

The latest (2011) Population Census factually confirmed what has been known for some time – British society is ageing. A fifth, 22%, were 60 years of age or over in 2011, and if one omitted the many immigrants reaching that age, the percentage would be a quarter, 24%. The 22% (more accurately 22.3%) was 20.9% in 2001, so the percentage 60 and over has increased by 1.4% in 10 years, that is, the population of this country is gradually becoming more age-weighted.

As is reflected in the church, the basic reason for this is that the increasing proportion of older people is that it is not being balanced by an increasing proportion of younger people. In 2001, the proportion of the population under 20 was 25%, in 2011 it was 24%, a small percentage difference but quite large in demographic terms. Projections by the Office for National Statistics paint the same trend for the decades ahead – in 2050 for example it expects 22% of the population to be under 20 and 25% 65 or over.¹

So the elderly trend is real, but slow. An age crisis is not likely to descend upon us in the short term, partly because of the continuing numbers of relatively young immigrants who come to the UK and partly because the number of babies being born (measured by the so-called Total Fertility Rate, or TFR) is relatively high. It increased between 2005 and 2012 (see Figure 14.6.3) but has slipped since. It peaked at 1.94 in 2013; the population balances if the TFR = 2.1. In recent years in Britain it has been boosted by the number of immigrant babies born here, but in years gone by it has been much lower, such as 1.7 in 1996.²

Fewer children: a world-wide problem

The ageing problem is spread not just across Britain and UK but most of the world. Figures given by the United States Population Bureau or the United Nations (UN), when they are providing forecasts about the world's population, bear three key criteria in mind:

(a) *The average fertility rate per woman*,³ which will continue to fall in the majority of countries in the Southern World, dropping from 2.69 in 2010 to 2.05 by 2050.⁴ Women in the Southern World are wanting fewer children, so more are using contraceptives, which are becoming more widely available and more affordable. Infant mortality rates are also reducing (from 4.2% in 2014 to 1.7% by 2050 in the Southern World).

(b) *The number of people with AIDS*, as more are receiving anti-retroviral treatment, thereby increasing the average life expectancy for a person contracting the disease from 12 years to 28 years. The number of people living with AIDS worldwide in 2012 was estimated as 35.3 million,⁵ of whom 9.7 million were receiving treatment, 27%. The number represents 0.5% of the world's population, but includes 2.6% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa (24 million of the total).

(c) *Immigration*. This is not strictly a demographic feature in the sense that immigrants do not increase the world's population, just the population of different countries, that is, a redistribution of the population. It is, however, of immense importance globally and demographically as a continuing trend, with many implications for the church.

Greying Europe

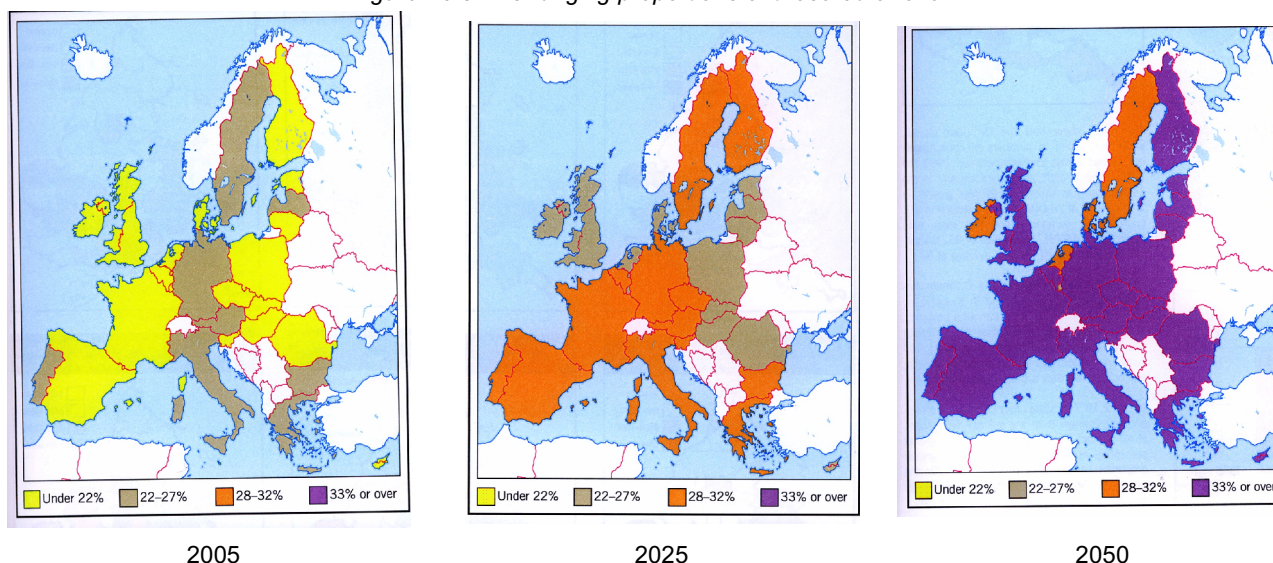
The demographic changes taking place within Europe are quite untypical of what is happening elsewhere. The TFR in some European countries is very low – it was only 1.2 in Poland, and 1.3 in Germany, Greece, Italy and 8 other European countries in 2005⁶ which has serious implications for those countries, as it will take 80 to 100 years to adjust the downward trend⁷ (and hence the importance of immigrants for them). If the value is too low it is very difficult for the population to grow quickly; the proportion of elderly people increases and the consequent ratio of elderly to the workforce makes it difficult for the government to get sufficient income tax to pay for services provided. Elderly people need more medical care; in the UK, for example, there are expected to be 1.7 million people with dementia in 2050.⁸ The overall TFR across Europe averaged 1.5 between 2005 and 2010.⁹

The consequence of low fertility rates in Europe, as elsewhere, is an increase in the proportion of elderly in the population, and is illustrated by the percentages of each population aged 60 or over across Europe for the years 2005, 2025 and 2050,¹⁰ shown in Figure 16.3.1 on the next page.

Mr Jérôme Vignon, Director of the European Commission's Directorate for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, wrote in an article: "The European Union is facing unprecedented demographic changes that will have a major impact on the whole of society. The issues are much broader than older workers and pension reforms. The ageing society will affect almost every aspect of our lives, from consumption patterns, business and family life to public policy and voting behaviour."¹¹ This includes the church. Lola Velarde, President of the Institute for Family Policies, points out that abortion is "one of the causes of the demographic decline in Europe". In 2007, Agenzia Fides reported that 1,200,000 abortions were registered across Europe, equivalent to one every 25 seconds.¹²

It is worth noting that some of us age faster than others. A New Zealand research study assessed the biological age of 1,000 people, all born in New Zealand in 1972 or 1973, using 18 physiological markers including blood pressure, cholesterol levels and organ function when they reached the ages of 26, 32 and 38. The results showed that while most, at 38, had a biological age similar to their actual age, some were, biologically, still in their late 20s, while quite a few were in their 50s, and one was even older – 61. They also noted that the 38-year-olds with the oldest biological ages looked older than their peers, and performed worse in problem-solving tests and in tests of balance and co-ordination.¹³ However, in this paper we are looking primarily at actual age.

Figure 16.3.1: Changing proportions of those 60 or over



It is obvious from Figure 16.3.1 that the UK is as caught up with the ageing process as many other countries in Europe, and the same is true for the church as well.

Age of churchgoers in the UK

While the measurement of the age of churchgoers is important, this has not been undertaken in any systematic way in the UK, and while the various Church Censuses which have taken place¹⁴ give such data they are all occasional. Since England is the major component of the UK and there have been four Church Censuses there we will focus on these for the rest of this paper. Each Census invites the minister of every church in the land to note how many are attending on a particular Sunday, across all services (with those coming twice only counted once) noting their age-group, gender, etc. To help in this, simple “slips” of paper are used for individuals to give answers appropriately. Although the use of these is optional, in the 2005 English Church Census some half million churchgoers ticked a form indicating their age and gender, ethnicity, etc. That gives a very reasonable database on which to assess percentages, and given like numbers in earlier Censuses, a reasonable base for forward projections.

The overall numbers are given in Table 16.3.1, taken from this edition of *UK Church Statistics*, figures for 2020 and onwards being estimated.¹⁵ The Table gives the basic numbers, the total number of churchgoers and that number as a percentage of the population, and then the proportions of the total in each age-group. Figure 16.3.2 on the next page illustrates these figures.

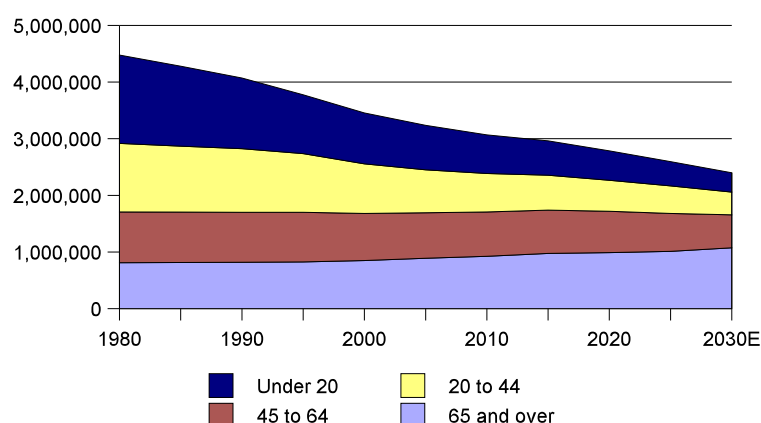
Table 16.3.1: Usual Sunday Church Attendance, England, by age-group

Year	Under 15	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 & over	TOTAL	% of Pop.	< 15 %	15-19 %	20-29 %	30-44 %	45-64 %	65/65+ %
1980	1,165,200	394,300	492,100	718,500	897,400	810,200	4,477,300	9.6	26.0	8.8	11.0	16.1	20.0	18.1
1985	1,066,100	343,700	450,400	714,300	890,400	814,700	4,279,600	9.1	24.9	8.0	10.5	16.7	20.8	19.1
1990	958,300	287,600	413,500	709,500	882,000	819,600	4,070,500	8.5	23.5	7.1	10.2	17.4	21.7	20.1
1995	796,600	242,300	370,700	666,100	875,500	824,900	3,776,100	7.8	21.1	6.4	9.8	17.6	23.2	21.9
2000	700,500	196,000	295,800	580,000	831,200	850,500	3,454,000	7.0	20.3	5.7	8.5	16.8	24.1	24.6
2005	627,800	156,700	240,600	518,300	802,000	890,700	3,236,100	6.4	19.4	4.9	7.4	16.0	24.8	27.5
2010	555,000	126,200	205,400	474,700	783,400	923,600	3,068,300	5.8	18.1	4.1	6.7	15.5	25.5	30.1
2015	502,900	102,900	174,900	440,300	765,500	975,100	2,961,600	5.4	17.0	3.5	5.9	14.9	25.8	32.9
2020	438,900	80,400	146,300	401,900	728,400	990,400	2,786,300	4.9	15.8	2.9	5.3	14.4	26.1	35.5
2025	366,100	62,000	119,600	367,700	668,700	1,012,100	2,587,200	4.4	14.2	2.4	4.6	14.2	25.8	39.1
2030	292,000	48,000	97,700	305,200	581,900	1,073,900	2,398,700	4.0	12.2	2.0	4.1	12.7	24.2	44.8

It is obvious that the English church has an ageing problem, and much more acute than that facing the demographers across Europe! This is because the number of young people in the church is decreasing at a very rapid rate – a 43% drop in those under 20 between 1980 and 2000 and a projected -45% drop between 2000 and 2020 (a decline of -2.9% per year).

The consequence is that the proportion of those at the other end of the scale is increasing – those 65 and over have grown from 18% of total churchgoers in 1980 to 25% in 2000 and a projected 36% by 2020 (and 45% by 2030). Their

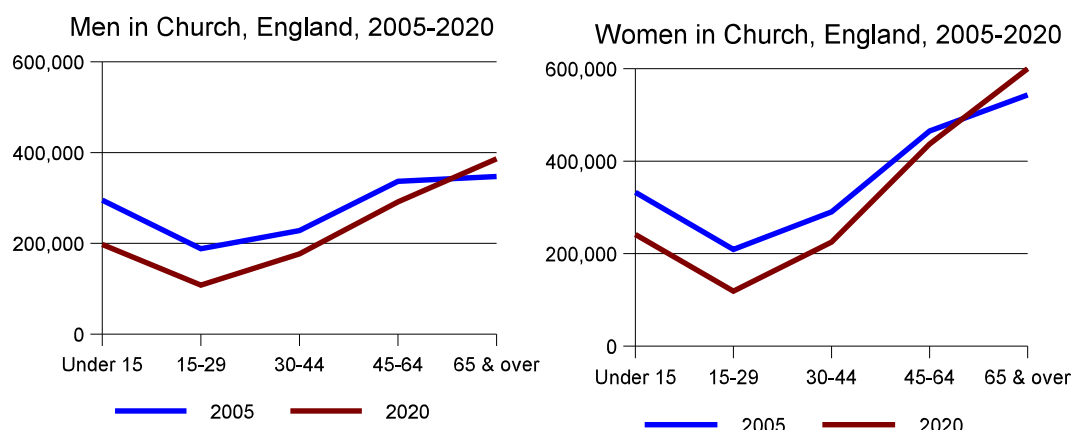
Figure 16.3.2: Sunday Church Attendance in England by age-group, 1980 to 2025E



numbers are increasing more rapidly, however – up +5% between 1980 and 2000, but an estimated +16% between 2000 and 2020. More than one person in three who attends church in 2015 in England is 65 or over.

Whereas those attenders under 20 have slipped from being 12% of the under 20 population in England in 1980 to an estimated 4% by 2020, those 65 and over will have only changed from 11% of the 65+ population in 1980 to 9% by 2020. In fact the number of those 65 and over in church in 2020 will almost certainly be greater than the number in church in 2005, even though numbers going to church have generally dropped, as the graphs in Figure 16.3.3 indicate.

Figure 16.3.3: Numbers in church in England, 2005 and 2020E by gender



There are usually more women in church than men (4 women to every 3 men) but this is partly because women live longer than men. Are women, in fact, more religious than men, or just that they feel more comfortable with expressing it and more under the necessity to express it, particularly in terms of churchgoing? The American Barna Group have researched women and the church, and have found in fact that women in 2015 were less likely to attend church regularly than men, a reverse of the situation 10 years earlier. They sought to ascertain why this was so, and found the following reasons for American women, but they may not all be so true of English women:¹⁶

- 1) Women are putting churchgoing at a lower priority than before, with family and work coming first very often (but not a commitment to furthering their career).
- 2) They were just busy, really, really busy. 72% of women felt stressed out, 58% felt tired, and 48% said they were overcommitted.
- 3) Lack of emotional engagement and support from those at church. 17% said they felt “very” supported at church, 23% “somewhat” and 43% “not at all”.
- 4) Changing family structures. Women are getting married later now, starting families later, preferring to become financially stable before embarking on marriage.
- 5) Women are not only failing to identify with the church, but also increasingly not identifying as a Christian, with churchgoing thus becoming irrelevant.

This scenario is less likely to be true of older women attending church where the above factors are probably less relevant, though for Third Agers other factors come into play.

Third, Fourth and Fifth Agers

Many who are currently Third Agers are able to spend money on pleasure and leisure, as in many cases they have been able to retire on pensions based on full-salary. Their health is strong – they have 10 or 20 years to go – so they have energy,¹⁷ and, if a churchgoer, are often willing to join in and help. Those aged 65 in 2015 for example were born in 1950, and their world-view was moulded by living through the “Swinging Sixties”; they are the “never-had-it-so-good” generation, whose slogan was “can do it”. In terms of churchgoers, they are the largest 10-year cohort.

When giving the age of churchgoers, the oldest group is usually simply summarised as “65 and over” as often the comparison is between the younger and older ages. However, “65 and over” may be divided into the “Third Age,” a title given by the government for those aged between 65 and 74, and what might be called “Fourth Agers”, those between 75 and 84, and “Fifth Agers”, those who are 85 and over. These three groups are in fact quite different, not only in years but also in health, ability, energy, mobility, availability and outlook.

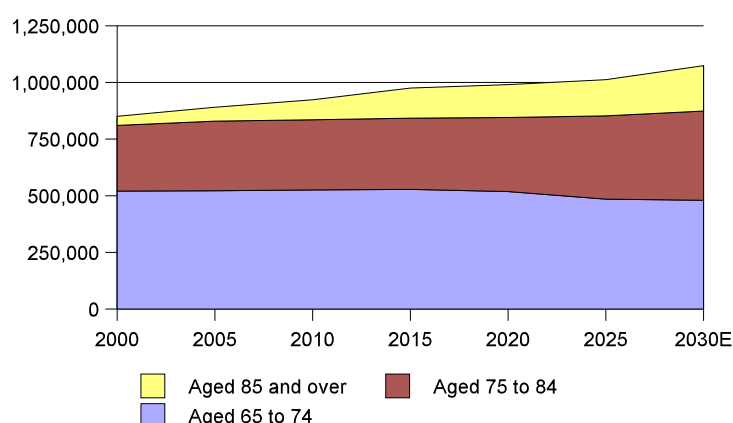
The number of churchgoers in these different groups was first requested in the English Church Census for 2005, and while the *total* number of those 65 and over is known earlier and has been estimated for later years, the subdivision into these age groups was not included. It can, however, perhaps be taken to be similar to the population split which is known from the Population Censuses, and the forward forecasts given by the Office for National Statistics. A calculation of these yields the following Table and chart, the numbers behind the chart being shown as they are important:

Table 16.3.2: Number of English churchgoers, 65 and over, 2000 to 2030E

Year	65 - 74	75 - 84	85 & over	Total 65 & over	Average age	% of all attenders
2000	520,500	289,800	40,200	850,500	74.4	25%
2005	522,200	307,100	61,400	890,700	75.0	28%
2010	525,900	309,700	88,000	923,600	75.4	30%
2015	528,000	314,400	132,700	975,100	76.2	33%
2020	518,400	327,300	144,700	990,400	76.5	36%
2025	485,200	367,300	159,600	1,012,100	77.1	39%
2030E	480,200	393,700	200,000	1,073,900	77.8	45%

It may be seen that there is relatively little change across these 30 years in the number of churchgoers aged 65 to 74 (-8%), mostly because there are good numbers of churchgoers in earlier years who will continue to come to church, being healthy and active enough to do so.

Figure 16.3.4: Number of English churchgoers, 65 and over, 2000 to 2030E



Numbers of churchgoers aged 75 to 84 increase somewhat (+13%) between 2000 and 2020 but then increase quite substantially between 2020 and 2030 (+20%), assuming that churchgoers follow the general population whose Fourth Age also expands significantly during this period.

Numbers of churchgoers in their Fifth Age, 85 and over, increase 5-fold in this period, from 40,000 in 2000 to 200,000 by 2030 (+398%). Again, this follows what is happening in the general population, but also takes into account the general finding on older churchgoers that they continue with their life-time habit of regular church attendance even in their old age. Some may well need transport or other help in getting there, however.

As these numbers increase (and the average age of those 65 and over moves from 74 in 2000 to 78 by 2030),

the proportion they are of total church attendance also increases, from 25% in 2000 to 45% by 2030. The proportion of those in their Third Age (65 to 74) moves from 61% in 2000 to 45% by 2030, if these trends turn out to be correct, and those in their "Fifth Age" (85 and over) from 5% of those 65 and over in 2000 to 19% by 2030.

People born in 1945 will be 70 in 2015 and their world-view was formed before the sexual revolution. Those born in 1930 will be 85 in 2015 and they went to Secondary School during the Second World War and would have experienced the uncertainties and hardships associated with that conflict and have never forgotten it. One old grandmother always asked her grandchildren for their used tubes of toothpaste – she would always open them up and scrape out the last remnants of any paste left in them.

These trends show church leaders that relatively little movement in age proportions lie ahead over the next 5 years but numbers and proportions begin to change much more in the following ten years. However, earlier research¹⁸ showed there are other considerations for older people than just numbers, and these are summarised in Table 16.3.3, which also includes those aged 55 to 64.

Table 16.3.3: Other factors about the elderly

Age-group	Name	Activity	Sufficiency	Church life	Sense of belonging to a church	% who went to Sunday School
55 to 64	~	Still employed	Earning a salary	In leadership	43%	32%
65 to 74	Third Age	Retired	Travelling with Saga	Supporting role	34%	38%
75 to 84	Fourth Age	Grand-parenting	Loss of spouse	May need help to get there	28%	46%
85 & over	Fifth Age	Confined to home	Increasing dependency	Only attend on special occasions	19%	51%

Implications for leaders

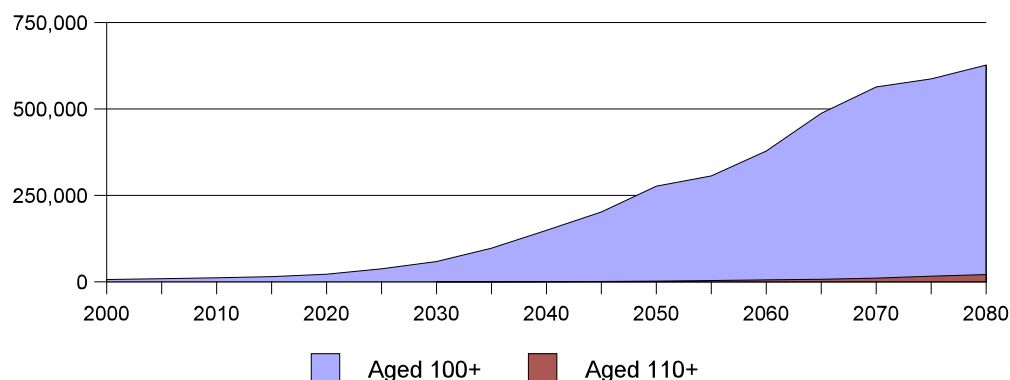
Age of retirement

One obvious implication of the above is that of the age of retirement, something relevant not just to ministers but elders, trustees and others. Should leaders continue to retire at, say, 65, or, as in a number of denominations, 70? Roman Catholic priests are not expected to retire until they are 75. The average age of a Protestant minister in the UK is about 54, and if an absolute retirement age of 70 (such as in the Anglican church) continues to hold, then by the time many present serving ministers retire, say in 15 years' time, in 2030, there will be a number of church-attached centenarians, although nothing like as many as in 2050, when ministers now in 30s will be thinking of retiring.

Embracing older people and more centenarians

The future number of centenarians will certainly keep the Queen's equerry busy (or those of her successors if they continue the tradition of signing a card for everyone reaching 100), as the following graph indicates:¹⁹

Figure 16.3.5: Number of estimated future centenarians in the UK



The impact of many older people, say those 65 and over, not just the centenarians, will affect the church in a variety of ways. Their *physical* ability is usually less, often finding stairs difficult (for example). Not all older people enjoy modern, especially loud, *worship*. Some churches are already appointing a *Minister for Older People*. Are ministers in *training* being prepared to serve the needs of congregations where older people dominate?

Over the next decade the numbers of Third Agers from the non-white ethnic communities is likely to continue to be fairly modest, although they will increase more substantially between 2025 and 2050.²⁰ Likewise while more Third Agers are divorcing this is unlikely to be a special challenge for churches. The increased life expectancy especially among men will, however, mean that there are more married people at older ages, something that will certainly be a new feature of church life.

Older people in general are especially likely to be seen in Tyne & Wear, the north Norfolk coast, the Essex coast, and generally along the south coast and north Dorset, where up to two-fifths of the population will be 65 or over by 2030.²¹ Older people are also especially likely to be seen in the London Boroughs of Havering, Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Sutton, Hillingdon, Harrow, Barnet and Enfield – all Boroughs in Outer London.²²

Helping Grandparents

Many Third Agers are grandparents, with an average of 4.4 grandchildren. Over 700,000 of them were attending church in the UK in 2015! Many will spend part of their time looking after their grandchildren two or more days a week when they are pre-school. In what practical ways can Christian grandparents be more than just child-minders or child-entertainers to share Christian truth and values? Should the churches provide facilities specially for grandparents?

This current generation in the Western World (whose parents often married in their mid-20s and started a family in their 20s) will not only see many grandparents, but also many *great-grandparents*. Since the next generation is marrying later, starting a family later, it may well be that fewer of them will be great-grandparents themselves. So how can the church celebrate great-grandparenthood, and how best encourage Christian great-grandparents in their living, loving and legacy to their extended family?

Finance

People aged between 50 and 74 spent twice as much as the under-30s on cinema tickets between 2000 and 2010. Their restaurant spending also increased by 33% while the under-30s spent 18% less.²³ While these are facts from the general population, they could also be true of Third Age churchgoers, although it may not necessarily be true across all denominations. Third Agers may be very committed to their church, but may become less able to give as much support as perhaps they used to.

However, in the Church of England, total giving in 2013 amounted to £953 million, the highest amount ever given to the church by those attending, an increase of +2.6% on the previous year, even if the number of committed “subscribers” to the church was -2% less.²⁴ On average Anglican church members gave £13 each per week to the church.

Transport

Driving is the most common form of transport for older people in the UK, with 68% of households where someone is aged 70+ having their own car.²⁵ Giving up driving is more likely to be because of declining health, rather than advancing age as such. However, the older people get, the less easy it is for them to travel to church, doctor or hospital. Can churches help by providing some kind of transport rota, even “bussing” people to church? Public transport is frequently simply not convenient for many older people, often infrequent even where available on a Sunday, and road crossings do not always give older people time to cross safely as local Councils generally assume a pedestrian walking speed faster than 76% of men and 85% of women over 65 can walk. Those living in rural areas find transport especially difficult.

Over the next ten years, driverless cars are very likely to be on our roads, which will probably include the transporting of elderly people. Some car companies, like Ford, are also deliberately designing cars particularly suitable for older people (wider front door, higher seats, larger dashboard and so on).²⁶ Numbers using Mobility Scooters may also increase, churches needing space for access.

Elderly evangelism

More elderly may go to church than in other age-groups, but there are yet many who do not go to church at all, and still need to be reached with the gospel. There are organisations like the Outlook Trust devoted to doing this; Senior Alpha run by many churches also has a powerful ministry.

A Tearfund survey²⁷ several years ago found that while 18% of Third Agers (65 to 74) went to church at least once a month, 42% had stopped going to church and 40% had never been. The respective percentages for Fourth Agers (75 to 84) were 15%, 50% and 35%, and for Fifth Agers (85 & over) 11%, 60% and 29%. Fresh Expressions, which have grown very rapidly in recent years, helps to attract those who have lost contact with the church, and Back to Church Sunday, usually held in September, also often especially encourages the elderly to come back. But like any group of churchgoers, they need to be befriended and enabled to join in suitable church activities. When Jesus said, “The fields are white, ready to harvest,” that included those 65 and over!

Endnotes

- 1) Office for National Statistics, *Population Projections*, given in *UK Church Statistics* No 2, 2010-2020, Table 16.9, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, 2014.
- 2) Office for National Statistics, *Population Trends*, given in *Religious Trends*, No 4, 2003/2004, Table 1.4, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2004.
- 3) The fertility rate is the average number of children born to a woman over her life-time. It is measured by taking the number of births and dividing by the number of women aged 15 to 45, roughly their child-bearing age.
- 4) Southern World here means the "Developed World", "Third World" or other like terms, and is essentially the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Western World means the "Developing World", or "First World" or other like terms and is essentially the continents of Europe, North America and Oceania (now sometimes called the Pacific).
- 5) From the website www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sub-Saharan, accessed 28th July 2015.
- 6) *Europe in Figures*, Eurostat Yearbook 2008, Table SP12, Page 46.
- 7) See www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-3X5hIF on Muslim demographics from Friends of Muslims, March 2009.
- 8) Talk at University College London "The new biology of ageing" by Professor Dame Linda Partridge, 20th October 2009.
- 9) www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles accessed 29th July 2015.
- 10) Taken from *Religious Trends*, No 7, 2007/2008, edited Peter Brierley, Christian Research, Swindon, Page 2.9.
- 11) *Sigma*, The Bulletin of European Statistics, 010-2008, Page 50.
- 12) Article "Europe needs Jesus!" in *Sword*, Volume 4, Number 6, November/December 2009, Page 34.
- 13) Article in *The Week*, 18th July 2015, Page 19, taken from *The Guardian*.
- 14) Held in England in 1979, 1989, 1998 and 2005, in London 2012, in Scotland 1984, 1994, 2002 and 2016, and in Wales in 1982, by either MARC Europe, Christian Research or Brierley Consultancy.
- 15) *UK Church Statistics*, No 2 2010-2020, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, Page 16.8 used for earlier years.
- 16) *Five Factors Changing Women's Relationship with Churches*, www.Barna-update, 30th June 2015.
- 17) *Ageing in a Consumer Society*, Policy Press, 2008.
- 18) *Hurting Elderly People & the Church*, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Christian Research, 1999.
- 19) *Number of Future Centenarians*, Dept for Work and Pensions, Dec 2010.
- 20) *Local Government and the Demography of Ageing*, Local Government Association, March 2015, Page 13.
- 21) *Ibid.*, Page 9.
- 22) Article in *The Economist*, 1st November, 2014, Page 34.
- 23) Article in *The Economist*, 27th September, 2014, Page 31.
- 24) *Finance Statistics* 2013, Research and Statistics Dept., Archbishops' Council, July 2015.
- 25) *The Future of Transport in an Ageing Society*, George Holley-Moore and Helen Creighton, Age UK, June 2015, Page 2.
- 26) *Ibid.*, Page 14.
- 27) *Churchgoing*, Tearfund, 2007.