

## Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Autumn 2003 No 90

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

### STATISTICS SHOW CONTINUED DECLINE

David Phillips

In July the Church of England released the membership, attendance and finance statistics for 2001. The breezy introduction to the report reminds readers that for the year 2000 the Church introduced new ways of calculating attendance based on weekly figures rather than Sunday attendance. This was an attempt to show that there were changing patterns of church attendance however it was also seen as an attempt to draw attention away from the continued decline in the Usual Sunday Attendance figure (USA). This being the second year in which the new figures have been provided it is now possible to see whether the trend in USA is reflected in the Average Weekly Attendance (AWA) figures.

On page 14, table 11 the total Average Weekly Attendance for 2001 is given as 1,205,000 This compares to 1,274,000 in 2000. That is a drop of 5.4% in one year on the new figure of church attendance. The decline in average Sunday attendance (not the same as USA) is smaller (by 17,000 or 1.6%) suggesting that a larger proportion has stopped attending midweek. Indeed on the bare figures it would appear that the attendance figure for midweek fell from 216,000 to 164,000 a drop of 24% although the actual figures are not given in the report.

What then of the old figure for Usual Sunday Attendance (USA)? This figure now stands at 938,000 compared to 968,800 in 1999 and 995,800 in 1997. That is a decline of nearly 1.5% per year over the four years. (Back in 1976 the USA was 1,247,208 but I don't think this included children.). The figures show a greater decline in attendance by children – 3.1% per year since 1997.

Another interesting statistic is that for adult confirmations. The report draws a comparison in the numbers of confirmations in 2001 as against 1976. This shows quite clearly that over this 25 years period the proportion of confirmations that are adults has risen from one fifth in 1976 to 38% (over a third) in 2001. This is not surprising given the changes in attendance. However, what the report does not state, but which can be deduced from the figures, is that the actual number of adult confirmations has fallen from 18,800 in 1976 to 12,600 in 2001.

It is also well known that the numbers of parochial clergy are continuing to decline. The statistics show the starkness of this, there were 240 less at the end of 2001 than at the beginning, that is a drop of 2.8% over one year and amounts to nearly 6 clergy per Diocese.

The one area of encouragement appears to be in average giving. The figures are given on page 23 table 24 for weekly average giving per electoral roll member. This shows that from 1990 to 2001 actual giving has more than doubled and that in real terms (adjusted for inflation) giving has gone up by almost exactly 50%.

Overall these figures make gloomy reading. Of course any statistics are open to a variety of interpretations. What seems obvious to me is that all the attempts by the Church to modernise itself and make itself more attractive to the world outside are at the very best having no effect and by all appearances making things worse. We have witnessed the claims that changing the face of our public liturgy would make the church more attractive, countless clergy and Bishops who believe that we have to abandon biblical truth in order to appeal to the world, the ordination of women – otherwise we were

putting up a barrier to women, and a wide range of structural changes intended to shape the church for mission. Most recently the pressure is to accept immoral lifestyles of varying sorts because otherwise people will not come to church. This is not just at the national level. I attended one meeting recently where most of those present seemed to approach every issue from the perspective of how we could be least offensive to people who might stumble into church. The logic appeared to be, the less we believe, the more likely people are to join us because they don't believe either.

The real problems facing the Church of England are spiritual. God is against us because of our unfaithfulness to Him, our rejection of His revealed Word. Until we face up to this we cannot hope to see any change. If the Church is determined to mimic the world then it would do well to follow the example of business, those at the top should go!