 2019 received the bread and wine. If the church is serious about reaching local people who are strangers to the faith it needs to seriously re-think how and when to celebrate the Eucharist.

Unapplied preaching.

Preaching is another obvious major aspect of public worship. It has been wisely said that Sunday preaching in a parish church should be pitched at a level that an intelligent sixteen-year-old can fully understand and appreciate. It used to be said that ideally it should be about Jesus and about twenty minutes (see Acts 2:22; 9:35; 27:29). Much contemporary Sunday preaching fails John Wesley's maxim to be 'the plain truth for the plain man'.

Too often it is neither practical nor applied to the business of daily living. There is a need to learn from the Elizabethan puritans who urged all clergy not to preach anything, doctrines included, unless it could be lived out.

There is more that could be added that is beyond the scope of this article including gaps in ordination training, clerical marital break-down and the lack of Christian ethical teaching in diocesan schools. Many people find it difficult to see where the outside world ends and the Church of England begins.

It was for these very reasons that the poet TS Eliot was critical of the apathy and corruption of church. His poem The Hippopotamus likens the church to a hippo, a creature often associated with laziness – lying in the mud for most of the day and feeding in short waking moments. By contrast, Eliot tells us that 'the church can eat and sleep at the same time'. We must hope, pray and demand that our Church of England can wake up out of its sleep and begin to enable the people of its parishes to know Jesus and make him known.

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