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The religious beliefs and attitudes of rural Anglican churchgoers: weekly and occasional attendees

Abstract

This paper uses quantitative methods to compare and contrast the beliefs and attitudes of weekly and infrequent churchgoers in the English countryside, using the data provided by 326 occasional and 775 frequent churchgoers drawn from a sample of 1454 respondents to a survey conducted in 27 rural parish churches in Worcestershire in autumn 2007. Four main areas are explored: believing in God and the Bible; believing in Christianity; religious identity; worship preferences. Whilst occasional churchgoers are found to sit more loosely to formulations of Christian affiliation, both groups are equally strongly attracted by traditional language and hymns. Two further characteristics are identified which unite them: a clear preference for building on traditional concepts and formulations of faith as opposed to finding new ones; a reluctance to affirm absolute truth claims and demands. In each case this is more pronounced among occasional churchgoers. Some practical suggestions for church mission and ministry are made. The paper concludes that the rural church can and should work with the flow of contemporary culture in order to engage effectively with its parishes.

Introduction

This paper lies within the tradition of congregational studies, as developed by Francis (2000) and others. This tradition of congregational studies takes as its methodology listening to what churchgoers have to say. It recognises, for example, that the beliefs, attitudes and practices of churchgoers may differ substantially from the official position taken by the local or wider leadership of the body to which the congregation belongs; a situation typified by the widespread rejection in British and other Western Roman Catholic congregations of the teaching about artificial birth control contained in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (see for example Dominion & Montefiore 1989). The incentive to undertake research in this field is not only for the academic; church ministers and leaders who understand their congregations are better placed both to exercise pastoral care and to identify effective opportunities for mission (see for example Walker 2010).

Churchgoers vary enormously in their attitudes, practices and beliefs. Francis (2000) set out the results of a survey among churchgoers of four different denominations in a market town in the north of England, showing the extent to which differences in belief fall in line with the observably different styles and public emphases of the various churches. Francis, Astley and Robbins (2005) identified how within one denomination both sex and age were associated with differences in beliefs and attitudes. In both the above studies the segmentation is into visibly different groups who might be expected to hold different positions and to follow distinct patterns of practice. This present paper explores a different and less visible segmentation, but one with particular interest to those engaged in mission; the aim being to compare and contrast the answers provided in a congregational survey by regular and by infrequent churchgoers.

Walker (2010) identified a number of ways in which occasional rural churchgoers differ from frequent attendees not only demographically but more specifically in the matters of how they relate to and belong with their local church and community. On the basis of this, he was then able to draw substantive conclusions for the ordering of the mission life of the church. This present paper continues the analysis of the sample and explores how the same two groups responded to questions about their religious beliefs and attitudes.

Four areas in particular were chosen for investigation here on the basis that each of them presented a plausible case for differences: believing in God and the Bible; believing in Christianity; religious identity; worship preferences. It might be expected that occasional churchgoers would be less committed to basic doctrinal statements, would hold more loosely to biblical veracity, would be more pluralist, would be less inclined to identify personally with Christianity and would seek something distinctive or different in public worship. The specific answers might also be expected to inform pastoral and missional practice. Moreover, distinguishing between the two groups could help in determining what is distinctive in matters of belief and practice about those who go to church frequently, considering for example whether frequent churchgoing is associated with high levels of trust in the historicity of the bible or exclusivist attitudes to other faiths. The areas set for investigation also allowed exploration of the three distinct aspects of Christian identity surveyed by Francis and Robbins (2004), namely response to the statements “I believe in God”, “I consider myself a Christian”, “I go to church”. The responses to these statements have been particularly important in the progression of the debate that followed the publication of *Believing without Belonging* (Davie 1994).

Respondents provided the data for this paper by completing a questionnaire at rural harvest services in Worcestershire in 2007. Whilst viewed narrowly the information collected could be said to apply only to the type of occasional churchgoer who comes to a harvest service, given the difficulty of obtaining comprehensive data from occasional churchgoers, it provides a valuable sample which is plausibly illustrative of a much wider group of people who retain a sense of belonging with the rural church.

Method

Procedure

Clergy in rural benefices in the Diocese of Worcester were invited to distribute a 92-question survey to all adults attending harvest services in their churches in 2007. In order to limit the skewing of results towards regular churchgoers questionnaires were required to be completed and handed in before leaving the church. It was suggested that questionnaires should be handed out on arrival at church and that time might be set aside during or immediately at the conclusion of the service to facilitate completion; the survey took between 5 and 10 minutes to answer all questions.

The churches participating represented a broad mix of rural Anglicanism, from deeply rural communities to those situated close to major urban centres; they covered a range of different churchmanship styles with the exception of “traditional catholic” of which there are very few in rural Worcestershire.

Instrument

Questions of religious belief, religious affiliation and worship preferences were asked using a standard five-point Likert scale to invite respondents to agree strongly, agree, disagree, disagree strongly, or to declare themselves “not certain”.

For the questions on the frequency of attendance at worship respondents were given a series of boxes and invited to tick the one which most closely reflected their practice. The choices provided were: nearly every week; at least once a month; at least 6 times a year; at least once a year; never.

Sample

Some 27 churches participated and 1454 respondents completed the questionnaire, an average of 54 per church. The number of individual responses from a church ranged from 9 to 143. There was a high rate of response to each individual question.

Walker (2009) analysed the data demographically, showing in particular that the sample contained about twice as many women as men and was skewed towards the upper age ranges; 33% being over 70 and a further 27% in their 60s. Both these were consistent with the broad trend of church attendance in Worcestershire.

Whilst 805 respondents (55%) claimed to attend church “nearly every week” and 282 (19%) “at least monthly” this left a significant group of 341 (24%) who reported infrequent attendance and 26 (2%) who did not respond to this particular question. The few respondents who did not complete large numbers of questions, those who claimed “at least monthly” attendance and those who did not answer the question, were removed from the data, leaving 775 frequent churchgoers and 326 infrequent attendees. It is on these two subsets of the data that the following calculations have been based.

Data analysis

For the purposes of analysing data collected using the Likert scale, the responses “agree” and “agree strongly” are brought together as are “disagree” and “disagree strongly”. The category “not certain” is kept as a separate category of response and includes those cases where a respondent omitted to respond to the particular question, but had otherwise substantially completed the questionnaire. The percentages given in the tables are for the combined “agree” category; the full three categories are used in the statistical tests.

Results

Believing in God and the Bible

Belief in God

One of the standard questions asked in surveys of religious affiliation is to invite respondents to indicate their level of assent or otherwise to the simple statement, “I believe in God”. For the purposes of this survey this was supplemented by a more specific statement “I believe in Jesus Christ” and a vaguer one, “I believe in a higher power.

Table 1 *Fundamental beliefs*

	In %	Wk %	χ^2	$p <$
I believe in a higher power	58	84	110	.001
I believe in God	78	96	87.1	.001
I believe in Jesus Christ	81	96	72.7	.001

The “higher power” statement was included in the questionnaire to explore whether infrequent churchgoers would be more inclined to agree with a religious statement less specific than of a personal deity. What is observed is the opposite. The most likely conclusion is that rural churchgoers, whether frequent attendees or otherwise, are not attracted to vague statements using unfamiliar terms.

The figures for belief in God and in Jesus Christ were not surprisingly significantly higher for the regular churchgoers, but interestingly for both groups the scores for the two questions were almost exactly the same.

Belief in the bible

Two statements in the questionnaire were set to test assent to biblical historicity. Respondents were asked both about creationism and Jesus’ miracle working. The particular statements were chosen to offer very different cases.

Table 2 Bible beliefs

	In %	Wk %	χ^2	$p <$
I believe God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh	20	35	30.1	.001
I believe Jesus really turned water into wine	25	59	104	.001

The issue of 6 day creation relates to a core Christian doctrine but the biblical account has been subjected to overwhelming scientific criticism for over a century and many Christians have reformulated their understanding of creation whilst rejecting the historicity of the account in Genesis 1-2. For others, as witnessed by periodic disputes over the teaching of it in secondary school science lessons, assent to creationism has become a litmus test of Christian orthodoxy. Spencer and Alexander (2009) give a concise account of the current state of the creationism debate and their figure of 17% of adults agreeing with a statement that “humans were created by God some time within the last 10,000 years” is in line with the results for the occasional churchgoers in the present survey.

By contrast with the biblical account of creation, the second statement relates to the gospels, indeed to Jesus himself, but to an event that does not in itself carry specific doctrinal import; respondents might feel able to dissent from it without straying from any key belief. Here the challenge to the statement is not that it is deemed specifically disproven by scientific evidence but that it is implausible from a naturalistic perspective.

Table 2 shows that for both statements, the level of assent was, at 20% and 25% respectively, significantly less for the infrequent churchgoers than for frequent attendees who reported agreement levels of 35% and 59%; In the case of the frequently attending group there was also a marked difference between assent to a minor gospel miracle at 59% and agreement with a traditional formulation about creation, which scored 35%,.

Being a regular churchgoer increased the level of support for 6 day creation by 15%; however the corresponding increase in agreement with the statement about turning water into wine was 34%. Going to church regularly makes an individual far more likely to believe in the plausibility of small scale miracles than it leads them to accept a fundamentalist view of scripture; nonetheless the evidence of this survey is that a large proportion of regular churchgoers take a relatively liberal view as to the scriptures.

Believing in Christianity

Two statements in the survey investigated the extent to which respondents supported notions of exclusivity, a third tested responses to a popular statement distancing Christian belonging from churchgoing.

Table 3 Believing in Christianity

	In %	Wk %	χ^2	$p <$
Christianity is the only true religion	23	41	40.8	.001
All world faiths lead to God	61	53	5.63	ns
You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian	80	53	59.6	.001

It is worth noting that the sample area of rural Worcestershire is one with very small numbers of adherents to other religions, hence it is likely that most of those surveyed have relatively little direct experience (either positive or negative) of engaging with those of different faiths.

Unsurprisingly the infrequent churchgoers were less likely to agree with the statement that Christianity is the only true religion. More noteworthy is the fact that the difference in the responses to the statement about world faiths, to which a majority of both groups assented, was insignificant. Furthermore, among frequent churchgoers only 41% believed Christianity to be the “only true religion”.

Given that the vast majority (84%) of infrequent churchgoers in the survey considered themselves to be Christians (see below for details) it is not surprising that some 80% agreed with the statement that church attendance is not necessary. It is the response of the frequent churchgoers that is more noteworthy, with over half agreeing with the same statement.

Religious identity

As evidenced in Francis and Robbins (2004), belonging as defined by a self-declaration such as “I consider myself a Christian”, is found in a significantly higher percentage of populations than belief as measured by statements such as “I believe in God”. This latter in turn returns figures significantly above statistics for regular church attendance.

Table 4 presents the responses to statements that explore the nature of belonging through three concepts of increasing specificity, namely self-definition as spiritual, religious and Christian. As in previous sections it was considered possible that vaguer statements about being “spiritual” or “religious” might appeal to those unwilling to make a more specific commitment to Christianity.

Table 4 Religious Identity

	In %	Wk %	χ^2	$p <$
I consider myself a spiritual person	53	69	35.9	.001
I consider myself a religious person	50	79	99.6	.001
I consider myself a Christian	84	97	56.5	.001

As well as the expected significantly higher levels of agreement with all three statements from regular churchgoers there are interesting differences between the respective answers of each group to these three questions.

At 79%, the relative unwillingness of frequent churchgoers to define themselves as “religious” as opposed to the 97% defining as Christian is somewhat surprising. It doesn’t appear from the survey to be doctrinal diffidence, as the figures for self-declared belief in “God” and in “Jesus Christ” were both at 96% in this group, only 1% below the figure for self-defining as “Christian”. It is possible that the term “religious” was seen to carry connotations well beyond doctrinal assent, suggesting either patterns of behaviour or a degree of commitment above that to frequent attendance at worship that some found beyond them.

Among infrequent churchgoers there was again no significant difference between the 84% self-defining as Christian and the figures for belief in God and Jesus Christ, at 78% and 81% respectively. For this sample the difference between self-definition as “Christian” and as “religious” was some 34%, almost twice as large as the 18% among frequent attendees. This supports the hypothesis that the word “religious” carries wide connotations and that “Christian” may well, for occasional churchgoers be a self-definition that is bound up with the sense of personal identity at a deeper or wider level than the religious.

As with the statement about belief in a “higher power” reported above, when the survey was designed it was thought that a question allowing respondents to self-define as “spiritual” might gain assent from those who find definition in terms of a particular religion too narrow, particularly given the increase in wider notions of spirituality evidenced by the shelves of many bookshops. This was not in fact the case. For

occasional churchgoers the reported levels of agreement with the two words “religious” and “spiritual” were broadly similar at 50% and 53% respectively. However, for regular churchgoers with figures of 69% and 79% the evidence is that “spiritual” is a less attractive term.

Worship Preferences

Church Councils agonise over the question of what styles of worship will appeal to those who they wish to draw more fully into the regular worshipping life of the parish. Much of what is asserted is based on hunch rather than evidence. To explore the worship preferences of the two groups, four specific statements were chosen. Two of them invited assent to “traditional” worship, using that term explicitly and referring respectively to language and hymns. The others offered the chance for respondents to agree with statements favouring typical aspects of more modern and “accessible” worship, choosing in this case the notions of congregational involvement and freshness.

The responses to the statements are set out in Table 5.

Table 5 *Worship Preferences*

	In %	Wk %	χ^2	$p <$
I like services using traditional language	62	63	.058	ns
I like services to be fresh and challenging	61	70	9.42	.01
I like traditional hymns	83	79	2.46	ns
I like services that get the congregation involved	70	76	4.80	ns

It is often argued, without any evidential base, that what churches need in order to attract more people to their worship are more modern style services. The data here suggest otherwise. Regular and occasional churchgoers alike are equally and substantially in favour of traditional language in worship, with agreement levels of 63% and 62% respectively. They are even more strongly in favour of traditional hymns at 79% and 83%. Beyond the texts used however both groups were positive about congregational involvement at 76% and 70% whilst the regular churchgoers were, by a margin of 70% to 61% the group more in favour of services being “fresh and challenging”; this last being the only statement in this section that produced a difference in response rates that was statistically significant.

Discussion

Some of the statements and questions in the survey are also to be found in the Church Congregation Survey as administered in an anonymous English market town and reported by Francis (2000). Some 95% reported belief in God and Jesus Christ (96%); 61% believed Jesus really turned water into wine (59%); 41% believed that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh (35%). The similarity of the responses where the same statement was offered does more than support the reliability of the

data; it supports the view that the picture found in the present paper is typical of churchgoers in less rural settings than that to which the present survey was restricted.

Before going on to reflect on the results of the survey for mission and ministry it is helpful to sketch a brief picture of the beliefs and attitudes of the regular and occasional rural churchgoer. The former has broad liturgical tastes, is moderately pluralist, and accepts biblical statements where they do not contradict scientific evidence, is fairly comfortable with the description “religious”, believes in God and Jesus Christ and self-identifies as Christian. The latter is pluralist as regards world faiths, does not treat the bible as historically accurate, regards church attendance as very much an optional extra, continues to believe in God and Jesus Christ and chooses to self-identify as Christian, is not seeking more modern or interactive styles of worship than appeal to regular churchgoers and is not attracted by more vague notions of spirituality.

With these broad characterisations underlying the specific results of the survey it is now possible to look at the engagement of the church with both groups. A previous paper (Walker 2010) set out how the *Five Marks of Mission* of the Anglican Communion provide a framework for engagement with both regular and infrequent church attendees as both recipients of and participants in mission. Without repeating that analysis in detail here it can be noted that occasional as well as regular churchgoers are not passive recipients or consumers of church ministry and mission provided by some professional or trained elite but can play their own active part as significant agents of both. Moreover, whilst some churches may experience a particular calling to reach out directly from a committed core membership to groups well beyond their doors, the evidence of that paper was that there is plenty of mission and ministry to be done through engagement with those who are at least sufficiently favourably disposed to the rural church to come its services once in while.

Building on traditional words and patterns

Throughout the survey both groups responded more positively to traditional words such as “God”, “Jesus Christ” and “Christian” than they did to vaguer notions of “spirituality” and “higher power”. There is a strong steer here that both in the task of nurturing regular congregations and in reaching out to occasional churchgoers there is little to be gained for the rural Church of England from seeking to adopt what might be seen as more inclusive terms. People respond better to the language with which they are familiar. Indeed the survey found equally among both groups strong positive responses to the use of traditional language and traditional hymns.

On the evidence of this survey the church would be advised in its teaching and preaching ministry to focus on adding to the content and meaning with which individuals fill out these terms rather than seeking to replace them. By way of example preaching might be advised to emphasise the gospel stories of Jesus, and to do so in ways that allow a congregation to identify with him. Equally there is much to commend the task of building up the concept of “God” beyond what a character in a novel by David Lodge (1988) described as “the ultimate floating signifier”.

The term “spirituality” is of particular interest. It is a term widely used in church circles. In addition to the general exposure of churchgoers to the media and bookshops many dioceses and other bodies advertise courses on it and many books

are written for a specifically Christian readership containing the word in their titles or description. Parish profiles drawn up to attract candidates for an incumbency often refer to it either as a quality sought in a cleric or an area in which the benefice wishes to deepen its life and experience. It is unlikely then that unfamiliarity is the reason for lower levels of agreement with the term among regular churchgoers. A more plausible reason is that it carries connotations of a depth of faith and practice that many outside of the most active church members are aware they do not experience and perhaps do not even aspire to.

In terms of helping people deepen their individual relationship with God the survey suggests therefore that there is much to be gained from avoiding the concept of “spirituality” and instead trying to flesh out and broaden how both regular and occasional churchgoers understand more traditional terms such as “prayer”. Rather than seeking to replace the traditional word, the challenge is to counteract the slippage by which it collapses through lack of attention into notions of “shopping lists” rather than carrying the full weight of the Christian spiritual tradition. Other aspects of the somewhat wide term “spirituality” may benefit from the same treatment.

The support for traditional language, and even more strongly for traditional hymns, by both groups must not be understated. When combined with the positive responses from both groups about congregational involvement and freshness a picture can be built up that again is centred upon building on the past rather than seeking to replace it. The notion of interactive participation cuts across many facets of British society from the growth of two-way internet communications (of which “twitter” is merely the most recent example) via TV audiences voting for the results of competitions and on to the highly consultative processes that have featured in the production of many recent civil parish plans. Church congregations are happy to be more actively involved during public worship than perhaps was the case in previous generations because the wider culture conditions them to be so. In practice a pattern appears to have grown up in many English parishes whereby interactive worship makes significantly less use of traditional liturgical texts and language and of traditional hymns than is the case when less participative models are used. The evidence of this survey suggests the opposite course of action would be more positively received, namely that in preparing fresh, challenging and interactive forms of worship the use of rather more traditional material will enhance the worship experience for both occasional and regular churchgoers.

Sitting lightly to absolute truth claims and demands

Several of the statements tested the willingness of respondents to affirm particular claims to truth, specifically two questions on belief in the Bible and two on the truth of Christianity in relation to other world faiths.

On the biblical truth claims, it is clearly important not to read too much into the response by two groups to only two statements. Nonetheless the evidence of the present survey suggests strongly that biblical literalism is a minority position among both frequent and infrequent Anglican churchgoers. Within the sample there were one or two churches that might be expected to take a deliberately conservative stance, to believe strongly that a high level of belief in biblical inerrancy is a necessary part of following Christ and consequently to teach that regularly and firmly. Beyond this the fact that one in five occasional attendees affirmed a six day creation suggests that

much of the support for the concept is, even among the more regular churchgoers, more likely to be either, as Spencer and Alexander (2009) conclude, a reaction against the wider conclusions about human nature propounded in the media by some ardent neo-Darwinists than a specific option for creationism. Alternatively it may simply be that such attitudes are pre-critical and unexamined.

Among regular churchgoers only, the level of support for a “minor” gospel miracle was considerably higher than the support for six day creation. It is plausible that familiarity both with this specific narrative and with the many other accounts of gospel miracles has an impact on the beliefs of regular churchgoers, making the stories seem more inherently plausible than to a person less familiar with them. As in the previous section, the importance of familiarity cannot be understated. However, even here, fewer than 60% felt able to affirm the statement offered. Biblical truth claims do not, for most churchgoers, and especially for occasional attendees, trump a person’s everyday experience of how the world is or their awareness of specific scientific evidence that runs counter to the scriptural narrative.

The high level of support within both groups for a pluralistic attitude to religious truth adds further weight to the case that for many churchgoers, and especially occasional ones, truth claims are not taken for granted but are examined from the perspective of the wider culture and society within which an individual lives. Despite the occurrence of a small number of very high profile incidents of religiously motivated violent extremism in Britain and elsewhere over the last decade, and consequent significant negative media reporting on Islam in particular, the post-modern notion that truth is pluriform and that a wide range of inconsistent but sincerely held beliefs can be affirmed, continues to hold sway, whilst statements of exclusivity, and in particular suggestions that other faiths are untrue or ineffective, are resisted.

In the light of the above, churches which place biblical historicity and exclusivist claims at the heart of their mission are faced with a major task in seeking to overturn the views of both regular church members and those who they are attracting to occasional participation. If, as suggested here, resistance to both biblical and religious truth claims are part of a general attitude it is likely that both would need to be addressed together. There is a delicate tightrope to be walked between asserting these claims sufficiently strongly to those taking part in church activities and not at the same time discouraging those on the fringes of church life and alienating the wider community. Whilst this may be possible in a suburban or urban setting, where the links between church and community are often less close, it is doubtful that it is achievable in rural England, least of all by the established church, even were it desirable. Indeed, the nature of the strong links between rural church and community established in several earlier papers (Walker 2006, 2009, 2010) would suggest compelling reasons for such a model of church and pattern of teaching being inconsistent with the place and mission of the rural parish.

For other churches the evidence of this survey would be that churchgoers are by and large comfortable with preaching and teaching that accepts the mainstream tradition of biblical criticism, engages respectfully with those of other world faiths, and presents the Christian faith for positive reasons rather than through seeking to falsify the truth claims of others. In making such an appeal to those attracted to occasional

participation the church is inviting them to grow and adapt their world view rather than to discard it.

Finally in this section, it must be noted that a majority of regular churchgoers did not take the view that attending church was necessary in order to be a “good Christian”. The idea that the Christian faith makes an absolute demand in terms of public worship does not attract even those who choose to attend on a weekly basis. Herein no doubt lies the nub of the evangelistic dilemma for the Church of England. Members of church congregations, who are in many respects the best placed to invite and encourage their friends and neighbours into church attendance are less likely to overcome their natural reserve in doing so if they take the view that it is not at the heart of what being a Christian is about. And, in a society where the demands on Sundays (from social activities, shopping, visiting of distant relatives) continue to grow it is of no surprise that even regular church attendees come less invariably than would appear to have been the case a generation ago. More positively, if the appeal cannot be simply “Come with me to church”, then it may well be more enthusiastically delivered and received if it is “Come with me this Sunday because it’s our special...” As a previous paper (Walker 2010) showed, a significant proportion of the occasional churchgoers at harvest were there because they had received a specific invite from someone. Outreach strategies based on a regular series of one-off events may be more successful in working with the understanding of churchgoing that both regular and infrequent attendees have been seen to share.

Conclusions

By surveying the beliefs, attitudes and worship preferences of both frequent and infrequent churchgoers it has proved possible to compare and contrast them. Whilst occasional church attendees unsurprisingly sit significantly more loosely to beliefs about God and the Bible, are more pluralist in their attitude to their faith and less willing to affirm religious identity, their attitudes and beliefs in many ways reflect those of the frequent churchgoing sample as to the relative strength of support for different statements offered.

Both groups have been found to respond most strongly to traditional words and patterns, suggesting that churches should seek where possible to build on these rather than seek to replace them. Albeit to differing extents, both groups show disinclination to absolute claims or narrow interpretations, affirming a model of rural church that is inclusive and respectful of difference.

It has proved possible in the light of the evidence and discussion to make some suggestions with regard to the mission and ministry of the rural church as it teaches the faith, devises its liturgies, nurtures Christian growth, and seeks to reach out into its community; in particular that it can work with the flow of contemporary culture without compromising its identity. Indeed it is more likely to be effective in its work when it does so.

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