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SO SORRY – THIS LINE IS OUT OF ORDER

By Brian Green

Like many others, I grieve over the present parlous state of the Church of England and its steady decline. Whilst recovering from a hip replacement operation late last year, I was reading Brother Andrew's book "Secret Believers" and was much taken by the repeated quote from Rev. 2 and 3 - "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches", and his reply when asked "What *is* the Spirit saying to the churches?", "that is exactly what I cannot tell you; you must listen."

So I ask myself what is the Spirit saying to the Church of England in the C21st AD. I cannot tell, but I will remind myself of the task which Jesus had in mind when he called His disciples - "I chose you that you should go and bear fruit" (Jn 15.16) and "Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are white already for harvest" (Jn 4.35). The charge at my Ordination seemed to imply that task is the same today. I will also recall that the Spirit bears witness to Christ (John 15:26) and glorifies Christ (John 16:14). Perhaps the Spirit may be asking the CofE how it is carrying out these two tasks (witnessing and glorifying) by His power. Is its practice working? I am also encouraged by Isaiah 1:18 to reason together with the Lord.

What are the published facts?

- (a) Congregations are *decreasing*
- (b) Finances are *shrinking*
- (c) Confirmations are *dwindling* - it is interesting to note that 2008's total for both Provinces of Canterbury and York together are approximately equal to one diocese's total 2 centuries ago, according to the 1764 Archdeacon's return (staggering when one takes on board the growth of national population over that period) there was a peak of 191,042 in 1961, and it has been downhill all the way ever since to about 27,000 in 2008
- (d) Ordinations are *declining* - 1968 was the last year when ordinations exceeded retirements & deaths, and
- (e) only financial pressures are *increasing*, mainly because of (a).

Of course there are many and diverse reasons we might give for the above situation, and probably all have an impact of some sort. Nevertheless we should still ask ourselves searching questions about our response to the task which Christ has committed to His church. Why have communications broken down? Why is the line out of order? So, let us ask ourselves -

Where are the opportunities given for people to hear the Gospel of Jesus? Where can they "taste and see that the Lord is good"? What form of worship is offered weekly in the vast majority of parish churches today? Is it 'open' enough for a casual visitor to drop in, or someone in extremis to find help?

When and why did the Church adopt its present practice as the weekly norm? What was its general practice prior to the 1930s and 40s? Where are congregations growing? - for a considerable number are doing so. What may be learned from their methods and experience by the wider church? Where does the Church of England re-prepare people to take the step of commitment to Christ and prepare for confirmation? Perhaps we should meditate hard on the task Jesus gave His followers that can never be done in Glory (Matt.28:19)

One can only speak of one's own experience of what God can do, so let me write humbly and factually of what God has done. My last six years before retirement were spent in a Gloucestershire

parish of 4,500; at our first meeting the PCC discussed with me their desires, which were (a) to 'feed' the insiders, and (b) to reach the outsiders. I asked what was their pattern of worship, and received the answer – seven Holy Communion services and two non-eucharistic type of worship per 4 Sundays. We agreed that the insiders were looked after, but the outsiders needed more to encourage them. A change was agreed, resulting in a regular weekly pattern – Holy Communion at 9am, a "Parish Service" (not "Family" so as not to exclude the single or widowed) at 10.30am, and an Evening Prayer at 6pm.

In those six years "God opened a door of faith" (Acts 14:27); while Communion attendance remained at around 35, the Parish Service grew from 50 to capacity at 180, and Evening Prayer grew from 6 to 30. Eventually a monthly Communion in place of the Parish Service had 80-100 communicants.

Is it possible that we need to rediscover the value of all-inclusive non-Eucharistic worship? Interestingly the Archdeacons' returns of the 18th century show the frequency of Holy Communion to have been around 4 - 6 a year. We might not be too surprised therefore that the churches were able to gain so many confirmation candidates.

In bringing this article to a close, may I add that God can work in Toxteth and in rural/commuter Essex. We may be playing "all the right notes", but it is important to get them in the right order. Or to put it another way, the lines of communication are there but they need to be joined up.

Brain Green has served in parishes in Liverpool, Essex and Gloucestershire and currently lives in Devon.