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Chapter 6

Who attends cathedral carol services, and why do they go?

David Walker

SUMMARY

This chapter profiles the congregations attending the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at Worcester Cathedral and at Lichfield Cathedral. Drawing on data provided by 1,151 participants the following issues are explored: attitudes and opinions regarding Christmas and carol services, motivations for attending the cathedral service, and the broader context of religious belonging, believing, and practising. The profile of those attending the cathedral carol service is compared and contrasted with other studies of Anglican churchgoers. This enables a distinctive picture to be drawn of a population for whom their Christian faith and belonging are important but who sit more loosely to church attendance and dogmatic statements, preferring the notions of mystery and of faith as a lived life. They are found to be liberal in their sexual ethics and pluralist towards other faiths; they strongly support the corporate and public dimensions of faith, a faith engaged in society both as political commentator and service provider. Some conclusions regarding their place in the mission of the church are drawn.

INTRODUCTION

Against a general picture in decline in the numbers of people going to church services over many decades, two pieces of recent evidence point in a contradictory direction. Attendances at Christmas services in England are in the region of 35% of the population (Archbishops' Council, 2011, a) and the numbers worshipping throughout the year in Church of England cathedrals grew by an average of 37% over the decade to 2010 (Archbishops' Council, 2011, b). Hence the cathedral carol service offers a particular opportunity to study a numerically successful example of Anglican worship, and to compare and contrast those who

attend it with other recent samples of churchgoers in order to identify learning points for those involved in leading mission both in the cathedral setting and more widely.

Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols

Many cathedral carol services, including those involved in this survey, follow a set pattern that has changed little over many years. The format, referred to most commonly as *The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, was popularised in the Church of England through its introduction into the annual cycle of services at King's College, Cambridge under the influence of Dean Eric Milner-White. The service spread throughout the country during the twentieth century, aided by its broadcast on national BBC radio each Christmas Eve. Whilst never part of the Church's official liturgy, formal recognition was given to the service by the inclusion of Milner-White's Bidding Prayer and cycle of readings in the seasonal supplement *The Promise of His Glory* (Central Board of Finance of the Church of England, 1991) which was formally commended by the House of Bishops for use in the Church of England. Because The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols remains in many places relatively unchanged from the Milner-White model, those attending, even if not regular churchgoers themselves, might have a fairly clear idea of what they are coming to, and hence have made a reasonably informed choice that the service will address their expectations.

Congregational and cathedral studies

This present study falls within the general field of congregational studies. This field is concerned, inter alia, with identifying the opinions, beliefs, attitudes and involvements of churchgoers in order to inform the ministry and mission that take place with and among them. Two studies are of particular interest to the questions raised by the present chapter and can be used for comparisons. The *Church Times* survey of 2001 (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005) received completed questionnaires from over 9,000 individuals, mostly frequent Anglican churchgoers, whilst in 2007 Walker generated a sample of 1,454 adults who attended rural

Anglican harvest services in Worcestershire (Walker 2009, 2010). Many of this second sample were only occasional churchgoers, a group that might be expected also to show up in significant numbers at carol services, both in parish churches and in cathedrals.

Within this wider congregational field a number of recent studies have turned their focus onto the cathedral. Ap Sion has investigated the prayer requests received in several cathedrals (see chapter 7), Williams creates a scale through which to measure social capital among cathedral congregations (Williams 2008), Williams and Francis report on attendees at services in Llandaff Cathedral (see chapter 3) and Phillips (2010) turns attention to Christmas services in particular. The present paper seeks to contribute to this developing body of work.

Surveying the carol service congregation

The popularity of cathedral services and of Christmas worship raises a number of questions; these are studied in successive sections of this paper. Who are the people who come to The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols and in what ways do they differ in terms of their age and gender profile from other samples of churchgoers? Is the cathedral able to attract younger worshippers or a higher proportion of men to such special events? Are they attracted to something that has a specifically traditional flavour? Do they want to sit back and be entertained or to be involved, challenged and stimulated? Are they in any way seeking a religious or spiritual experience?

The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is structured as a retelling of the Christmas story. Both the biblical accounts and the carols point towards the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Christ as both man and God. How far do those attending accept the accounts as broadly factual? Do they identify with the doctrine that lies beyond them, and do they see the link between the two as necessary? An interrogation of beliefs about the Christmas story then leads naturally to ask about their more general position on a spectrum from conservative to liberal in terms of beliefs, moral standpoints and attitudes to other faiths.

The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is a public event. As such it has a place amongst other ways in which Christmas is marked in the public realm, both as a religious and as a cultural event. What do those who attend feel about their own participation in the public dimension of Christmas, about the formal recognition of Christmas in British society, and about the ways in which the festival is celebrated in society at large? As with the questions about belief, these in turn provoke consideration of the public dimension of the Christian faith in British society and the broader links between society and church.

METHOD

Procedure

In addition to hosting Carol Services for a number of local organisations, Worcester Cathedral itself holds two such services at 7.30pm on consecutive evenings, usually 21 and 22 December. The questionnaire was distributed on both nights. The services are identical in both format and content and follow closely the Milner-White model. The services attract some 1,200-1,500 attendees over the two nights; those wishing to obtain seats with a reasonable view will arrive half an hour before the service begins. Early arrival provided an opportunity for members of the congregation to be presented with the survey form and invited to complete and return it before leaving. The survey was repeated in the same format the following year at Lichfield Cathedral, where the second service took place the day after Christmas Day.

Instrument

The first section of the questionnaire comprised five introductory questions to establish respondents' gender, age, frequency of church attendance, religious affiliation and baptismal/confirmation status. Age was divided into decades (although 10-14 and 15-19 were categorised separately and "80 and over" was a single category). Respondents were given a choice of religious affiliation between Church of England, other Christian, other world faith,

and none. Several frequencies were offered for church attendance: never, at least once a year, at least six times a year, at least once a month, nearly every week, and once a week or more often.

The next few sections of the questionnaire made use of a five-point Likert scale: disagree strongly, disagree, not certain, agree, and agree strongly. A series of questions, divided into three headed sections, covered the topics of carol services, beliefs about Christmas, and why the respondent had come to this particular service.

Analysis

Some 1,151 surveys were completed sufficiently thoroughly to include in analysis. Almost all questions had a response rate of over 95%; nil responses to individual questions have not been counted in the statistics that follow. As is standard the responses 'agree' and 'agree strongly' were conflated into a single 'yes' category and likewise the 'disagree' and 'disagree strongly' were conflated into 'no'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Who comes to the carol service?

Sex

At 58% the proportion of women is equal to that seen in the *Church Times* survey of largely committed Anglicans in 2004, the results of which are set out in *Fragmented Faith* (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005). It is however markedly below the 66% of women who responded to the harvest service survey of 2007 (Walker, 2009).

Age

The age profile showed a much more distinct pattern: 36% of respondents were under fifty (with 6% aged nineteen or below, 8% in their twenties, 6% in their thirties, and 15% in their forties); this contrasts with 25% at harvest and just 19% in the *Church Times* survey. There was an even stronger skew away from the over seventy age groups with just 13% in those

categories (harvest 33%, *Church Times* 29%). The cathedral carol service attracts a much lower average age of attendee; the slight drop for those in their thirties being likely to be a consequence of a much higher proportion of this age group having small children at home.

Religious identity

A large majority of respondents (64%) considered themselves to be Church of England. A further 18% were members of other Christian denominations, whilst 1% belonged to other world faiths and 17% had no religion. Some 62% had been both baptised and confirmed and a further 26% were baptised but not confirmed. In response to two Likert scale statements, 76% professed belief in God and 82% considered themselves Christians, with 8% disagreeing in each case.

Church attendance

By far the largest single category (379 respondents, 34%) comprised of those who claimed to attend church at least once a year but less than 6 times annually. Together with the 7% who never attend and another 15% who attend less than monthly, this placed 56% as being at most occasional churchgoers (harvest 24%). Some 36% claimed to attend nearly every week or more often, contrasting with 56% at harvest. The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at the cathedral clearly attracted a very high proportion of those who are not often seen in a church on a regular Sunday. In particular, not far from half (44%) had come because someone had invited them. The 33% who claimed to feel themselves to 'belong to this cathedral's congregation' indicates that belonging stretches well beyond habitual and frequent Sunday attendance.

Summary

From this initial analysis of the sample, it is evident that the congregation at the cathedral carol service is far from a typical church Sunday congregation. The most striking features are the much larger percentages in the lower age ranges and the very high figure for occasional

churchgoers. Hence analysis of the sample can provide information that accesses the views and attitudes not only of committed churchgoers, but of a much wider group, who are open to and engaged with the church. The vast majority claim membership of some Christian denomination, with over three fifths confirmed. Their attendance on this specific occasion raises questions regarding their openness to more regular churchgoing, and what the church might do to appeal to them more strongly or more regularly.

Engaging with the carol service

The first set of questions, directly concerned with exploring views about engaging with the carol service, were designed to access three main themes: the extent to which people came to the cathedral to connect with the traditional image of the Christmas service; how far they came willing to engage in and be engaged by the spirit of the service; and how deeply they were looking to be drawn into worship (see table 1).

- insert table 1 about here -

Connecting with tradition

The desire to connect with the traditional image of the Christmas carol service emerged as a high priority. Around three quarters of those who came to The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols preferred the historic or traditional atmosphere produced by candlelight (74%) and almost as many preferred traditional hymns to modern ones (73%). This desire to connect with the traditional image was strongly emphasised by the fact that only a small minority indicated a preference for modern carols over traditional ones (10%). Although there was little enthusiasm for traditional carols giving way to modern ones, there was considerably more acceptance for modern English being used in the service. Over two fifths (43%) of those who came said that they actually preferred modern English to be used, compared with 31% who took the opposite view, the remaining 27% were undecided.

Catching the spirit

The second batch of questions demonstrated that the majority of those attending came with the intention of becoming involved. They were not there as detached spectators, as might be the case at a concert. The vast majority said that the service should be uplifting (95%) and three quarters said that they liked carol services that get the congregation involved (76%). The sense of involvement however went deeper than that. Fewer than a quarter said that they didn't really notice the people near to them at a carol service (23%). This suggests at least a willingness to be engaged as part of a community. Moreover, almost half said that they like carol services that make them ask questions of themselves (47%). This suggests an openness to engage with the personal quest prompted by the Christmas gospel message, and possibly to engage with the issues of human existence, purpose and meaning to which the underlying theology of the lessons and carols points.

Being drawn into worship

The third group of questions set out a variety of motivations for attending the service, relating to varying degrees of spiritual encounter. At the most basic level, almost everyone expressed the intention of enjoying the music (95%) and four fifths were looking to be reminded of the Christmas story (81%). The figures for those who were looking to worship God (75%), and to feel close to God (71%), were up around the three quarters mark, indicating a strong desire among most of those present to use the service as a way of engaging with God. The lowest figure in this section was the 62% who said that they were looking to find the true meaning of Christmas; perhaps many felt they knew it already.

Summary

Taken together these three themes suggest that cathedrals may be wise to protect the traditional feel and conventional image of The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. At the same time, they should not be reluctant to address the willingness of these occasional churchgoers to engage with the community of the assembled congregation, and with the

personal challenges offered by the seasonal retelling of the core message of creation, fall and redemption. Nor should they fall shy of offering their congregation an experience of prayer and worship as well as of liturgical and musical excellence.

Beliefs about the Christmas story

The second set of questions, directly concerned with exploring beliefs about the Christmas story, were designed to access three main themes: the extent to which people who came to the carol service believed the details of the traditional Christmas story; the extent to which they accepted the doctrine of the incarnation; and the extent to which they viewed the Christmas story as history or as mystery (see table 2).

- insert table 2 about here -

The traditional Christmas story

The three questions which asked about belief in particular details contained in the New Testament account, and which are commonly read at The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, all gained assent from around two thirds of the sample: the shepherds (68%), the wise men (67%) and the stable (65%), with around a quarter of respondents choosing neither to agree nor disagree in each case. A similar number (66%) agreed with the statement that the Bible predicted Jesus' birth, something on which the Old Testament lessons in the service concentrate. In each case disagreement was in the range between 6% and 8%. Whilst a lower number agreed with the entirely extra-biblical, but deeply traditional element of the story, that Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey (58%), this is still a relatively high figure and would tend to suggest that tradition is a more significant factor in belief than is adherence to the biblical account.

The doctrine of the incarnation

The doctrine of incarnation is largely carried at The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols by the final gospel lesson, the Johannine prologue, and by the way it is explored through carols.

The one specific link to the infancy narratives comes with the notion that Jesus was born of a virgin mother. By comparison with the other biblical details, there was a noticeably lower level of support (58%) for this statement. This figure is however only slightly lower than the 62% who agreed with the same statement in the *Church Times* survey. It was also the only question relating to the biblical account where the percentage of disagreement reached double figures; a sixth of respondents (16%) disagreed with it and a quarter of them (26%) were uncertain. These responses are, however, much more in line with the ones given to the three questions that asked specifically about the humanity and divinity of Jesus. This would suggest that the virgin birth is seen as a doctrinal statement rather than as a traditional element of the story and, building on the previous set of answers, that tradition is more strongly adhered to than either biblical accuracy or doctrinal orthodoxy.

History or mystery?

The relative weights of history and mystery were tested by the two remaining questions in the third section. Only 37% disagreed with a statement rejecting a literal belief in the story whilst 40% supported it. Since the levels of disagreement with any individual element of the story were far lower, this suggests that there is a greater reluctance to commit to the whole story than to specific aspects of it; the former being seen as more of a doctrinal position. Two thirds of respondents (66%) agreed that ‘the mystery is more important than the facts’ (13% disagreeing) which confirms a preference against seeing doctrine or biblical truth as being at the heart of their engagement with Christmas.

Summary

Taken together, these results set out a picture of a sizeable number of people who enjoy occasional participation in worship, and indeed who explicitly come to worship God. They underpin that worship through the repetition and enjoyment of traditional elements, but sit more lightly to doctrinal statements – even about Jesus – and are more drawn to mystery than

dogma. As with the previous section, it is important that those planning both liturgies and other aspects of the cathedral or church programme ensure that there is adequate provision to support and encourage those drawn to a path that is more mystical than doctrinal.

Conservative and liberal Christianity

The third set of questions, directly concerned with tackling the issues of liberal and conservative Christian believing, were designed to access three main themes: the extent to which people who came to the carol service accepted conservative religious beliefs; the extent to which they accepted conservative moral beliefs; and the extent to which they accepted religious pluralism (see table 3).

The Anglican Communion, and the Church of England more specifically, is widely seen as a battleground between two brands of Christianity. One can be characterised as an essentially liberal faith approaching scripture through the lens of modern critical techniques, holding personal moral views largely consonant with those of wider western culture and embracing other faiths as partners in the spiritual quest and local social action. The conservative position is by contrast marked by a literal or near literal attitude to the biblical texts, by conservative moral attitudes and by religious exclusivism. The questions included in the survey were chosen because they had been earlier used in the *Church Times* survey, allowing a direct comparison between the two different samples to be drawn. Some had also been asked in the harvest survey, where distinctions made in the analysis had been drawn between regular and infrequent churchgoers.

- insert table 3 about here -

Religious beliefs

The statement that 'Jesus really turned water into wine' presents an example of a biblical miracle that is generally not seen to carry specific doctrinal content. It was one of only two statements in this section for which a conservative belief position gained more support (43%)

than disagreement (20%), though it also returned the highest levels of respondents being uncertain (37%). This was considerably lower than the 64% agreement reported in the *Church Times* survey. Walker (2010), analysing harvest congregations, separated frequent churchgoers from occasional ones and found 59% of regular churchgoers assenting to the statement, but only 25% of infrequent attendees.

The issue of creationism has been a high profile area of doctrinal disagreement between conservative and liberal Christians, particularly, but not confined to, Christians in the USA. In Britain the main public airings of the debate have been over the curriculum being taught in religiously-based independent schools. Whilst there are a variety of questions that can be asked to elicit views on this subject the statement that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh is the most commonly used, not least because it is simply stated. Less than a quarter of those attending the carol services agreed with the conservative creation statement (24%), whilst almost twice as many actively disagreed (43%). Interestingly this figure for agreement is higher than that recorded by the *Church Times* survey (16%), the same respondents who were significantly more conservative over the water into wine miracle. This is most likely due to the fact that the *Church Times* readership is skewed away from the more evangelical part of the Anglican spectrum, and that creationism is more strongly associated with the evangelical tradition than with other conservative Christian viewpoints. The number who said they believed the bible to be without any error, an even stronger test of conservative biblical attitudes, was very small indeed, a mere 9%, with three fifths actively disagreeing (60%). The cathedral congregation appear to fall substantially into the liberal camp as far as their doctrinal beliefs are concerned.

Moral beliefs

Church attitudes to homosexuality have been highly contentious in recent times across the Anglican Communion, where the two key issues have been ordination of homosexuals to the

episcopate, and the provision of church sanctioned liturgies for the blessing of same sex partnerships (Lambeth Commission on Communion, 2004). This has been against a background where in many parts of the world liberal views are espoused by governments and there has been a clear move towards formal recognition of same sex partnerships in the last few years, including mainland Britain, whilst some other countries, not least in Africa and Asia, have moved to embed more conservative positions in secular law. Respondents were asked their views on both topics. Opinion among respondents was significantly more in favour (47%) of male gay bishops than opposed (28%). This contrasted strongly with the *Church Times* survey where only 21% favoured gay bishops and 58% were opposed. The second question was put in fairly strong terms, inviting respondents to indicate support for same sex couples being allowed to ‘marry’ rather than simply to be able to form civil partnerships as under present English law. Here the congregations were more evenly divided with 36% in favour and 41% against. The *Church Times* results were much more strongly conservative again, with 14% supporting same sex marriage and 69% against it. The differences between the two surveys are likely to relate in part to the significantly older age profile of the *Church Times* survey, [since indeed that earlier study found](#) conservative attitudes to homosexuality [to be](#) strongly associated with age, [with two thirds of lay people aged 70 or over agreeing that “it is wrong for two people of the same gender to have sex” compared with only 42% agreement among those under 50.](#) The cathedral congregations appear broadly liberal on these divisive moral topics, but somewhat less liberal on matters of sexual morality than on doctrinal belief.

Religious pluralism

The position of the congregations on the pluralist/exclusivist spectrum was explored through three questions. Over half of the sample (51%) said that all world faiths lead to God. This compares with 53% for regular churchgoers and 61% for occasional ones in the harvest

survey. Almost half disagreed with the statement that Christianity is the only true religion (46%). Asking this second question essentially the other way round discounts any bias in the data from a tendency of respondents to want to agree more than disagree. The 27% who agreed with the statement compares with the figure of 23% among infrequent churchgoers and 41% among regular churchgoers in the harvest survey. This question was also asked in the *Church Times* survey where 46% agreed with it. The cathedral carol service congregation are more pluralist than both, a conclusion borne out by the responses to a third question not used in either previous survey; 38% agreed with the statement that Christians should not try to convert people, with only 36% disagreeing. The cathedral congregations were pluralist in their religious attitudes, more so than those polled in earlier surveys, to the extent of being not inclined to support conversions.

Summary

Taken together, these results show that the cathedral carol service is attended by a number of people who espouse liberal Christianity in terms of both their religious beliefs and their moral beliefs. Their religious pluralism is another attribute consonant with this general tendency away from conservative views. For this sample, being traditional is not the same as being conservative. In seeking to minister among them [the cathedrals and churches are encouraged needs](#) to recognise their positions and identify additional ways in which it can draw on these in order to engage with them in mission and ministry. [Those responsible for making appointments should ensure that staff teams are both sympathetic to and willing to engage with occasional churchgoers such as those identified here.](#)

Celebrating Christmas in Britain today

The fourth set of questions broadened the scope of the survey to focus on the wider celebration of Christmas in Britain today. These questions were designed to access three main themes: the extent to which people who came to the carol service might wish to disconnect

Christmas from public culture; the extent to which they were critical or accepting of the cultural festival; or the extent to which they affirmed Christmas as a religious festival (see table 4).

Christmas functions in present British society as both the largest single cultural festival and as a major focus for Christian faith and practice at both the individual and corporate levels. As cultural festival, among its most significant features are the consumption of food and drink, the sudden closure of shops after a hectic period of trading and the status of Christmas Day as the public holiday on which most business activities are suspended. Concerns are regularly expressed in the British media that some consider that the level of conspicuous consumption is inappropriate and that the true meaning of Christmas has been lost in recent times. As a religious festival it is seen within mainstream Christian tradition as a major celebration, albeit subordinate in importance to Easter. In particular it is seen as an occasion both for participation in public worship and for personal spiritual experience.

- insert table 4 around here -

Christmas in public culture

The carol service congregations reported very high levels of support both for Christmas being a public holiday (95%) and for the continuation of restrictions on shop opening (90%). Whilst the status of Christmas Day as a public holiday is largely uncontested, the level of support for trading restrictions is notable given that there has been significant political pressure from parts of the retail sector in recent years to relax the present restrictions. The strength of the figures suggests that those seeking to restrict religious expression, including that of Christmas, to the private sphere are opposed by a much wider sector of society than simply those who go to church regularly.

The cultural festival

Over two thirds of the congregations (70%) supported the celebration of Christmas with food and drink, with two thirds of the remainder (19%) being uncertain. Alongside this, however, over two thirds said that modern society had spoilt Christmas (70%). The latter statement was chosen deliberately to echo the terms in which much criticism of the modern Christmas is couched. Whilst the level of positive response to it might be boosted by unreflective nostalgia, and in particular the belief that Christmas is never quite the same once one has left childhood behind, it nevertheless represents a significant attitude for what is, by church standards, a relatively young sample. The high levels of support for both statements indicate that the respondents felt that the public, shared and corporate elements of Christmas matter. Also, whilst regretting some of the commercial and self-indulgent aspects of the season, they are not withdrawing from the secular dimensions of celebration through food and drink.

Christmas as religious festival

Unsurprisingly for a church congregation, some two thirds (66%) felt that churchgoing was an essential part of their celebration; rather more than the half (50%) who feel closer to God at this season. It is important to note that in both cases the levels of agreement were well above those of disagreement; neither the corporate worship nor individual spirituality dimensions of Christmas should be neglected. At the same time, the difference in levels of support for the two statements suggests that the corporate dimension is of great significance.

Despite the fact that it is not borne out in terms of church or cathedral congregation numbers, fewer respondents agreed (35%) than disagreed (43%) with a statement suggesting Christmas is more important to them than Easter. This may imply that whilst Easter matters more, it does not need to be celebrated in church. On the other hand, it may be that what is actually keeping many of the congregation from also attending at Easter is the lack of a liturgy that captures the imagination of such a wide range of people as does The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. The rapid rise of Christingle services in many parish churches in

the last generation supports the notion that given an appropriate act of worship many people will be attracted to it even where there is no long-standing tradition to support it.

Summary

Taken together, these results show that the cathedral carol service is attended by a number of people who value the place of Christmas in the public square, and who are keen to ensure that Christmas remains in Britain as a religious festival. The religious connotations of Christmas are important to their faith as liberal Christians, although they do not see the need to be in church every Sunday. [One practical recommendation is that cathedrals and other churches should consider whether there is scope to create a similar occasion at Easter.](#)

Private and public Christianity

The fifth set of questions broadens the scope of the survey even further to examine the ways in which those who attend the carol services view the place of Christianity in present society, and how they see the connections between Christian faith, Christian practice, and Christian belonging (see table 5).

- insert table 5 around here –

Christianity in present society

The place of the Christian faith within the public realm was therefore explored through three questions, each of them related to an area of public Christian engagement that is contested. Almost three quarters said that they agreed with the principle of church schools (72%), which although somewhat lower than the 85% who agreed with a similar statement in the *Church Times* survey, nonetheless indicates a high level of support at a time when church schools have been challenged as being divisive or elitist. A similar proportion (70%) said that Christianity should have special status in this country. Taking this finding together with the strongly pluralistic positions seen earlier, suggests both a desire to see Christian symbols and institutions receive particular recognition and a belief that these institutions and symbols need

not be seen as divisive or detrimental to other faiths. The remaining question invited respondents to reflect on the statement that Christianity and politics don't mix. This was deliberately phrased in this way so that any general bias towards agreement over disagreement could be discounted. Only a quarter (25%) agreed with the statement and almost half (47%) disagreed. This supports the results of the previous two questions. The congregations rejected a pietistic formulation of their religion and strongly supported the public place of the Christian faith in its symbols and institutions, in its engagement with politics and in its delivery of services. Public Christianity is for life, not just for Christmas.

Christian belief, practice and belonging

Since the publication of *Believing without belonging* by Grace Davie (1994) the definition of what either of those two terms implies, how they are measured and how they relate to churchgoing, has continued. The low levels of church attendance among the present sample, together with their liberal attitudes to doctrinal and moral questions provoke the question as to whether they see matters of attendance and doctrine as not among the essentials of the Christian faith. For the purposes of the present survey two questions were asked. The first sought to relate Christian belonging, as represented by being a 'good Christian', to practice, as represented by churchgoing. The second question related Christian belonging, as represented by living the Christian life, to doctrine, as represented by belief. Over two thirds (69%) of those asked said that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian, with half the remainder being uncertain. Whilst this may look unsurprising given the high proportion of the sample whose own personal practice is of very infrequent churchgoing the size of the agreement figure shows that this view is also shared by many who are themselves among the 44% who are more frequent churchgoers. Churchgoing is clearly seen as not necessary for Christian belonging. There was a closer balance when respondents were asked to choose between belief (36%) and Christian living (43%) but these figures still represent a

significant preference for the latter. Taking both questions together it is clear that Christian belonging cannot, in the minds of those attending cathedral carol services be collapsed either into regular churchgoing or into doctrinal assent. These results are consistent with the picture of a liberal group of Christians that has emerged both from the statements about Christmas and those relating to wider beliefs, attitudes and practices.

Summary

In this section it has been seen that, for those attending The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols give a relatively low priority to doctrinal issues and to churchgoing; this, chimes with their favouring of the lived life over belief. However, their support for the public place of the Christian faith endorsed at this particular season carries over into a wider support for a faith that is active in the public realm both in politics and service delivery. In the light of these findings cathedrals and churches are encouraged to further develop their roles as places where hard questions are asked, and serious debate takes place, on matters of concern to wider society. ~~The relatively low priority they give both to doctrinal issues and to churchgoing, chimes with their favouring of the lived life over belief.~~

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has found that the congregation at The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols includes a high proportion of people who are not frequent in their church attendance but who nonetheless express Christian faith in a variety of ways. They are attracted to tradition and identify strongly with the most familiar elements of the Christmas story as set out in the readings and carols. Beyond this however they are open to modern features and to being questioned by what they are engaged in. Their attendance at the service is not purely social or aesthetic, but substantially directed towards worship and spiritual encounter. Beyond the occasion itself they identify with the public place of Christianity, both at Christmas and more generally. Belief in its more dogmatic forms appeals less to them than

engagement with mystery. They are attracted by the corporate and communal dimensions of faith as well as the individual.

What is most likely to appeal to them is an inclusive and liberal Christian faith. This is a faith that engages them in their daily lives, invites them onto a mystical journey, is visible in the public realm, accepts their general sense of faith and belonging rather than requires them to hold fast to details of dogma, is comfortable with the present dominant views on human sexuality in British society, and is eirenic in its relationships with other religious traditions and world faiths. There is evidence that they are flexible in their church attendance patterns and hence may be open to more regular churchgoing if what is offered engages with them in an attractive and well-presented way without requiring them to change their fundamental positions. For those who believe such a faith to be a parody of Christianity they present a forbidding challenge, but for others they are an opportunity to engage with a favourably disposed population. [It has been possible, in each section of this paper, to give brief examples of practical recommendations for ministry, however, as](#) Walker (2010) concluded, [it is important to recognise that](#) the missional task with them will not simply be directed towards more frequent church attendance, as for many that is not their primary mode of belonging; but it is to deepen them in their faith and to encourage them along their journey.

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Table 1

Engaging with the carol service

	Yes %	? %	No %
<i>Connecting with tradition</i>			
I prefer Carol Services to be candlelit	74	21	5
I prefer traditional hymns to modern ones	73	16	11
I prefer modern carols to traditional ones	10	29	62
I prefer modern English in Carol Services	43	27	31
<i>Catching the spirit</i>			
Carol services should be uplifting	95	4	1
I like carol services that get the congregation involved	76	18	6
I like carol services that make me ask questions of myself	47	34	20
I don't really notice the people near me at a carol service	23	26	50
<i>Being drawn into worship</i>			
I have come to this service...			
...to enjoy the music	95	3	1
...to be reminded of the Christmas story	81	9	10
...to worship God	75	13	11
...to feel close to God	71	16	12
...to find the true meaning of Christmas	62	20	18

Table 2

Beliefs about the Christmas story

	Yes %	? %	No %
<i>The traditional Christmas story</i>			
I believe that shepherds visited Jesus' birthplace	68	26	6
I believe that wise men visited the infant Jesus	67	26	7
I believe that Jesus was born in a stable	65	28	7
I believe that Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey	58	35	7
I believe the bible predicted Jesus' birth	66	25	8
<i>The doctrine of the incarnation</i>			
I believe that Jesus was born of a virgin mother	58	26	16
I believe that Jesus is fully human	52	31	17
I believe that Jesus is fully God	55	29	16
I believe that Jesus is fully God and fully human	49	35	16
<i>History or mystery?</i>			
I don't believe the Christmas story literally	40	23	37
The Christmas mystery is more important than the facts	66	22	13

Table 3

Conservative and liberal Christianity

	Yes %	? %	No %
<i>Religious beliefs</i>			
Jesus really turned water into wine	43	37	20
I believe that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh	24	33	43
The Bible is without any error	9	32	60
<i>Moral beliefs</i>			
It should be possible for a gay man to be made a Bishop	47	25	28
Homosexual couples should be allowed to marry	36	23	41
<i>Religious pluralism</i>			
Christianity is the only true religion	27	27	46
All world faiths lead to God	51	29	19
Christians shouldn't try to convert people	38	27	36

Table 4

Celebrating Christmas in Britain today

	Yes %	? %	No %
<i>Christmas in public culture</i>			
Christmas should not longer to be public holiday	2	3	95
All shops should be allowed to open on Christmas Day	4	5	90
<i>Christmas as cultural festival</i>			
Modern society has spoilt Christmas	70	14	16
It's good to celebrate Christmas with food and drink	70	19	11
<i>Christmas as religious festival</i>			
It wouldn't be Christmas if I didn't go to church	66	14	20
I feel closer to God at Christmas	50	26	24
Christmas is more important to me than Easter	35	22	43

Table 5

Private and public Christianity

	Yes %	? %	No %
<i>Christianity in present society</i>			
I agree with the principle of church schools	72	19	9
Christianity and politics don't mix	25	27	47
Christianity should have special status in this country	70	15	15
<i>Christian belief, practice and belonging</i>			
You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian	69	15	17
What you believe matters less than how you live your life	43	21	36