

WHAT IS CHURCH AND HOW DO YOU MEASURE IT?

Once upon a time we thought we knew what church was and how to measure it. Church happened when we gathered in a consecrated building for a public act of worship with a priest on a Sunday. So we measured the size of the church by the number of people who attended the public act of worship. Until the year 2000 we counted ‘Usual Sunday Attendance’, and since then we’ve also used ‘Average weekly attendance in October’, including weekdays.

But attendance & electoral roll measures have never done full justice to what we think church really is. So today I want to pose the deeper questions: ‘What is church?’ & ‘How do we measure it?’

The church we find in the Bible is not a 10.30 Anglican eucharist in a Gothic building, though I have met one or two Anglican clergy recently who believe it was. The essence of church we find in the NT is not format but relationships. Church is people who have seen in Jesus that ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’ and made the appropriate response together to ‘repent and believe in the good news’. Paul Tillich suggests that church is ‘a group of people who express a new reality by which they have been grasped’. Vincent O’Donovan, reflecting on his experience with the Masai, defines church similarly – ‘Repent, believe, be baptised, witness to Christ in the Spirit until he comes again. This is the response to the Christian message. That is the church.’ So, O’Donovan is saying that church is

our culturally appropriate collective response to the gospel message. Archbishop Rowan defines church in his foreword to 'Mission Shaped Church' as 'What happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other'.

If church is Christians meeting Jesus together, forming community around him, then it's not defined by particular forms of public worship events. It's fluid, dynamic, our active collective response to the gospel, a purposeful community, ever going deeper, growing up, imitating heaven more closely, always welcoming, never ending, never giving up in the face of adversity and disappointment, the eternal bride of its saviour & lord, Jesus Christ, always ready to re-imagine herself for changing times.

Which is why Rowan has said that re-imagining church must now be one of our major priorities, in order to make the church relevant to a fast changing multi cultural world and so to grow both numerically and spiritually.

If we are to measure that growth then we need new ways of counting ourselves because the traditional indicators are limited to measuring a particular organisational form of church. I'll come to what to do about that in a moment. But, even counting people in a general way, not dependant on a particular organisational form, hardly exhausts what can be said by way of defining 'church'. All that does is measure the circumference of its circle.

Church is more than a circle. Think of it as a cylinder with depth and height as well as circumference. If we want truly to say what the local church is and how it is measured, we have to find language and measurement not only for the human circumference of its boundary but also for the depth and height of its spiritual life and maturity.

It's just the same if we want to measure a car cylinder. To measure a car engine we need to know the volume of the cylinder, not just the length and not just the circumference. But cylinder volume is not enough by itself. A cylinder is nothing until a piston starts pushing in and out of it. The power of the cylinder is determined not just by the volume swept by the piston, but also by the speed of the piston, which translates into rpm. Other things being equal, the piston speed measures the force or vitality of the engine. Similarly, church only comes to life when it is a ministering, serving, working community. So we can't fully capture & measure church unless its vitality, its energy (its rpm) is assessed along with the extent of its circumference and the depth of its being.

So the measure of a church is threefold – its extent as measured by the number of its people, its depth as measured by its spiritual maturity, and its vitality as measured by its ministry as instrument, sign and foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. We wish the church to grow in numbers, spirituality and effectiveness.

Finally we don't measure the power of an engine just by piston speed and the swept volume of one cylinder but also

by the number of cylinders. The greater the number of cylinders the better the engine runs. Church in an area is measured by adding up the size, depth and vitality of each church.

The stuff of which a church's spiritual maturity and mission energy are made is not subject to numerical calculation in the straightforward way that the extent of its membership can be added up. Yet I think we can and should develop proxy indices for measuring or assessing the spiritual maturity and mission energy of the church. That's not today's subject, but we can talk about those two long term projects later if you wish.

For now I'll focus on the easy bit – reforming the way we count numbers of people, measuring better the circumference of the church's circle. Here is a question: Is 'church' measured by attending or belonging; by activity or ontology? Is it the things we do together or the community we are together? My point is our theology suggests church is long term community but currently we measure it as periodic attendance event.

There is, though, a biblical argument for saying 'the service is what church is and attendance is how we measure it'. The NT word we translate as church, 'ekklesia' has its origins in the Greek city state – it denotes the gathering of the citizens convened for the purpose of transacting city business. So the ekklesia's size is measured by attendance. We see ekklesia in action in this original sense in Acts ch 19 in relation to the riot at Ephesus.

But four recent developments have disturbed that assumption about the nature and measurement of church as set-piece worship event.

1. Cell church. In its pure form, the small cells meeting on weeknights in homes *are* the church. Each cell worships, prays, reads Scripture, and has a ministry in the world. It may even share communion from time to time. The cells meet in homes not in a ‘church’ building but then so did the whole Christian church for the first few centuries of its existence. Have a look at Romans ch 16v5 where Paul greets the ekklesia that meets in the house of Aquila & Priscilla, or Colossians 4v15 where he greets Nympha and the church in her house. Yet all we measure as ‘church’ is the Sunday celebration event that cell members are invited to attend as their second priority in the week. Not many churches operate a pure form of cell, but many have small groups with some cell characteristics. If you prayed, studied Scripture, worshipped and enjoyed Christian community on a Wednesday evening down at Nympha’s house (or Jean’s!) but did not attend the church building on Sunday morning, should you really be excluded from the church when we measure it?

2. Fresh Expressions. The rise of the fresh expressions movement has given us new models of how to do church. Many happen on weekdays, not in a consecrated church building, and take such a form that we scratch our heads and wonder whether attending the fresh expression can be classified as ‘going to church’ at all. By definition a fresh

expression is different from traditional church and it may not be centred on a weekly attendance event at all. Some churches are wary of including their 'fresh expression' congregation for fear of parish share or because they are not sure it is proper church. The national statistics have not accommodated fresh expressions easily not only because of definitional uncertainty but also because of data base inertia.

3. Decreasing attendance frequency. The media believes the Church of England is shrinking because our average attendance numbers have been going down for many years. But more than half of this is caused not by there being fewer of us but by each of us coming less frequently. It's only an estimate but I think that 30 years ago attendance frequency was about 80% - 4 weeks in 5. Now its 60% - 3 weeks in five – and falling towards 50%.

Reasons for this include the crowded pace of modern living, the change in the nature of Sunday, the rise of Fresh Expressions meeting monthly, and the motivational change from the old habit, duty & loyalty to contemporary consumerism. Because many fresh expressions happen on weekdays, many do not meet every week and the average member does not attend every time, I calculate it takes 10 new members of an average new style worship event to increase 'uSa' by 1. If a church loses one regular weekly Sunday attender and gains 9 new fresh expression members its recorded average attendance will go down. And so it is that many churches today believe that, while their average attendance is going down, their membership is going up.

4. The new emphasis on church growth. The Church of England is increasingly focussed on provoking its own flourishing and growth. +Rowan gave the current General Synod a five year priority – to take forward the spiritual and numerical growth of the church, including the growth of its capacity to serve the whole community of this country. Most dioceses now have some sort of church growth strategy and they employ people like you. Many dioceses are asking each church to have a Mission Action Plan designed to chart how the church may flourish, grow and minister in the future. General Synod in July passed a private member's motion asking the bishops and the Archbishops' Council to develop a national mission and growth strategy. So it has become even more important to know exactly what it is we are trying to grow and how to measure it. We have to monitor progress, research and analyse what is working and what is not, and communicate success to the media and throughout the church community. And we have to adapt our understanding and our measurement to the changing church scene so that we measure the whole church, not just the traditional bits.

So, as part of our re-imagining of church, we need to break out of the old straight jackets and do some new clear thinking about the nature of what 'church' is and how it can best be measured.

The OT has two different words for the people of God. Amazingly the OT scholars don't entirely agree on how or whether their meanings differ but I won't let that spoil a

good story. I believe that “Edhah” is used in the Pentatuch for the whole community of Israel that God assembled to take through the wilderness into the Promised Land that they might declare his lordship to the world. Edhah is a single community, a living breathing entity surviving the death of every individual member, growing, developing, having crises and setbacks, yet walking with God down the centuries. It is the OT version of the Bride or child of Christ, of whom God says through Hosea: “When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I brought forth my son”. The church community or membership is the successor of the Edhah.

‘Qahal’ is the word used for an actual meeting of the Edhah, the people of God. The qahal is summoned to form a gathering that constitutes God’s people for that moment even though not all the Edhah may be present. In the Greek Bible ekklesia is a translation of ‘qahal’ not ‘edhah’. A church worship gathering looks like the successor to the qahal.

When the whole edhah meet together to form the qahal (as in Numbers 14v5) then the two are the same thing. That’s how the NT church started – Acts ch 2 “All the believers were together and had everything in common, every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts.” The community and the gathering, were one and the same. In the good old days when everyone came to church every week our community and gathering were also more or less the same. But no longer!

That conjunction of *edhah* and *qahal* did not last in NT times either. Numbers rose so rapidly they couldn't all meet together. As the church spread outside Jerusalem, the afterglow of the first white heat of Pentecost started to fade. Soon the writer of Hebrews had to rally the troops: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." Infrequent attendance is a terrible thing for the health of the church because it's vital to encourage and spur one another on. Church should be a functioning, contributing community, not a loose collection of occasional consumers of religion. Though, of course, for some, their Christian commitment is no less than in the past but it is expressed in ways other than clockwork regularity at the set piece event.

In NT times the meaning of 'ekklesia' broadened, coming to mean the whole circle of believers irrespective of whether or not they were assembled for worship. See, for example, 1 Cor 16v1 "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galation churches to do".

Acts 9v31 spreads the meaning of *ekklesia* to encompass all the local churches in an area: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. *It* was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, *it* grew in numbers." So *ekklesia* is now used to describe the whole called-out community of God in a place or area. It was the whole community that Luke wished to count and to say grew in numbers - not in one location over and above another, but in the collectivity of them. The

church grew in numbers not when one local ekklesia nicked some members from another but when the Christians became thicker on the ground overall.

This understanding of church as the whole community of Christ's followers is reinforced by other NT metaphors. The church is the Bride of Christ, the community whom Christ loves and to whom he is permanently committed. This community is more than the sum of the individuals in it; it will partner Christ in the establishment of his kingdom in this world and the next. And the church is the body of Christ of which he is the head. This is ontology not activity, it is the nature of what we together are. We exist as Christ's bride & body & church not just when we gather together for a moment to form a meeting, but always, continuously, without pause. Church is not a particular form of religious meeting, it's what we always are together.

These pictures of a church so closely wedded to Christ in glory that the two almost become one, imply that the church is a spiritual body with heaven as its natural home and ultimate destination. The church never shrinks – because it's a universal mystical communion of all the faithful believers both living and departed in the Lord. Yet church people on earth are a mix of believers, non believers, half believers, saints and sinners. Why count this 'church visible' when it is the church invisible –the true believers and active disciples - we want to grow? The Great Commission calls us to make disciples not to fill pews.

Well, yes, *but* Jesus still had 12 apostles though one would betray him. The early church contained people who would fall away or let it down – Ananias, Saphirra, Demas and the rest. Who are we to judge which church members are true believers or disciples and which are not? And could we agree on the criteria? As Queen Elizabeth put it in relation to the new latitude in religion allowed under the Elizabethan Settlement in 1559 – “We do not make windows into men’s souls.” All we can do is count the church visible, leaving to God the question of the nature and size of the church invisible and triumphant in heaven.

If the visible church is composed of all those who participate in its life, not just those who attend certain of its events on a given week, then our attendance measures do not measure the size of the church or anything remotely like it. And we should stop pretending that they do.

If the size of the church is measured by its membership then our current membership measure (electoral roll) is of little use. Some join ERs for purposes other than to signify belonging – to get married, to get their children into a church school, or to show support for the church without ever taking part. Others belong to the church community but never join the roll. Joining a formal membership list is not some post-moderns’ thing, and fresh expressions may not ask new members to join the church’s electoral roll for fear of putting them off with an inappropriate demand.

Most important of all, the electoral roll excludes children. Yet the Bible clearly treats children as being members of

the people of God. Paul writes to the Ephesians in ch 1v1 “To the Saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Jesus Christ”. The saints are the holy ones, the called out ones, the members of the community of Christians. Then in ch 6v1 he specifically addresses those saints who are children – “Children obey your parents in the Lord”. Children were clearly part of the ekklesia in Ephesus and are part of the church today. That’s why we baptise them.

And the health and future of the church are in large part measured or determined by its child members. The church with many children projects health and future hope. The childless church faces a dreary inevitable demise. So, far from needing to be excluded from membership, the children are the most crucial members of the Christian church. As in any family, it is inconceivable to count the Christian community and miss out the children. But that is what we do with the Electoral Roll!

So we are left with a need to create a new measure of church - one that is not an increasingly unreliable proxy in a fast changing world, but one which actually measures ‘church’ as we have defined it and will carry on measuring church as its organisational and cultural forms evolve. This measure is quite simply a full list of all the effective participants in the worshipping community of the local church. The size or circumference of the church is the length of the list. Such a list should be compiled by the leadership of each local church and kept up to date on a continuous basis or else revised annually.

This immediately raises a number of issues. The Church of England has traditionally had porous boundaries. We do not like to sit in judgement on who is 'in' and who is 'out'. The criteria would need to be consistent –who will fix them? How much time and effort would it take to compile and update the list? What about data protection issues?

But many churches already have such a list that they use for pastoral reasons or as a prayer or membership list with contact details. In fact it is good practice for every church to possess a list of their own participants in order to enable pastoral care for them without people slipping through nets. If a church is caring for its people by name in this way then there will be little extra effort required to tot up their total number for a diocesan return. Those who would prefer their names not to be on a published list should still be on an informal supplementary list used by the leaders of the church for internal pastoral purposes. Simply having a list of currently active participants passes no judgement on people's standing before God or the church – it is simply attempting to reflect the current reality. There are no data protection issues in relation to simply knowing who participates in church life and adding up their total number.

Finally, as with every other attempted measure of the church, the definition and criteria must be set by the national church and by the diocese. The Diocese of Bath & Wells is already asking all of its churches to count their participants in the way here described and it issues a set of guidance notes to explain the criteria by which the church is to decide who to include. Lichfield has modified this and

will be asking each church to estimate the total number of its participants annually from the start of this year. If this goes well then we will have created the measure of church that we need properly to chart our numerical growth as well as to help each church care better for its people.

When Luke is describing and counting the growth of the early church in the Book of Acts, he emphasises not only the total number but also the additions to it. For example, the original group prior to Pentecost was 120 strong (ch 1v15). But at Pentecost 3000 were baptised and added to their number (ch2v41). In the period after Pentecost ‘The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved,’ (ch 2v47). Following Peter’s speech in ch 3, ‘Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5000’ (ch 4v4). As the apostles kept performing healing miracles and testifying to the resurrection ‘More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number’ (ch 5v14).

Only two out of ten church growth references in the first half of Acts quote the actual size of the church (120 and 5000). The other eight all refer to the numbers of new people joining the church. Luke starts by quoting an actual number (3000) but thereafter the sheer volume precludes an exact number so he falls back on a stock phrase such as ‘a great number’ of joiners.

Charting progress by counting the joiners has some advantages. Counting the size of the community is never an exact science, so estimates of the change between two

inexact counts may be even more inexact. It is easier to make an accurate count of the joiners. And the number of joiners is a guide to the evangelistic success of the church. Average attendance can go up not because new people come to faith because existing members attend more frequently or there is a spate of baptisms. A church's membership can rise simply through transfer from other churches but a count of joiners places them into categories - for example those who have transferred from another church and those who are new to church. The contribution each individual church is making to the overall evangelism and growth of the church can then be estimated. And information on the composition of the joiners (eg by age or gender) can help reveal what sort of people the church is attracting, what direction the church is moving in and what the future may hold.

Simply trying to increase the number of joiners gives a one-sided picture and encourages rapid throughput rather than genuine growth. Half the business of growing the church is keeping the people we already have. So a measurement method focussing on joiners should also focus on leavers.

In 2009, the Diocese of Leicester began asking each church to give numbers of joiners and leavers in different categories. The results, in a diocese used to attendance decline, were very surprising. In both 2009 and 2010 there was a large surplus of joiners over leavers – about 1600 joiners and 1000 leavers each year. Two thirds of the joiners were starting church for the first time or after a break. Very few of the leavers were simply ceasing

churchgoing. The results paint a picture of a whole diocese growing in a healthy way.

The Diocese of Lichfield experimented by asking a sample of churches the same question in 2010 and obtained very similar answers. Lichfield is now asking every church to estimate joiners and leavers in relation to 2011 alongside the total number of participants. Other dioceses may follow. It certainly looks as though when the question ‘What is church?’ is answered in terms of affiliation rather than attendance, and when ‘church growth’ is measured by the balance of joiners over leavers, the Church of England may be growing not shrinking. It is, therefore, doubly important that these two new ways of measuring the church be widely trialled and used in order to reveal what is really happening to the size of the church and how its growth can be stimulated in the future.

If we find, due to declining frequency and underestimated Fresh Expressions, that the circumference of the church community is in fact growing while average attendance is still shrinking, the worst possible response would be to sit back in relief and say ‘that’s alright then’. If we have more people with looser affiliation, then the challenge of continuing to grow numerically while re-shaping church to grow discipleship, spiritual depth and vitality, is gigantic. Along with further stimulation of numerical growth, that is the challenge we now face.

Extra on spiritual depth and mission vitality measurement

However, the stuff of which a church's spiritual maturity is made is not subject to numerical calculation in the way that the extent of its membership can be added up. But we can measure proxy-indicators for the level and direction of a church's spiritual health and depth. For example, the giving of the people is normally thought to be a good indicator of their spiritual commitment. The proportion of the membership who pray and study the Bible daily, or who meet together in small groups, could be used as indicators of spiritual health. So we have a (challenging) agenda to develop a set of 'spiritual health and maturity' criteria that can be measured and then merged into an index to be used as an overall indicator of the church's spiritual progress. There is already some literature in this area, including the 'Reveal' series from the Willow Creek stable, but there is much work to do before we could have any consensus on a credible Anglican index.

Measuring the vitality of each church's kingdom contribution through its outward-focussed ministry also requires proxy-indicators to be measured and collated into an overall index. The Church Life Survey in Australia has developed 'vitality indices' of church activity based on a meticulous survey of church life conducted every five years using detailed questionnaires. It should be a priority to develop this tool for the UK context. For Anglicans this will involve some sort of index of the strength of each church's enmeshment with its own parish.

