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40 – YEAR NOSEDIVE.....BUT DOES ANYONE ASK WHY?

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The fall in congregation numbers is common knowledge, so probably nobody will be surprised to see the graph showing that the numbers being confirmed in the C of E have been in free-fall since a peak of 191,042 in 1961 an abysmal 36,387 in 2000; all figures are supplied by the Statistical Unit of the Archbishops' Council and are publicly available, though that for 2001 is still awaited. Put another way, a decline of 81% in a (biblical) generation. But why?

It is my contention that we are faced with a conundrum, which I posed in a letter which was printed in the CEN (25th Feb 2000) and which provoked lively correspondence both pro and anti (surprise, surprise) my point of view. It is this, that while there are certainly many factors in the decline of congregations, yet church attendance and confirmations are firmly linked. If people are not already attending church, how will they acquire the urge to be confirmed – and if so, into what? – since they have no practice of churchgoing. And if people are not confirmed, why would they attend a form of worship in which they may not participate fully? – since the usual form provided is Holy Communion. How's that for a chicken-and-egg problem?

If the trend is not reversed confirmations will drop off the graph around 2014 and communicant membership of the Church of England will eventually die out completely, so for whom will Holy Communion be celebrated? Of course! I know! We'll forget the business of confirmation altogether, and let anyone receive Communion whether or not they know what they are doing. Forget 1 Corinthians 11 and the BCP about receiving unworthily – what does that matter? That will solve the problem of such nasty figures for good....Oh, has that suggestion already been made? I am surprised! As a former civil servant I seem to remember stories of government departments burying uncomfortable statistics, so there is precedent. But I admit that arguing statistically from a graph is not realistic; it will not happen in practice since lively churches will continue to produce their candidates. Next question:- why are there not more lively churches?

Since the decline, either accidental or engineered, of Morning and Evening Prayer over the past half century and the doctrinaire rejection of Family Services – call them what you will – by many clergy and PCCs, where are confirmation candidates to come from? And if people are not being confirmed how on earth or heaven can we expect them to attend worship geared only to the confirmed? Of course anyone may receive a blessing at most altar (sic) rails, but come on, get real, few will find that an irresistible attraction.

The Church of England is neither boring nor irrelevant – it shares with others the greatest news for humankind – but it has marginalized itself by going about its business of sharing the Kingdom of God in the wrong way and turning a blind eye to its historic practice, albeit with the best of intentions. For 300 years its doors were open to all to explore the Faith, with personal commitment for those who would make it, yet still encouraging the enquiring minds to keep enquiring. Then it changed its approach.

The Parish Communion Movement from the 1930s onwards has rightly emphasised the centrality of Holy Communion *for the insider*, but forgotten the concern committed to it by Christ *for the outsider*

“go and make disciples”, Matthew 28:19. This emphasis on the Eucharist has in practice been pressed to the virtual exclusion of every other form of public worship over many areas of the country. The Revd. Canon Prof. Leslie Francis, “Rural Anglicanism” (Collins 1985) says, amongst many other perceptive but perhaps unwelcome comments, the “centrality of the Communion service may be seen as a weakness in the sense that it emphasises the gulf between the believing community and those outside.....some would argue that it is a most divisive way of separating out the confirmed members of the church from those who have not been confirmed.”

Our scholars on the Liturgical Commission had the opportunity in 1980 with the ASB to tackle the problem – after all, confirmations had “only” dropped 50% in the space of 19 years then – and again in 2000 with Common Worship – what a misnomer! – but they blew it. Two new Prayer Books in twenty years for the first time in three-and-a-half centuries and not a form of truly common worship in them. But be fair, there are almost infinite variations of Holy Communion with no fewer than eight different Eucharistic prayers. Now this is the body with the title The Church of England. It is nothing of the kind: it is The Church of less than 5% (declining) of England. It might be said to be The Church that has Turned its Back on England.

Yet the experience of numbers of Anglican clergy is that England is hungering for positively-expressed Christianity - cf. the growth of Alpha courses the length and breadth of the country – but the hungry are not being fed by our pattern of Sunday services, which are, bluntly, off-putting.

Imagine yourself one of the 95%+ of the unconfirmed population. You have a personal crisis and seek spiritual/moral strength and consolation (like a friend recently who confided that his son was literally within feet of being blown to bits in Bali) and you decide to go to church. Leslie Francis again, “the times and types of services may be a piece of esoteric knowledge” especially away from the cities....but you are determined and find a church and you go along only to feel completely mystified by something specifically geared to the initiated to which you do not belong. You’ll be a brave person indeed to try again next weekend.

Yet there are thriving and growing churches up and down the land. Not just in the university towns and cities but also villages. One of my favourites in which to worship when staying with my family in Norfolk is the (usually full, c.200) church in the village of Necton. People will travel miles to worship there, passing several other churches; Newport Essex is much the same, as are hundreds of others across the country. Why can’t we look at, listen to, and learn from the places where growth is happening? The hunger is there but only partially is it being satisfied.

Before the thunder of the broadsides breaks out from those that my analysis will offend please let me point back to the facts: confirmations have plummeted and congregations are sparse. Who is giving thought to this? The Statistical Unit knows of no research being carried out apart from the enquiries addressed to them by a retired parochial hack. Let those who disagree with my contention put forward their own views and suggestions for recovering the ground and advancing the Kingdom of God.

The Church of England has been shooting itself in the foot for half a century. How long before we put a bullet through the head? Not long, if we won’t change our ways.

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