

The Church of England has been doing some research into Church Growth. A comprehensive report has looked at all sorts of types of church, from rural multi-parish groups to market towns to urban areas to cathedrals. 'Greater Churches' like Beverley Minster get a special section. There are encouragements and discouragements. Some churches have grown greatly – and the cathedral sector is part of that. Most Greater Churches have grown too, though not all, and not us, though I'd say in numbers terms we are at best holding our own. The greatest discouragement is that, overall, there has been a decline of around 9% in the last decade across the Church of England, and that's a cause for real concern.

We had a conversation about this at the Deanery Synod on Tuesday. We nearly had an argument actually – about what should motivate us to tell people about Jesus, what should drive us in inviting people to encounter the Living God as we worship and meet and pray and learn. One person cited those depressing numbers: huge declines in the number of children and young people in our churches. At the end of the last decade something like 2.2% of 16-19 year olds in the country were attending church once a month or more. 50% of churches have fewer than 5 under 16s. It's not that people have stopped going to church, says the Report. It's that they never started.

Another person said that we shouldn't start with the numbers, but with our commitment as disciples to make Jesus known. It is our job, just as it was John the Baptist's job at the beginning of John's gospel, to point to Jesus, not for the sake of getting more people into church and so feeling successful, but for the sake of pointing to Jesus alone. John actually loses numbers, as his task was not to build his own grouping, but to give himself and his followers away. His two leave him and follow Jesus. It's not the same situation, but if we introduce someone to Jesus and they come to faith, and then they go to another church, we shouldn't be dismayed, even if it makes our statistics look bad. Disciples tell people about Jesus. That's it.

As a good and balanced Rural Dean, I, of course, said that it was both. As disciples we not only pray and learn and worship and serve, we evangelise. And we are members of a church in which evangelism is embodied in what we do, in the services we offer, in the groups we have. A mark of whether we are evangelising well will be in whether people come. The numbers tell a story. Crucially, if we are not being a church which makes Christ known to every generation, how will they hear? If there's not enough of us to tell the story, how will people come to faith? We need to be here, in numbers enough to be the body of Christ. I don't mind whether we start with fear for our survival, or with an inner passion for speaking the Good News. It needs to be done.

What is fascinating in the Report is that there is no single recipe for successful evangelism, no one pattern for growing the numbers of the church which everyone can adopt. There is no one style of being the church, no one worship pattern or theological stance, which will guarantee growth. I'm quite encouraged by that. Too often in the church people have been keen to demonstrate how badly wrong others have got it, and how clearly right they are. Not so: it's not the choir or guitars, or simple gospel or flowery music, or evangelical fervour or anglo catholic mysticism, or digital projectors or incense, or chairs or pews.

So what is it, which is a factor in church growth? Not the recipe, says the Report, but the ingredients. This is a fabulous encouragement for the church to be local, to see where we are, and what we can do, not to impose a blueprint from elsewhere. The ingredients are: Good leadership (*Good Vicars mean growing churches, said the Archbishop of Canterbury recently. Discuss...*);

A clear mission and purpose;

Willingness to self reflect and to change and adapt;

Involvement of lay members;

Being intentional in prioritising growth;

Being intentional in a chosen style of worship;

Being intentional in nurturing disciples.

When I was teaching, our school was radical: no uniforms, first names for teachers, mixed ability classes, continual assessment. Mr Gove would not have been an admirer, you feel. The next door school had uniform, exams, setting, many rules. We both did well, because each school was committed to its ethos and philosophy. The whole school community knew what made it tick, and pupils and staff flourished. I think that's what this Report says about church growth. It's not the specific method, but the joint commitment of the whole church, or group of churches, which is key.

We must want to introduce people to Jesus. We must want to grow ourselves as disciples. We must stop fighting battles about the style or pattern of worship, and be people who can unite, even around something not all of us like. This is what we do, and we do it because through it we worship Jesus. I happen to be thrilled that, over a month, something like 50 people under 18 sing in our choirs. But I don't want to impose that model, or the style of worship which goes with it, on everyone. In other churches a different style of worship will work. The key is to be committed to it, not fight against it.

As a larger church we also have the opportunity to offer other kinds of work with children and young people. I'm thrilled that good numbers of children and young people encounter us in a variety of groups and meetings under the direction of Emily, our youth and children's minister. It's important for us to make this work known: to support it, and enable it to bear fruit in our worship. Some of that will happen in our All Age Service once a month. Some people choose not to come to the All Age because it's not the style for them. Well, better to absent yourself than to fight against it. But why not embrace it and be thrilled that people come and meet God through it. Better still, bring your grandchildren.

I say grandchildren because the average age of a worshipper in the Church of England is, evidently, 62. You have an opportunity to make that statistic work: grandchildren need you. And you have friends with more time than they used to. Get them along. A commitment to following Christ means a commitment to tell people about him. The churches which have grown have done so because they have decided to do so, in whatever way was right for their context. I would be thrilled if a great queue of you formed straight after this service to tell me how we are not doing it right, so that we can reflect and learn and commit. Jesus Christ deserves nothing less. This church, built on the inheritance of those who, in their day, told people about Christ, deserves nothing less. Who will you tell today, like Andrew told his brother, that 'We have found the Christ'? Amen.