

Does the 2030 Future have a Church?

The Current Christian Scene, Major Global and UK Trends, 2020 to 2030

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Executive Summary

This paper, *The Alarm is Sounding!*, looks at some of the major religious, demographic and other trends both globally and in the UK today likely of importance for the church for the decade ahead 2020 to 2030. As such they may be strategic in the forward thinking and planning for those in Christian leadership in the church, training institutions, agencies and elsewhere.

1) The Global Church would be shrinking were it not for Africa.

The worldwide population is increasing and likely to reach 8.5 billion in 2030, up 10% on its size in 2020. In that same decade, Africa's population will increase +25%, and the rest of the world by +6%. The number of Christians is likely to increase to 2.9 billion in 2030, up from 2.6 billion in 2020, an +11% rise. Africa's Christians are likely to increase by +30% against the rest of the world's +4%. So without Africa, global Christianity would be growing more slowly than the worldwide population.

Why is Africa growing so strongly at the present time? It has a fertility rate roughly double the global average, 4.7 children per woman to 2.4. Many mothers are teenagers, and AIDS/HIV is still prevalent (leading to many orphans when their mothers are in their thirties). Africa also has a high percentage of Christians – 60% in 2018 against 30% in the rest of the world. African Christians have also been growing at more than twice the rate elsewhere – at an annual average rate of +3.3% between 1970 and 2015 against +1.2% in the rest of the world.

These Christians go to church, and start new churches. In Nairobi, capital of Kenya, for example, in 1986 some 200,000 people attended on a Sunday, 12% of the population. In 2004, more than 430,000 were going (16% of population)! In Kisumu, the third city in Kenya, 900 churches in 2008 had become 4,000 ten years later, though the latter includes non-evangelical churches. The main growing denominations are the Anglicans and Protestants (in that order) many of whom are Evangelical and Pentecostal. When they engage in “reverse mission” the rest of the world has much to learn from them.

The only other fast growing faith group is the Muslims, up +15% between 2020 and 2030 globally.

2) The European Church wobbles from a past faith to an amorphous spirituality.

Europe is the key continent for nominality although this is present everywhere else as well. Indifference to church attendance and membership has seen both fall in all the major countries, and in terms of faith there is an ongoing tension whether a person is religious or spiritual or both. But many of those who say they are neither have a range of theistic beliefs! The consequence is that practising one's religious beliefs ceases to have a focussed priority in one's own life or in expression in their community.

It can be argued whether the out-turn is truly secularisation, or loosely “a loss of religiousness”? Is it “believing without belonging” to use Grace Davie's famous phrase? Even Davie has moved from that phrase to the more cumbersome “from obligation to consumption,” seeing in Britain, as an example of Europe, a “persistent paradox.” She also ponders the concept of a “vicarious religion” with ritual being performed on behalf of others.

This leads into the issue of “invisible religion” with research indicating quite large numbers of people, apparently orthodox believers, simply “out of church” and absent for many years. Such a definition could perhaps apply to a sixth, 17%, of the English population, who would simply agree with the statement, “I used to go to church but felt I didn't fit in,” or “I don't have time now.” This differs from the many, especially those under 35, who say they have “no religion”, the so-called Nones. The challenge for the church is how to draw all these nihilistic thinkers into a warm, living fellowship.

3) Some claim the UK church is simply “asleep” (rather than “dead” or “dying”).

Others would say it is a very deep sleep since churchgoing numbers have been declining measurably for over 40 years. At the same time some groups are clearly growing, especially the immigrant churches in the last 15 years, the Pentecostal churches over a similar period, and there are many newly started church plants by those of virtually all denominations. Messy Church has been especially popular with over 3,000 started in 15 years, drawing in some of the “Invisibles” and “Nones”. But the sad truth is that though good, real growth can be seen in many places, the loss from the major institutional churches (Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Presbyterians) outweighs all the gains.

Scottish attendance is looked at as well as English, but the out-turn is the same. Maps of both countries show drastic rural decline, except in the Western Isles. The decline affects all, including the Evangelicals, who are, however, less affected than non-Evangelicals so that of those still attending, Evangelicals are an increasing proportion. The Mainstream or Conservative Evangelicals do best.

The Inner City, which houses many Pentecostal churches, has fewest pro rata losses. The black churches thrive, but their gains are no match for white decline unfortunately. Mid-week attendance, some 10% more people, climbs slowly in both churches and cathedrals, but again does not outweigh the loss. London, however, proved totally different 2005 to 2012, and this is described.

4) Two major alarms to awake any still sleeping.

These are gender and age. There are too few men in church! This creates problems for the younger women looking for a partner, or an absorbing mixed fellowship. It has major implications for the future, especially if churchmanship is taken into account.

The age of churchgoers, however, is a huge worry. The under 20s are scarce, though some churches attract them. Some Millennials, aged say 18 to 36, do come to church, especially in London, or to larger churches. They are not only tomorrow’s church leaders but need to have the opportunity to exercise a vital guided ministry today. Their values and sympathies are different, defining living, working and understanding in alternative ways.

24% of churchgoers were 65 or over in 2000, 36% will be in 2020, 45% in 2030. The church is ageing faster than the population and, as it ages, so attendance becomes more difficult, financial support grows less, pastoral concerns deepen. There are many grandparents in church now and will be through the 2020s. The problem is not confined to the UK, but is very true of Europe, and globally, also.

5) Other key global trends.

The final Chapter looks, much more briefly, at 7 key issues: (1) The world moving beyond the old pattern of a Judaeo-Christian tradition; (2) The growth of Islam and its challenge to the evangelical movement especially; (3) The danger and perhaps likelihood of Evangelical tribal or doctrinal splits; (4) The lack of confidence in many churchgoers in sharing their faith and their lack of vision for mission (and what is “mission”?); (5) The advance of Artificial Intelligence, 5G technology and the widespread use of social media; (6) The challenge and opportunity of the huge migrations seen worldwide but especially in Europe and the UK; and (7) The impact of some of this on current leadership.

There are a number of Appendix tables giving greater detail on some of the issues mentioned.