

30 Most Churches are half-full these days, surely Christianity will be dead in 50 years.

Most Churches are half-full these days, surely Christianity will be dead in 50 years. This is a prophecy that has been made many times and is yet to be fulfilled. If you look at the register of St. Paul's Cathedral in London I'm told that on Easter Day 1800 communicants were in single figures. Over 200 years later one million people participate in Anglican services alone every Sunday in Britain. Of course spread that million over 12,000 buildings and it averages at 80 which means some churches *can* look half empty.

It can't be denied that church going is declining but its rate of decline is comparable to the decline in other community groups in say sport or politics. Many people today live in the 'mini' world of their immediate family and the 'mega' world so called of the mass media and internet. This leaves commitment to what I'd call the 'midi' world of the local community and its activities in third place. In many parts of Britain people don't know their neighbours. So much of their lives is thrown into their families, work and recreation to the exclusion of an investment in the place they live. This is an important mitigating factor in judging people's involvement in local churches.

British churches are reshaping to meet this challenge from the weakening of local communities and the effect of that on church attendance. Network churches are springing up which connect with youth, young families, pensioners and other groups. These Christian groups don't fill church buildings because they deliberately meet away from traditional buildings in the places people meet, young or old. In this way the churches are connecting with where people *are nowadays* and especially the new patterns of social networking.

For all of this 3 million people still participate in Anglican services alone on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve. In 2007 the Church of England ordained 552 clergy the highest number since 2000. One in seven people said they considered themselves as Christians in the 2001 national census.

Surely Christianity will be dead in 50 years. The statistics challenge such pessimism. However if the age profile of English Anglicans is considered there are grounds for concern. The age range 15-25 is poorly represented when it comes to church attendance. Nevertheless the Church of England provides activities outside church worship in local communities for over half a million children and young people under 16 and 38,000 young people aged 16 to 25 years according to Church statistics released in 2008.

When you go to North Africa you can stand in the ruins of basilicas that are evidence of a past adherence to Christianity in a predominantly Muslim culture. Could the same thing come to pass in Britain? God knows, literally! Even if there are today more people in church on a Sunday than at football on a Saturday we can't guarantee that decline in the churches won't accelerate so that the foundations of our Christian nation also lie in ruins.

When Jesus promised in Matthew 16 that *the gates of hell will not prevail against (his church)* (v18b) he did not specify the church in Britain or North Africa. The Christian message spread in the last 500 years from an originally vital European Church to Africa, Asia and America exciting the Christian commitment of hundreds of millions. Now Christian vitality is much less in Europe than in most other continents so that African, Asian and American missionaries are being invited to serve the European churches!

Britain is still officially a Christian country with a legally established Church that serves most civic occasions, not least the inauguration – coronation – of the head of state. Many Christians see the church's involvement in the establishment as now something of a disadvantage in a non-deferential society that is currently very critical of all aspects of the so-called establishment.

Even if the UK church is declining the church in Africa, China and South America is in fast expansion. Where Christianity is flourishing it is frequently being persecuted, as in China, India or Indonesia, and isn't officially approved. Christian faith seems to thrive best under persecution so the contemporary attacks upon it in the UK may yet awaken new vitality and growth!

Most Churches are half-full these days, surely Christianity will be dead in 50 years. I don't believe that the church's is failing in Britain so much as at times shrinking back from her task. When you look around the world there's so much to encourage. Where the church fears the favour of God more than the favour of man and throws herself into her task she comes very much alive!